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**METAPHYSICS, WAR, AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE
CONATUS ESSENDI
IN EMMANUEL LEVINAS**

A Dissertation in
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by
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation concerns Emmanuel Levinas' critique of the *conatus essendi*. I will argue that Levinas' critique of the *conatus* is indispensable to understanding his engagement with Western metaphysics and its relation to the subject of war. The problem of war is not defined by the actual violence of war but by the ways in which we are conditioned for war and are consequently susceptible to mobilization. According to Levinas, the susceptibility to war or mobilization is the direct result of thought or thinking of being in general. I contend that the connection of thought to war is articulated in his critique of the idea of the *conatus*. The *conatus* is the tendency towards self-preservation and for Levinas it represents the positing of being as war or a struggle-to-be. However, the relation between the *conatus*, metaphysics, and war is absent from many interpretations of Levinas. This is because Levinas is best known for his ethics. The ethics of responsibility or the face-to-face and the ethics that will develop later in his account of substitution overshadow his work as a whole. The overemphasis on his ethics often results in the under-examination of his metaphysics and political thought, specifically his revision to the ways in which we think of both together. I contend that although the present analysis does not directly take on the question of the ethical in Levinas' work, the introduction of the critique of the *conatus* deepens the role of ethics within his metaphysics. This, as I will demonstrate, is due to that fact that Levinas' engagement with the idea of the *conatus* is not just that of critique but also of revision. Levinas' notion of the *conatus existendi*, which is found in his late works, reverses the meaning and utility of the idea of the *conatus* in the history of philosophy and its bearing on how we conceive of the body, time, and existence.

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Chapter I
Introduction
War, Metaphysics and the *Conatus*

Emmanuel Levinas is best known for his ethics. What captures our minds immediately when we think of the twentieth-century Lithuanian philosopher is his ethics of the face: the unconditional responsibility towards the other, the calling into question of *my* claim to freedom, and essentially the face's resistance to *my* possession, to *my* domination and *my* powers. The text that expresses these images the most is *Totality and Infinity*, which is undeniably the most known and the most read of Levinas. The analysis of the face, although treated in only a few sections of *Totality and Infinity*, dominates the popular conceptions of his philosophical project. Although Levinas' earlier concepts of responsibility of the other will dramatically transform later in his account of substitution, the ethics of the face overshadows interpretations of his work as a whole. The overemphasis on his ethics often results in the under-examination of his contributions to the history of Western metaphysics and the depth of his own political thought. Levinas' approach to philosophy and metaphysics is linked to his political reflections and cannot be separated from them. This is why the philosophical question par excellence in Levinas is not to ask "Why is there something rather than nothing?" but rather "Why does war exist rather than peace?"

For Levinas peace cannot merely be the absence of war, and war cannot signify a suspension of peace.¹ The problem of war is not defined by the actual violence of war—either in the battlefield, on the environment, or its devastation of civilian territory—but by the ways in which we are conditioned for war and are consequently susceptible to mobilization. War as the possibility of mobilization is a recognition of political life that is not merely historically determined, meaning that it cannot be reduced to the tragedies experienced in WWI or WWII

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 21.

and the philosophies associated with National Socialism. War understood in this view is also not ideological or political in the strictest sense but something that is attached to the thought or idea of being itself. It is the total and blind obedience to being [*asservissement*] and, more specifically, to an identity in being. War is a symptom and result of thought or thinking of being. Starting from his earliest work in 1935 titled “On Escape,” all the way through his work in the 1980s, Levinas continuously asserts that there is a warlike character to the metaphysics of being. In *On Escape*, he specifically asks whether ontology does not harbor an aptitude for war, and this is related to his claim that such ontological categories as identity, action, and *essence* operate in the service of the endurance and the maintenance of a being’s identity. Specifically, Levinas contends that these ontological categories are *invested* in the production of being as a perpetual conflict [*lutte*]. Levinas will directly link this propensity of thought to war in his critique of the idea of the *conatus*. According to Levinas, the *conatus*—the tendency towards self-preservation—is that which represents the positing of being or existence as war, as a fight, a conflict, or a struggle-to-be.

My thesis offers the first sustained reading of Levinas as a critic of the metaphysics of the *conatus essendi* as a whole. For Levinas, the problematic of the notion of the *conatus* is the problem of being itself and its investment in war. The problem of being is the relation between beings and Being in Western metaphysics for Levinas. This relation is essential to the critique of the *conatus* because it highlights the ways in which a being adheres to Being. It concerns how “man posits himself [...] as a self” in view of the metaphysics of Being.² Levinas’ apprehensiveness towards the ontology of being in the history of Western metaphysics can also be conceived in light of Heidegger’s approach in 1957 in the “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics.” The problem of metaphysics for Heidegger is that it is determined by the onto-theological structure of Being. For Heidegger we are incapable of thinking of being on its own terms. However, in

² Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 130.

Levinas the problem of metaphysics cannot be surmounted by a return to the un-thought within the relation between Being and beings as in Heidegger. Instead Levinas undermines the notion of being itself through his interrogation of the categories according to which we conceive of a being's being (its existence) in relation to Being, the foremost of which is identity. Within the tradition of metaphysics *essence* does not just signify an individual's being but denotes its persistence, its identity across time.³ Levinas describes identity as the “invincible persistence of *essence*.”⁴ The act of being (being's *esse*) is the manifestation of being's *essence*, and it denotes the act of persistence, of identity, in being, which for Levinas is the positive affirmation of the *conatus*.⁵ In this sense the *conatus*—the tendency towards self-preservation—is the positing of being or existence as war and the struggle for the persistence of identity.

Levinas' earliest formulation of this critique of the *conatus* can be traced to his use of the term *lutte* or struggle in the essay “On Escape.” This term connects the notion of being or “pure being” in traditional philosophy to the internal struggle of an individual to maintain its internal coherence, its unity, and ultimately its identity. The “individual” is made in the heat of the battle in which it heroically fights—it is a fight against what Levinas describes as the “foreign reality [*réalité étrangère*] that chokes it”⁶—in order to assure its own preservation. This Levinas describes as “the full flowering [of an individual's] own reality.” In 1947 in *Existence and Existents* Levinas will attribute the notion of the *conatus* or struggle to thinkers such as Malebranche, Descartes, Bergson, and Heidegger; and in his later works in the 1970s and 80s he will also attribute the structure of the *conatus essendi* to Spinoza, Husserl, and Brentano. Spinoza, as I argue, is the central figure for Levinas' critique of the *conatus essendi*. The connection between Levinas' critique

³ Ibid, 122-123,150.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 4. Levinas will combine the notion of *esse* (to be or being) with essence in the concept he uses in his late work called *essance*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 49-50.

of metaphysics, being, and the *conatus* is most evident in Levinas' work in the late 1970s, such as *Otherwise Than Being* and his lectures in *God, Death and Time*, and up until his work in the 1980s, notably in the essays in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*.

My thesis highlights the point that despite Levinas' interrogation of Western ontology, his work attempts to revise metaphysics instead of rejecting it. The dissertation reconstructs both his critique of the *conatus* and his revision of it. Seen from the perspective of my dissertation, Levinas can be conceived as a metaphysician just as much as we conceive Leibniz, Bergson, and Spinoza as metaphysicians. Levinas' project seeks to present "an alternative anthropology, which does not start with the *conatus essendi* but with my unrelinquishable obligation, my absolute responsibility."⁷ I argue throughout the dissertation that this does not reflect a moral sentiment in Levinas but a metaphysical assertion. In particular, this assertion denotes the structure of being-for-the-other in the form of the *conatus existendi*, which is a revision to the formal structure of the *conatus essendi*.

On my account Levinas' revision to the structure of *conatus* is found in his use of the *conatus existendi* in *Otherwise Than Being*.⁸ The use of the phrase denotes a passive coming-to-be of the self. It is an "undergoing" of the ego, in which we experience the pain, the labor, and the lassitude of the body and where we are existing-for-the-sake-of-another. It is an experience where one feels that one has not had the strength to persist in one's being. But it is essentially an experience of being in one's skin, of the exposure of the skin. This reflects both the effort to live or to be and a *resistance* to an egocentric existence. This appropriation of the *existendi* form of the *conatus* changes the order from which we think of the end or the *telos* of the exertion of the body and mind. The notion of the *conatus* entails that all mental and physical effort that is directed toward prolongation of the existence of the individual is innately self-interested. Effort in view of the

⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*

conatus is circular; it starts with the individual and returns to him, for his own sake. The *existendi*, according to Levinas' analysis, reflects a retrograde movement, a centrifugal force that pulls the subject away from its own self-interestedness and towards what is exterior to its own motives, toward the other. Levinas reverses the meaning and utility of the term itself in the history of philosophy. This reversal of the historical use and understanding of the *conatus* starts most notably in Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, who constructed the *conatus* from an interpretation of Rene Descartes' First Law of Motion in the *Principles of Philosophy* (1644). Both Hobbes and Spinoza conceptualize the *conatus* as the effort or force of an endeavoring or a striving in order to preserve (and specifically for Spinoza to enhance) one's existence.

The term *conatus* itself has a complex history. The Latin term *conatus* is derived from the word *conor* or *conari*, which can be translated into English as to "endeavor" or to "pursue." Philosophically, the early usage can be traced back to the Stoics, who understand the *conatus* as an impetus to action. There, the *conatus* was used to account for intentions in the pursuit of certain outcomes, namely why the soul is directed towards certain objects in action and not others.⁹ The term finds its most vivid expression in early modern philosophy, especially in respondents to Cartesian metaphysics. In particular, early modern thinkers such as Spinoza, Hobbes, and Leibniz will utilize the term to critique Cartesianism following from Descartes' *First Principles*. The idea of *conatus* is only suggested in Descartes' First and Third Law of Motion and never fully developed. There, in the *First Principles of Philosophy*, it refers to the *quantum in se est* or the power of a thing.¹⁰ The *quantum in se est* entails that there is a (1) tendency of a body to persist in a state of motion or rest unless hindered by external interference and (2) not act or move towards its own

⁹ For a historical development of the idea of the *conatus*, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Process of his Reasoning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 196-204

¹⁰ René Descartes, *First Principles of Philosophy*, trans. Valentine Rodger Miller & Reese P. Miller. (Reidel Publishing Company, 1983). Miller translates the *quantum in se est* from the Latin to 'as far as is in its power' or 'as far as it [itself] is concerned.' See, translation note, 59.

destruction.¹¹ These specific reflections are established by Descartes' First Law of Motion and substantiated in his theory of conversation (of motion) in the Third Law of Motion. The *conari*, in the context of the laws of collision, explains the causal relations between bodies and provides the basis for Descartes' mechanistic portrayal of the universe.¹² A body's force of *resistance* (against other bodies) and *persistence* in a specific state follows from the proposition that all material entities in the universe (animate and inanimate) have given tendencies or powers. Spinoza will develop his reflections on the *Ethics* (1677) and indirectly in *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* (1663); Hobbes' treats the idea of the *conatus* in his mechanics in *De Corpore* (1655) and the moral and political significance of the *conatus* in the *Elements of the Law* (1640) and in the *Leviathan* (1651). The *conatus* will show up in Leibniz in several essays from the 1670s through the 1690s. Spinoza understands the *conatus* to be a striving instead of a "endeavoring;" Hobbes' formulation will be more traditionally aligned with the Stoic articulation as an endeavoring; and Leibniz construes the *conatus* as a derivative force of the body that he describes in the term *nisus*.

In one sense, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Leibniz utilize the concept in their physics to demonstrate the power or force of bodies and the ways in which bodies interact. In another sense, *conatus* also operates as a principle in Spinoza's and Leibniz's metaphysics, namely in their respective articulations of substance. The significance of Hobbes' and Spinoza's usage in particular and its possible bearing on Levinas' overarching critique of the term is that they utilize it in their political thought as well as in their theoretical philosophy. Descartes' *quantum in se est* becomes tantamount in Spinoza and Hobbes' work to the body's tendency to persist in a state and its incapacity to move towards its own destruction. These ideas show up again in Spinoza

¹¹ Also see Latin term "ire *conari*" or "conatus" as a tendency or striving in Mahoney's translation Part II Section 26, 1997, 1995.

¹²Ibid, Part II, Sections 41-43, 62-63. It is ambiguous if in Descartes the *quantum in se est* of a thing necessarily refers to an inherent power in bodies or merely a tendency or a power that is endowed to bodies in motion. Ultimately, the difficulty lies in where to place this power in respect to the body itself. Specifically, whether the power of the *quantum in se est* is in motion as a mode of motion or is something that follows from the unity of the body, the shared motion of its parts.

and Hobbes' practical works as a power in the *preservation* and *persistence* of the individual in a constant state of strife in the state of nature. The right of the individual and consequently the right of the state becomes derived from this original right in conflict and preservation.¹³ In both philosophers, the right to war is the natural right to all beings and the foundation of the formation of the State. For Levinas, the connection between self-preservation, strife, and the right to exist reflects his ongoing critique of the interdependency between identity and being in Western ontology.

According to my analysis, Levinas will present several forms of his reversal of the *conatus* in his work, starting from his work in *On Escape* in 1935 but culminating in his utilization of the term *conatus existendi* in Chapter II of *Otherwise Than Being* in 1974, where he will provide the final dimension of his resolution of the *conatus*. The term *conatus existendi* was originally briefly used by Baruch Spinoza at the end of Part III of the *Ethics* (1674) and in two minor works by Gottfried Leibniz, *Notationes Generales* (1683-85) and "On the Radical Origination of Things" (1697). In both authors the *existendi* signifies a passive force. For Levinas, as already mentioned, the "undergoing" is of the ego, in which we experience the pain, the labor and the lassitude of the body and where we are existing-for-the-sake-of-another. It is an experience where one feels that one has not had the strength to persist in one's being, which will reflect both the effort to live or to be and a *resistance* to an egocentric existence. Although Levinas' ethics is not directly treated in the analysis, the structure of being-for-the-other in this context not only makes us responsible for the other but is that which makes sacrifice possible—the ultimate sense of responsibility. In sacrifice the subject substitutes himself for the other. According to Levinas, in taking on the other's responsibility the subject is "freed of the *conatus*."¹⁴ Finally, I will argue that *conatus existendi*

¹³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, trans. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 74-75. Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise* in *Collected Works*, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 683-685

¹⁴ See Emmanuel Levinas, "Signature" in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press,

has a significant role in deciphering Levinas' philosophy of war and mobilization, especially his assertion that war as the condition for political life will always result in a self-betrayal. This statement can only be fully comprehended in these reflections of the self and its relation to the critique of the *conatus*.

Some commentators have dismissed the characterization of Levinas as a political thinker or a metaphysician from the perspective of his ethics (as opposed to a politics and traditional metaphysics). As a result, these commentators have frequently discouraged an interpretation of Levinas' political thought and its bearing on other dimensions of his work. The problem with these treatments of Levinas' project lies in their failure to situate his critique of politics. In effect, Levinas' critique of politics has been conceptualized as opposed to, separate from, or supplementary to his ethics. Levinas' critique of *conatus* resituates the question of the political in Levinas not in view of his notion of responsibility but in view of his engagement with Western metaphysics. And in the same vein, a majority of commentators have overlooked the weight that Levinas' engagement with the idea of the *conatus* has within his work. This lack of treatment is paradoxical, given that almost every volume of philosophical works published from 1963 to 1988 has included the term either in their preliminary arguments or throughout the works themselves. I will argue in this dissertation that the argument has been present in Levinas since 1935 in *On Escape*. There, the term *conatus* is not used but is anticipated by the term struggle or *lutte*. In many respects the exclusion of Levinas' critique of the *conatus* in secondary literature is due to the fact (a) that Levinas never systematically treated the term and (b) that the critique itself has been largely associated with his ongoing polemic against Martin Heidegger's ontology in *Being and Time* (1927). The latter is most apparent in Richard Bernstein's "Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy" (2002) and Robert Bernasconi's "Levinas and the Struggle for Existence" (2005).

1990), 295.

Both authors argue that the critique of the *conatus* in Levinas is deeply indebted to his engagement with Heidegger and more specifically to his more severe charges that Heidegger's ontology exhibits National Socialism and Social Darwinism.¹⁵

Bernstein correctly recognizes that the *conatus* in Levinas has its bearing in what the philosopher conceives as the problem of being. Bernstein focuses on how Levinas' description of the *conatus essendi* enhances an understanding of evil. But by doing so Bernstein focuses only on its connection to Nazism and the limitations of Heidegger's humanism instead of the critical reflection on the term in Levinas' work. Bernasconi also does not engage in a broader discussion of the critique of the *conatus* in Levinas by framing the critique as a response to Social Darwinism. However, Bernasconi's analysis brings Levinas' notion of the *conatus* out of the context of Heidegger's ontology and to a discussion of Levinas' political thought. My dissertation will be placed in between these two perspectives in an effort to move beyond both of them. Both authors' reflections are correct but do not account for Levinas' other treatments of *conatus*, where Heidegger is not mentioned.

The political problem of the *conatus* is the problem of war itself, but it will concretely be connected to the concept of "political right," which Levinas describes as being based upon "good conscience" or morality of the *conatus*. In this context, the political dimension of the critique of the *conatus* extends further than the social or political ideologies of Social Darwinism of the nineteenth and twentieth century, which in many respects Levinas is attending to. It is not Nazism but early modern theories of natural right and the State that are philosophically invested in the idea of self-preservation or the *conatus*. And even more so, this will prove that it is Baruch Spinoza and his notion of the *conatus essendi* and not Heidegger who is the true target of Levinas'

¹⁵ Robert Bernasconi, "Levinas and the Struggle for Existence," in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Nelson, Kent Stoll and Antje Kapust (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 170-184. Richard Bernstein "Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 252-267.

criticism. This point follows Levinas' various assertions made against Spinoza throughout his work and follows from the ways in which he frames the political and ontological problem of the *conatus*. Although I will direct Levinas' observations on war and the *conatus* to the notion of "political right," I will also acknowledge that these reflections are not historically determined in Levinas but denote a permanent state of political life in general. The problem of mobilization of war and politics is not violence in the strictest sense or even coercion but a total and blind obedience to being [*asservissement*] and more specifically to an identity in being. Identity is the passage from metaphysics to politics. And identity or self-identification will concretely be the ground or base from which the individual becomes mobilized.

1.2 *Summary of Chapters*

The second chapter will follow from these introductory reflections on Levinas' critique of the *conatus* in order to demonstrate the presence of and preoccupation with it in his earliest works "On Escape" and *Existence and Existents*. In *On Escape* and more vividly in *Existence and Existents*, the basic articulation of existence found in thought and the thinking of being unfolds as the struggle-to-be [*lutte*] in Levinas. In particular, the struggle [*lutte*] will be articulated as following from the original lack in being. This original lack or perceived failing in existence arises in thought for Levinas, specifically in positing the relation between a being and Being. The relation between being and Being (or existent and existence) is not a relation in a strictest sense but a dynamism that subordinates a being to Being. The subversion is not domination between beings but should be recognized as the very urge and struggle to fulfill one's being. From this perspective, human finitude prevents one from perfection and absolute self-sufficiency, or, as Levinas argues, all the categories or qualities that we attribute to existence.

As a result, according to Levinas, we never possess our own existence but always will strive or struggle to obtain it, either in view of being or against it. This is demonstrated in Levinas in the descriptions of the bourgeois spirit, the valorized individualism in Rousseau and the Romantics, and the notion of “becoming” in Bergson. Here I will clarify that the struggle to fulfill one’s own existence occurs in two ways: it can be conceived either as a struggle *towards* or *against* existence itself. In *Existence and Existents* Levinas will expand his prior work on struggle and attempt to resolve it. The ego’s struggle-to-be is not in vain or a mere constructed illusion. Rather, Levinas will declare that the “struggle” or effort to exist is originally experienced in the *hypostasis*, the effort in the upsurge of the ego from the *there is* [*il y a*]. Here, it is evident that the concept of struggle becomes problematic once it is taken up wholesale and adopted as an attitude towards existence. The notion of the “struggle for life,” Levinas argues, has been “supported by the development of the biological sciences in the nineteenth century” and “has had incalculable influences on the whole of contemporary philosophy.”¹⁶

Chapter III will qualify the distinction between the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi*, which will be detrimental to recognizing Levinas’ conception of the *conatus existendi*. The different usages of the *conatus* can be distinguished by aspects of the ego they illuminate. The general sense of the *conatus* should be conceived as the basic urge or struggle-to-be in the ego’s articulation or relation to its own material existence. In view of this, the *conatus essendi* as the persistence of *essence* or identity is an abstraction of the primordial *conatus* in so far that it takes on the urge or inclination to be. The struggle of the *essendi* is not primarily a relation with objective existence or the impersonal abyss of the “there is”—or even an animal inclination (although it sometimes takes on the appearance of this)—but a relationship of identification. Here, the persistence of the ego’s

¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 10.

identity or its *essence* unfolds at the level of theorizing or philosophical reflection but also can be seen in the most basic articulation of the ego's awareness of itself.

Chapter III will treat the conception of the *conatus essendi* in view of Levinas' analysis of *essence* in *Otherwise Than Being* and his critique of intentionality. Overall, Levinas will argue that intentional consciousness and the act of representation is the concrete practice of the perseverance of being. The central figure Levinas will engage with here is Heidegger and his notion of authentic being-towards-death. Although Heidegger will be the primary focus of the chapter, Husserl and Brentano will also be brought to bear in the critique of the *conatus essendi*. In the context of the prior analysis Heidegger defines the struggle *towards* Being [*lutte pour être*] as a disposition or the mode of being that sustains this openness or being-towards Being as maintaining 'being' in care and enduring in Dasein's confrontation with death. This dimension in Heidegger is discussed in *Existence and Existents* and even attributed to the notion of the struggle for life. But this is not the critical point to recognize in the critique of the *conatus* as the *conatus essendi* in Heidegger. I will argue that the *conatus essendi* in Heidegger does not proceed from the notion of existence that is conceived from its givenness [*le donné*] or an offering up of existence from which an individual struggles to maintain its own identity. Rather, the *conatus essendi* reflects a production of being and the effort of the ego to preserve itself.

The role of the *conatus essendi* in Heidegger, according to Levinas' analysis, is found in Heidegger's emphasis on the ways in which Dasein is authentic in *Being and Time*. Dasein's authenticity should be recognized by its self-reference or identification with itself as primarily a self-concern. The self-interestedness of Dasein's mineness, the foundation of authenticity, is brought to bear once one distinguishes Dasein in its everyday, where it is not itself and is unconcerned (in the strictest sense) for its own being. The they-self [*Das Man*] is the condition or state of Dasein's losing its self-identification, its authenticity. Levinas will interpret Dasein in its

mode of everydayness as a contempt for the everyday and a prioritization of Dasein's authenticity, a self-identification or concern as a being for-itself as expressed in a self-interestedness. Although the self or Dasein in the everyday is conceived as distinct from Dasein portrayed in the authentic mode of being, the everyday reflects a continuity of the axiology of the *conatus essendi*. Levinas will argue that this value of self-concern is pervasive throughout the primordial structure *Jemeinigkeit*, Dasein's mineness or selfhood, which is the *ontological constitution* of being-towards-death in Heidegger.

Chapter IV attends to Levinas' resolution of the *conatus* in the form of the *conatus existendi* in *Otherwise Than Being* and to his ongoing polemics against Spinoza. Here, I will argue that the force of the *existendi* is not brought about by active or intentional condition of being but something, as we will see, that comes about in a subject in the weakness of pain and hunger or in the neglect of living in the modes of lassitude. The *existendi* is a failing and a deficiency. This conception of the force of existence is a divergence from Spinoza's ontology. There are two distinct dimensions to Levinas' critique of Spinoza: the first is directed towards Spinoza's interpretation of Scripture in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, and the second (which is significant to the analysis at hand) is directed towards Spinoza's ontology and ethics proper. The former, although not the topic of the present analysis, indicts Spinoza for prioritizing reason over the Scripture and the wisdom or truth of revelation. For Levinas this reflects an upholding of the philosophical over the theological and, much more severely, a "theology without God."¹⁷ Levinas' critique of Spinoza's ontology bears a larger significance in Levinas' overall project than the theological dimension. This is because there is an indispensable link between total war and the *conatus*, a link that is not a minor argument in Levinas but a reoccurring theme that directly implicates Spinoza's ontology rather than his theology or lack thereof. In the Levinasian

¹⁷ See, Michael Juffe "Levinas Misreader of Spinoza," in *Levinas Studies*, Volume II, (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2007).

interpretation of Spinoza's ethics and politics, there is an absolute individuation of the *conatus* that procures the right for the individual. For Spinoza and other early modern thinkers such as Hobbes, the right to exist by one's own means that no entity can act towards its own destruction or its opposite. This condition was already affirmed in Spinoza's *Ethics* in the Scholium of P20 of Book IV. However, it is only in Spinoza's treatment of the *conatus* in the *Political Treatise* that the self-preservation implies an indefinite power over all things in Nature that assist or aid in the preservation of existence. For Levinas, this framework not only procures us to wage war in politics and articulates the meaning of being as war, it also eliminates the possibility of the ethical.

Chapter V will conclude the analysis by returning to our original theme of war and metaphysics in Levinas' political thought. Here, I discuss the problem of the mobilization of war as distinct from the realities of warfare in Levinas. When Levinas speaks of the warlike character of Western metaphysics, he is not speaking of the experiences of warfare itself but an aptitude for war. The production of war—from the declaration of the enemy to the mobilization of citizens and resources—is distinct from the actual fighting in war. The critique of the *conatus* reveals the aptitude of war and conflict in Western ontology. However, Levinas' reversal the *conatus* in the form of the *conatus existendi* will encourage a different perspective of human coexistence that is not directly treated in Levinas' work. Although Levinas will not advocate a wholesale rejection of politics but rather emphasize the role of the ethical in political life, he will leave the question open whether we can think about the political otherwise, especially from the perspective of the *existendi*.

Chapter II
On Being and the *Conatus*:
Reconsiderations of Levinas' Critique of Western Metaphysics

2.0 Introduction

Emphasis on the polemical character of Levinas' argument against the notion of the *conatus* overlooks the subtleties of the argument itself and how it bears a significant weight within his critique of Western metaphysics. The notion of the *conatus* is not treated by Levinas as a fictitious assertion of selfhood or human nature. Rather, the sheer repetition of the idea of the *conatus* (in all its manifold forms) within specific traditions in the history of philosophy reveals a particular formula of being, namely the interdependency between "what exists" or beings (*ens*) and existence in general or Being. Levinas' critique of the *conatus essendi* and his resolution of the problem of the *conatus* in the notion of the *hypostasis* and the *conatus existendi* cannot be separated from his engagements with Western metaphysics. Similar to Heidegger's approach in "The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics," (1957) Levinas will locate the problem of Being in such a way that it colors the ways in which we conceptualize a being's being. For Heidegger, the problem of Western metaphysics in general is that presupposed but un-reflected relation between beings and Being, where Being becomes the ground or foundation (*causa sui*) from which we think of the nature of beings.¹⁸ In this respect metaphysics becomes ontology in so far as it conceives of Being as what comes prior to beings and what is universal to all beings. And in Heidegger metaphysics is also theology because it thinks of Being as the cause of beings. The result in Heidegger is that metaphysics is determined by an onto-theological structure of Being. For Heidegger we are incapable of thinking of being on its own terms. Therefore, we must return to the question of being from the difference between Being and beings, which has always

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 9-13, 15-16, 63-66.

previously been presupposed in the history of philosophy. However, in Levinas the problem of metaphysics cannot be surmounted by a return to the un-thought within the relation between Being and beings, as seen in Heidegger's *Being and Time* and *Identity and Difference* but to undermine the notion of being itself through the interrogation of the categories in which we conceive of a being's being (its existence) in relation to Being, namely that of identity and *essence*.

Identity, being, and *essence* operate as a tautology in Levinas. Each term always affirms the truth of the other and ultimately the truth of being itself—they form a totality.¹⁹ This is due to the fact that in Levinas the truth of being in philosophical discourse since the Greeks, has emphasized manifestation, intelligibility, and the appearing of truth. Levinas more clearly outlines this in a 1976 lecture titled “Subjectivity as An-Archy,” where he states that “Being is manifestation, ‘to be’= ‘manifestation.’”²⁰ *Essence* and identity as it relates to being in Levinas designates something beyond the Aristotelian formulation of the *to ti esti* (what it is), which in its most basic assertion, often appears as what can be said about a thing “[only] in respect to itself.”²¹ The classical definition of *essence* is the precondition for the identification of existing things, how we can have knowledge of them, but for Levinas it is also the mode or vantage point from which we comprehend ourselves as being.²² This is because in Levinas being's identity and *essence* are not neutral terms from which we can find or seek out truth or knowledge of being but themselves posit beings in such a way that they are conceived as one and the same. A being's being is created by and given meaning through these ontological categories, such as identity and *essence*, and at the same time verifies them. Therefore, the problem of the relation between beings

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Consciousness to Prophetism,” in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 204-206. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 4-6. Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and Awakening,” in *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 85-87

²⁰ See a fuller analysis on this formula in Levinas in the 1976 lecture titled “Being and Meaning” in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 128-130.

²¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 1999), 1030a.

²² This argument is clearly made in Levinas' analysis of the “Who” in *Otherwise Than Being*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 23-26.

and Being in Western metaphysics—which will be essential to the critique of the *conatus*—is that it highlights a subversive relation between thought and being. The relation concerns how “man posits himself [...] as a self” in view of the metaphysics of Being.²³ And for this reason being’s truth does not require that it appear or manifest in/to consciousness or the mind in a specific way but must always correspond to an action, act, or activity of being that designates being—what Levinas will describe as being’s *esse* or the act of being [*l’acte d’être*].²⁴ It is not enough to posit a notion of the true or the essential of existence. These notions always correspond to the *ethos* of being’s *esse*—corresponding acts and modes of being.²⁵ This correlation is found clearly in Greek philosophy’s emphases on pure acts, tasks, and activities as well as faculties, abilities, and capacities: the question of the *ergon* in Aristotle’s *Ethics*.²⁶ Similar to the Greeks, Hegel sought to qualify the pure activity of being, which for him was Absolute thought, the coincidence with the reason and acts of the will. In view of correlation between being and manifestation, Levinas’ emphasis on the connection between the *esse* and *essence* is a departure from the history of philosophy, which since Aquinas places *essence* above being’s act, because potency cannot be reduced to actuality.²⁷ The passage or process of being from *essence* or “what something is” to being’s act or “that it is” in Levinas is articulated by the concept of the *conatus*.²⁸

As will be explored throughout this thesis, *essence* does not just signify an individual’s being but denotes the persistence of sameness and identity across time—Levinas describes it as the

²³ Levinas, “Being and Meaning” in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 130

²⁴ Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 122-123, 150. Levinas will continuously play upon the Latin infinitive of the *esse* (to be) in his later works, 260

²⁵ Levinas, “From Carefree Deficiency to The New Meaning,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 43-45.

²⁶ Ibid. Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newbury: Focus Philosophical Library Series, 2002), 1097b22–1098a20

²⁷ Levinas will state in *Otherwise than Being* that the dual logic of *essence*, either as potency or act, is overcome by the notion of responsibility or being-for-the-other in so far that as it introduces a notion of passivity that transcends this dichotomy, 140-143.

²⁸ Many interpreters traditionally understand being’s *esse* as distinct from its *essence*. Both principles compose an entity. See *Metaphysics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Santa Fe: Green Lion Press, 1999), 12.1-7. M. Kosugi. “Esse and Essentia in St. Thomas Aquinas” in *Studies in Medieval Thought*, 21, 1979, 155-163.

“invincible persistence of *essence*.”²⁹ The act of being (being’s *esse*) is the manifestation of being’s *essence*, and it denotes the act of persistence of identity in being, which for Levinas is the positive affirmation of the *conatus*.³⁰ This connection between Levinas’ critique of metaphysics, being, and the *conatus* is most evident in Levinas’ work in the late 1970s, such as *Otherwise Than Being* and his lectures in *God, Death and Time* and up until his work in the 1980s, notably in essays in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. For Levinas, the *essence* and *esse* of being expressed as being’s self-interestedness will have its most intense expression in Heidegger’s ontology, where *essence* and existence and the act or authentic modes of being (*esse*) are one in the same. This is in reference to Heidegger’s notable line in *Being and Time*, “[...] [essence] of Dasein lies in its existence.”³¹ But the problem of the *esse* and the *conatus* can be traced more specifically to the individualism of modern thinkers, such as Malebranche, Bergson, Husserl, Spinoza, Hobbes, and Rousseau. However, the task of this chapter is to demonstrate the decisive role of the argument of the *conatus* and its connection to the critique of Western metaphysics in Levinas’ earliest works, specifically that of *On Escape* (1935) and *Existence and Existents* (1947). In both works Levinas emphasizes the limitation in thinking of the identity of the self. Thought is limited because of the ontology of being (or what Levinas describes as the Western “tendency to *ontologize*”). Ontology in this respect conceptualizes being’s being as a relation to Being. And this relation with Being determines that the act of being (*esse*) or its primary mode of existence is the persistence or “perseverance in being.”³² The actual term “conatus” is not found in these texts, but his use of the notion of “struggle” [*lutte*] anticipates the late critique of the *conatus essendi*. In its basic formulation, the preservation of the identity of the “I” or “ego” becomes a struggle for existence in a being’s relation to existence (Being). A being’s

²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 4. Levinas will combine the notion of *esse* (to be or being) with essence in the concept he uses in his late work called *essance*.

³⁰ Ibid. Also see “Subjectivity as An-Anarchy” in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 175-176.

³¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), Section 9.

³² Emmanuel Levinas, “Bloch: Toward a Conclusion” in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 103.

being is never its own (self-possessed) but something that is brought about by a relation, which Levinas describes as subservience [*asservissement*] to Being. Although here the problem of “Being” will not be the notion of God as *causa sui* or observed as something that which is foundational (the ground) from which we conceive of a being’s being as in Heidegger. For Levinas the notion of the *pure being* that defines existence at large. In these early stages Levinas conceives of pure being—the traditional idea of being as the material fact of being—as primary in the Western tradition conception of Being.

In *On Escape* Levinas argues that despite the modern and contemporary philosophical shifts, developments, and ultimately rebellions against the traditional notion of Being, Western metaphysics has not overcome and remains adherent to this basic notion of being that conceives of existence as absolute. Levinas endorses the argument that no notion of Being has ever been able to transcend material existence, but despite this failure it still remains preoccupied with attempting to transcend the limitations of pure being and strive for the “communion with an infinite being,” such as a God, a deity, or nature.³³ For Levinas the ultimate problem of pure being (the dilemma we are left with in the history of philosophy) is that philosophical notions of selfhood and identity become articulated in view of it in such a way that we “envision in a being only its existence.”³⁴ The “I” or ego becomes an object. The claim to one’s identity is the act of existence (being’s *esse*)—what Levinas will describe as the act of self-positing of the ego or the “I.” Here, Levinas argues from the outset that the act of self-positing is articulated as an act of self-preservation. Self-identity requires effort, something that is won or achieved in a struggle or a fight against or in being. The outcome of this battle is also the preservation of the identity of the “I” or ego. And for Levinas this is due to the inherent adherence to being or existence from

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 51. Also see Levinas’ argument in the essay “Philosophy and Transcendence” in *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 3-38.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

which a being's identity is articulated. The struggle is not directed towards the self (as a form of inner conflict) but against the realities of the world, which can take the form of the stranger, the physical body, or social and political institutions, all of which oppose the self-sufficiency of the identity of the "I."³⁵ For example, these dynamics are evident in modern discourses found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophy, namely that of Rousseau, Byron, and other Romantic thinkers and poets. According to Levinas' interpretation, in these writers the heroic act of the individual to claim its individuality from oppression, convention, or the status quo is the authentic act of existence. The "individual" is made in the heat of the battle from which it heroically fights—against what Levinas describes as the "foreign reality [*réalité étrangère*] that chokes it"—in order to assure its own preservation or, in Levinas' words, "the full flowering [of an individual's] own reality."³⁶ Moreover, as we will see, Levinas catches sight of these dynamics of the thinking of human existence in terms of struggle in Bergson's notion of becoming and bourgeois individualism and ultimately in the processes of thinking in general.

In *Existence and Existents* Levinas directly takes on the problem of the relation of beings and Being. Here, the task is to interrogate the conditions from which we conceptualize pure being and its accompanying notion of struggle. The concept of pure being and the struggle-to-be is predicated on material existence that necessitates a temporal and spatial relation, viz. as a relation with a preexisting world.³⁷ In opposition to this view, Levinas argues that existence or Being is inherently anonymous and without content and therefore cannot be articulated from terrestrial existence or even from the standpoint of a Divine Creator. In this sense a being's existence is self-generated (an act *ex nihilo*) which takes place out of the realms of an autonomous

³⁵ Aristotle, *Ethics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newbury: Focus Philosophical Library Series, 2002), 1097b22–1098a20

³⁶ "An individual" was added to replace "of its" in the original text. Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 49-50.

³⁷ Levinas attempts to make a distinction between existence and an existent by separating the theoretical a priori within the traditional demonstrations of being. According to this analysis, existence or being has traditionally been conceived as a separate object. It is what can be reflected on, seen, heard, felt—it is what is given to the ego. As a result, as we saw in *On Escape*, existing or being's *esse* is always an activity or an act that is directed towards what is outside of itself in order to be.

Being. A being's existence comes to be without a culture, a politics, or a preformed world or a notion of a Creator or Infinite being. There still remains an act of being in Levinas (being's *esse*). Being's *esse* in Levinas does not affirm or signify an *essence* or Being because it is a self-referential and self-contained act from which an existence "takes up" its existence. Levinas' analysis of the *hypostasis*, in effect, would argue for an existence that cannot be determined as a struggle for life or existence. The *hypostasis* does not determine a manifestation and "appearing" of truth or produce a relation to existence but produces only the ego itself; it can be qualified as a birth. Although Levinas wants to distance himself from the idea of life as a struggle-to-be in the present text, the *hypostasis* does account for the ways in which the existence of the ego can be conceptualized (at least initially) as a fight or a struggle-to-be. The process from which the ego produces itself (its upsurge from the abyss of Being or the *ily a*) is that of effort and a struggle but also more significantly of resistance. The effort or the struggle is not directed towards Being, the other, or the world at large but articulated as a "force of creation."³⁸ The creation of the self reflects two movements, one that propels the I-to-be-an-I and the other as a hesitation or resistance against being a self and having an identity. It is "being too weak for the world."³⁹ Levinas describes this as the experience of fatigue.⁴⁰ The importance of Levinas' distinction between the different movements or forces at play in the event of the *hypostasis* is indispensable to understanding Levinas' reversal of the *conatus* in the understanding of the *conatus existendi* in *Otherwise Than Being*.⁴¹

³⁸ There are no other known texts where Levinas describes the effort of the ego in its inception as a creative force or as a creative moment of force. The force to be is not brute and wholly determined but creative in the sense that (a) it is self-generated, denoting a creation *ex nihilo*, and (b) it is what Levinas describes as a "creative moment" in effort that "somehow ventures beyond a possession whose limits and onerousness are marked by fatigue," Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 20. It is also not clear if this is in reference to Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, 1907.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 20. This should be conceived in view of precarious kinship between the "me" or "self" [*soi*] with the "I" [*moi*] in Levinas. See, Robert Bernasconi's Foreword in *Existence and Existents*, vii-xv.

⁴⁰ See analysis in 2.6

⁴¹ The relation between the *hypostasis* and the *conatus existendi* will provide a link between Levinas' early works in the 1930s and 1940s and his late works in the 1970s. This will be treated in greater depth in Chapter IV.

The following analysis will be divided into three sections: the first section will bring to bear the role of the notion of struggle [*lutte*], which alludes to the *conatus*, in Levinas' analysis of the problem of being in *On Escape*. Here, I will emphasize that in Levinas the notion of Being denotes a problematic relationship between a being and existence found explicitly in modernism and contemporary discourse. On the one hand, this relationship entails that the "I" or ego is conceived within an identification *with* or *in* Being or existence in terms of a destiny and end. And on the other hand, this relation also entails an activity or act of maintaining individuality and an autonomy *against* Being as a struggle for the self-sufficiency of the identity of the "I." Both of these dimensions mark the subservience [*asservissement*] to the notion of Being, which ultimately prevents us from "ever having envisaged the meaning of the 'finite being.'"⁴² As will be discussed below, the "struggle" *against* and *in* being does not reflect a simple overcoming of a negation but something more intrinsic. The struggle reflects a need to overcome an inherent lack or the deficiency of a finite being in view of existence. We can catch sight of the need to overcome one's being in view of Being by the emphasis on notions of *essences*, properties, and faculties. These categories only apply to a finite being in relation its existence. Being itself is beyond the "distinction between the perfect and the imperfect" and the individual in the struggle between the perfect and imperfect.⁴³ On this account of struggle or the *conatus*, the nothingness, the degenerate qualities, the mundane, and the deficient reality are that which stand opposed to the true and essential qualities or the authenticity of the individual. But as already mentioned, the precariousness in the battle for the authentic self is that it does not take place within the "I" (an inner conflict) but is always directed outward. The second section will develop the analysis of the Being and the struggle-to-be in *Existence and Existents* and Levinas' early resolution of the *conatus* in

⁴² Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 51.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

the analysis of the *hypostasis*. Here, the philosophical discourses to be overcome are not those that of modern or contemporary thinkers (although Bergson and Heidegger are still decisive figures in Levinas' analysis) but early modern creationist theorists such as Descartes and Malebranche. A critical outcome of these early modern formulations is that they are unable to account for the ways the "I" or the ego is able to accomplish its own existence. However, both Descartes and Malebranche's conceptions of creation are significant in the trajectory of Levinas' project because they connect the "inward relationship between the ego and its act" of being, a relationship which overcomes thinking of being's *esse* in relation to its *essence*. The final section will conclude the discussion by looking forward to Levinas' ongoing critique of the *conatus essendi* in view of the reflections gained from the notion of struggle [*lutte*] or the *conatus*. The critique of the formal structure of the *conatus* and its misappropriation of existence as struggle for existence finds its clarity in Levinas' engagement with Bergson, Rousseau, Malebranche, and Descartes. But the more concrete articulation of the *conatus* can also be view in Levinas' discussion of the natural or animal inclination to exist.⁴⁴ The *conatus essendi*, as the persistence of *essence* or identity, is an abstraction of the primordial or basic *conatus* in so far it assumes the urge or inclination to be. The problem of the *essendi* will not just be its fight against what opposes the "I" but the morality that it instills, what Levinas describes as the "good conscience of being [...] the morality based upon the inalienable right of the *conatus*."⁴⁵ Here, the main proponents of the dangerous morality (specifically a morality without the ethical) are Heidegger and Baruch Spinoza.

⁴⁴ The equation of the *conatus* with the animal tendency to survive can be discussed as separate from the *conatus essendi*, which has to do with the persistence of essence, identity, and representation. The *conatus essendi* does not necessarily reflect a struggle for being in its material existence (as with the *conatus*) but persistence in self-identification. Although the *conatus essendi* is not predicated on material existence, it is condition by a temporal relation (a projection towards the future) as we see in the notion of struggle.

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "Nonintentional Consciousness" in *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 130.

2.1 *On Escape*

The inherent and irrefutable compulsion to exist defined and affirmed by the idea of *conatus* is intricately connected to the thesis of the essay *On Escape*. Overall, escape in Levinas is the need to “get outside of oneself,” which for him is evidently not based upon the need for freedom or internal peace but indicates an internal conflict in our material experiences—the experience of pure being.⁴⁶ Levinas argues that the true experience of pure being is not self-sufficiency or any categories that define Being but the experience of powerlessness in the wake of the absolutism of existence, which is our inability to leave the body and consequently our inability to leave one-self [*soi-meme*].⁴⁷ But ultimately the impulse that the term “escape” in contemporary literature expresses is the “quest for the marvelous,” which Levinas calls *excedence*.⁴⁸ However, as I will argue, a different reading of *On Escape* can be conceived as Levinas’ early attempt to locate the nature of the problem of the idea of Being in Western thought and to break with its obsession with ontology. Ultimately, the problem with the notion of Being is not only that we desire to escape it but also that we can’t think outside of it. Levinas, following Bergson, will argue that even notions of non-being or nothingness are “clothed” by being—“nothingness is the work of a thinking essentially turned toward being.”⁴⁹ The notion of being that is in question here is not what follows Aristotle’s ontology but the existence of the *real*: the material and factual existence of things we encounter in the world. It is a notion of existence indebted to an empiricist doctrine. Being is the fact of being; things are in so far as they exist.⁵⁰ Levinas will argue here that Western metaphysics has not overcome and remains adherent to this

⁴⁶ Levinas will define the internal conflict of our experiences in this essay as being derived from an original experience of imprisonment to the body, the enchainment of the “I” [*moi*] to the “Self” [*soi*]. Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 54-56.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 55.

⁴⁸ The term *excedence* has also a more technical meaning for Levinas. In the Preface of *Existence and Existents* he describes it as signifying the “the movement which leads an existent toward the Good is not a transcendence by which that existent raises itself up to a higher existence, but a departure from being and from the categories which describe it: an ex-cendence.” *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), xxvii.

⁴⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 70-71.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 50-51.

basic notion of being, specifically its proposition that conceives of material existence as absolute. Here, Levinas endorses the argument that no notion of Being has ever been able to transcend material existence, but despite this failure it still remains preoccupied with attempting to transcend the limitations of pure being and strive for the “communion with an infinite being,” such as a God, a deity.

The question of being’s *essence* is not treated in this notion of existence but accompanies it, because they both demand a verification of truth that is based upon a manifestation or an “appearance” (or sense-perception) of something. Levinas does not specifically confront any predominately modern empiricists, such as Bacon, Locke, Berkeley, or Hume in his qualification of the traditional conception of being. The indictment of the ontology presented here is also not reminiscent of Aristotle’s qualification of empirical truth claims found in *De Anima* [3.4.4301] or in Book I of *Posterior Analytics*, where the recognition of the existence of an entity is determined by “whether a thing is” and “what it is” upon reflection and not sensory perception. Rather, Levinas describes the nominalism from which we come to recognize or understand being is conceived [*conçue*] under or in the “image” or “model” of being [*sur l’image l’être*].⁵¹ The model of sensible or physical existence Levinas describes reflects a reality presented to the prisoner in Plato’s cave in the *Republic*. The model of pure being is, as Levinas briefly insists, that things are “offered” [*l’offrent*] over to us. An existence is given to us. This is not presented as a simple act of cognition. Rather, it is the sheer existence of things in all of the manifold ways they can be presented to the subject. The different models of knowledge, such as ontology, idealism, phenomenology, and the sciences, do not escape the weight of this original and immediate verification of truth (its empirical qualifications) of being as presence. Levinas will call this the “ontologistic character” of

⁵¹Ibid, 50.

thought.⁵² This is being as presence in Levinas. The absolutism of existing entities that enframes and assembles existence as such but also the absolutism taken as the model of identity. Thus in Levinas being or existing entails a double positing: (1) the positing of things that appear to us as real entities are (2) posited as that which exists absolutely and unquestionably. The significance of this analysis is that the theoretical presupposition within the positing of existence operates in the same way the ego posits itself as a self. The ego or the “I” is that which is primary, immediate, and present to the mind.⁵³ In many respects the structure of “pure being” appears to be attributed to modern and contemporary discourses alone, but Levinas will also assert that it reflects the ancient problem of *being qua being* in the history of philosophy.⁵⁴ This assertion about the problem is due to the fact that the study of being starts with the intellection of being in general, of the things that exist. The model of being (as pure being) reveals the dogma of ontologism in Western philosophy.⁵⁵ The presence of ontologism in thought has not been surpassed or overcome even in the attempt to overcome or revolt against the traditional notion of being. As will be discussed below, we fail to think outside of being because of the categories from which we theorize, such as the categories of the ideal, becoming, *essence*, or consciousness. Not only are these categories unable to surpass the “first model of being,” but they also reproduce it in varied forms and adhere to its verification of truth.

The significance of the treatment of the pure being in *On Escape* is that it anticipates Levinas’ later engagement with the *conatus*. The heart of the critique of the notion of pure being is that it becomes the image or model from which we articulate human identity. The convergence in thinking about “that which is” (existence) to the “the being of that which is” (an existent) is not the act of mapping on one model to the other but always invokes a relation. Here, in its

⁵² Ibid, 71.

⁵³ Ibid, 50.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 56.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 71.

theoretical form, the relation between existence and a being signifies a relation of subservience or adherence to the primordial model of being. All nature, powers, properties, faculties of the human subject or even notions of perfect/imperfect are conceived through this model of being since, as Levinas states, “the very fact of being is placed beyond the distinction between the perfect and imperfect.”⁵⁶ Moreover, the adherence to existence is concretely articulated as a struggle-to-be, because the relation presupposes and functions as an individual’s urge or inclination to fulfill existence. These reflections are expressed directly in Levinas’ analysis of bourgeois individualism. The effort to fulfill being, namely to exist as a self-sufficiency, follows from the absolutism of the original proposition of the “fact of being.” The assertion that “being is” entails that nothing else can refer to its truth or definitive character since the proposition itself “is absolutely sufficient.”⁵⁷ Therefore, according to Levinas, a being’s relation to existence takes on this character or category of self-sufficiency, specifically the identity of the “I.” The task or the struggle of the “I” to maintain its own self-sufficiency and internal coherence in view of its existence marks the relation between a being and being in general. And as will be discussed in depth in the proceeding sections, the sufficiency of the “I” in its struggle to persevere in being is something that can be observed in notions of freedom, autonomy, or becoming, but also as something that is integral to thinking about being in general.

The depiction of the struggle-to-be is first used by Levinas in the opening pages of *On Escape*, but it will also be a reoccurring theme that is played throughout the analysis and other essential points of his work. As already mentioned, the “*conatus*” is not directly connected to “struggle” there, but the descriptions of the *conatus* as perseverance and the effort or aspiration to preserve in being must be conceptualized alongside this critique of the notion of being in *On*

⁵⁶ Ibid, 51.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Escape. Moreover, the struggle-to-be treated in these early reflections on Western metaphysics either refers to a struggle-in-being or a struggle-against-being. The “struggle” is recognized as a theoretical opposition or a revolt against traditional notions of being found in modern discourses on freedom of eighteenth-century philosophy. The ideal of human existence in modern philosophy is the overcoming of pure being, the reality that is external to the sufficiency of the “I.” Levinas also locates the ideal in the self-sufficiency of the “I” and in the “heroic” task of its struggle against the unknown in the spirit of bourgeois philosophy.⁵⁸ According to the analysis, despite all of these *prima facie* rebellions against the notion of “pure being,” the reversion back to being is inevitable.⁵⁹

2.1.2 “*Is Being Self-Sufficient?*”

The philosophical question that dominates *On Escape* is that of the autonomy or the sufficiency of being. Is the assertion of the *real* (as already qualified above) an autonomous claim, unsupported and indisputable? Levinas questions whether being is self-sufficient. This question is not intended to place doubt on the existence of real entities.⁶⁰ Nor does Levinas attempt to doubt, in the form of Idealism, the existence of the real as an empirical claim. Rather, the interrogation of being is not to reject or denounce the existence of entities but to call into question the authority of the proposition, its absolutism. The problem here is that the assertion of being as absolute determines and is indistinguishable from the act of positing. As Levinas states,

⁵⁸ The struggle-towards-being in order to fulfill or satisfy a type of destiny of being was already expressed by Levinas’ indictment of Heidegger’s ontology, as will be discussed in Chapter III. The struggle towards being is most notable in Bergson’s vitalist philosophy. Bergson’s becoming is not distinct from this understanding of being. Being as pure presence is still the measure of existence even in contemporary discourses.

⁵⁹ The inevitability of being reverted back to being is not a result of the trends in thought but in the process of thinking in general. Thought itself holds an inclination or tendency to posit being as pure being. The connection between the *conatus* and theoretical thought will not be treated in depth until Levinas’ work in the 1980s following *Otherwise Than Being*. However, these early articulations of thinking and the structure of pure being anticipates Levinas’ later treatments of the *conatus* because it brings to bear the inseparability of positing being (the existence or being of things) in thought and assertion of being (things that exists) in general, one affirms the other. The affirmation of being in thought will be later defined as the persistence of *essence*, the “endurance of being in being.” Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), xi.

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 70-71.

“[...] the attachment of thought to being is unshakable [*indefectible*].”⁶¹ This connection between thought and the act of positing existence (“the fact that something is [...] that I am”⁶²) is not determined by theory. In Levinas theory and philosophical discourse do not have a direct bearing on the behavior of an individual. Theory for Levinas is “essentially subservient to the existent and, when it does not start from being, it anticipates it.”⁶³ An existent or individual, in this respect, is brought to bear by the positing of existence (its *fait accompli*). Therefore, as a result, according to Levinas, “we envision in a being only its existence.”⁶⁴ The pull of the ontology of being within philosophical discourse does not denote a logical necessity in philosophical reflections. Rather, the pull or lure of pure being is its account of identity—being is the assertion of identity. This is the tradition Levinas is opposed to. In this tradition the identification of things is seen as one and the same with the identification of oneself as an existing being. The convergence of these two different modes of thinking is not an accidental quality within thinking of the existence of a being and existence in general but reflects the tautology of identity and being in Western thought, namely that the “reference to oneself is precisely what one speaks of the identity of being.”⁶⁵ To be more precise, it is the theoretical dependency of the notion of identity and being as an expression of self-sufficiency, a self-evident truth. For this reason Levinas states, “[...] existence is an absolute that is asserted without reference to anything else. It is identity.”⁶⁶ The identity of a being (I, ego, *moi*) takes on the character of a tautology: I am only in so far as I am and must be.

The outcome of Levinas’ analysis is that although the assertion of the identity of being has a logical and tautological form, the claim to existence’s absolutely sufficiency is distinct from the

⁶¹ Ibid, 72.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 51.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 55.

positing of the self-sufficiency of the “I” or ego. According to Levinas, the “I”’s self-sufficiency is always running up against its own insufficiency or imperfection in relation to being. The fact of being is perfect since “it is inscribed in the absolute.” Therefore, nothing “affects the absolute character of an assertion that refers only to itself.”⁶⁷ The notion of pure being is beyond perfection because it is placed beyond the “distinction between the perfect and the imperfect.”⁶⁸ The categories of perfect/imperfect or sufficient/insufficient are only applied to the “I” or ego alone. The experience of pure being is the experience of limit, finitude, and insufficiency. It is also the “the experience of internal antagonisms and of the escape that foists itself on us.”⁶⁹ For Levinas the dominance of ontology in Western philosophy in this sense entails that being is never our own; there is always a dependency and lack of power to transcend or depart from being. From the standpoint of the subject, the character of self-sufficiency within the notion of pure being denotes that “impossibility of being what one is.”⁷⁰ Thus, as Levinas explains in the experience of nausea, “[...] we are there, and there is nothing more to be done, or anything to add to this fact that we have been entirely delivered up, that everything is consumed [...]”⁷¹ For this reason an individual does not have his or her own existence but only a relation to it given the degree of its fulfillment of existence. Three propositions follow: (a) the “I” or the ego does not have an existence of its own; (b) the ego under the model of pure being cannot be conceived existing within existence but (c) only has a relationship to existence. The nature of the relationship to existence is predicated on a struggle [*lutte*]. The struggle-to-be is the tendency to preserve, which is defined by Levinas as the notion of the *conatus*. In one sense the formal structure of the struggle to exist is situated at the heart of the traditional notions of being

⁶⁷ Ibid, 57.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 51.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 67.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 66.

⁷¹ Ibid, 66-67.

following from Greek thought, but Levinas is also attempting to demonstrate that even in a revolt or the effort to surpass “being” a struggle is necessary. Therefore for Levinas the struggle-to-exist runs in two directions: (1) in the effort to adhere to existence (in order to fulfill one’s existence), which in turn results in subservience to being; and (2) in the effort to overcome being itself.

In a narrow sense, as already mentioned, the struggle-to-exist is also determined by the categories of sufficiency/insufficiency, perfection/imperfection, and infinite/finite. The relation between existence and a being’s existence implies a struggle that responds to an inherent limit or lack in a being’s existence.⁷² This can be found in eighteenth-century discourses on freedom and individualism. Here, as will be discussed in depth later, the effort or struggle-to-be is directed towards preserving the internal peace of the individual in the midst of a causally determined world. The individual’s struggle against the world should be seen as an effort to overcome a foreign reality [*réalité étrangère*]. This foreign reality is an obstacle to overcome or something for the individual to defeat, and for Levinas is always inevitably directed towards the stranger [*l’étranger*].⁷³ The “I” or ego is modeled from the image of pure being (under the category of sufficiency) that it wishes to overcome. From this point of view, the chief characteristic or intrinsic quality of the “I” is its act of being (*esse*) as the heroic triumph against the being “that chokes it.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, as discussed in Levinas’ brief but explicit critique of Bergson and his implicit challenge to Heidegger, the *conatus* should be conceptualized not only as a struggle *against* an abrasive notion of pure being but also a struggle *towards* being. Both perspectives will result in the same formula specifically that being always implies a struggle-to-be and “denotes a subservience [*asservissement*] to being.”⁷⁵ The acknowledgment of the struggle *towards* being follows from Levinas’ proposition that being is absolute only in so far as it maintains its own justification and

⁷² Ibid, 49-51.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 49.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 54.

criterion of truth.⁷⁶ The struggle towards being [*lutte pour être*] is also an activity or disposition towards existence; this can take of the form of “activities,” propensities, and powers that maintain an individual’s existence. Here, Levinas speaks of the notion of ‘becoming’ or ‘vitality’ in Bergson as rendering the dynamism of stigma of being’s fulfillment. In sum, as will be discussed in 2.4 and 2.5, the *lutte pour être* does not entail a struggle against “real entities” or the harsh realities of the world but rather denotes a propensity and an urge towards existence, the *esse* of being’s *essence*.

2.1.3 *Being, the Category of Sufficiency, and the Struggle against and for Being*

As mentioned above, the arguments outlined in *On Escape* qualify the failure to escape the traditional notion of being in philosophical discourse. Despite all of the *prima facie* rebellions against the notion of “pure being,” the primary model of being resurfaces in varied forms. This is evident for Levinas in the ways in which the subject is reverted back to this model, either in the ways it approximates identity of the ego or the “I” or the ways it attaches a destiny to the human condition. In both of these instances the subject’s existence is articulated and mediated by being. Therefore, as will be argued, the individual has no existence but only has a relation to it; he is burdened by it. In Levinas the dynamics between an existent and existence, given this model of being, as I will continue argue, is always a relation of struggle. The term “struggle” [*lutte*] is used at the outset of the essay to denote the heroism of the “I” against the world in eighteenth-century philosophy’s notion of freedom. Here, the conception of freedom arises from the revolt against traditional notions of being. This revolt is not a claim for a spontaneous freedom but a reaction against the objective and traditional expression of being, which Levinas phrases “the brutal fact of being.”⁷⁷ Being for the moderns is the existence of the outside world; it is the “non-I” [*non-moi*]

⁷⁶ Ibid, 56.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 49.

or the foreign reality [*réalité étrangère*] that presented itself to the “I” as an opposition to the will.⁷⁸ To be clear, the individual’s opposition against the world is not a conflict within the self but something that takes flight in the individual’s experience of the world. Every encounter with the surrounding world, whether it is nature or society at large, would appear as a threat to one’s own existence. The structure of “I” in this sense is presupposed by the ideal of its internal peace—a self or ego that is on its own is complete, unified, and self-sufficient. According to Levinas the antagonism between the “I” and existence is most notable in Romanticism, where the flourishing of the individual is primary. There, the external world is the world or existence given over to us by human institutions—social conventions or the tyranny of politics—that demand obedience. The monotony of social life is the “lower realities” the Romantic poet attempts to evade in order to reclaim the individual’s disenfranchised self.⁷⁹ This is apparent for Levinas in the philosophy of Rousseau and Byron: “No one is more proud than Rousseau or Byron; no one is more self-sufficient.”⁸⁰ In consequence, the true and essential act or task for the individual is its heroic struggle against all that encroaches on his freedom and internal coherence, i.e. his individuality.

In Levinas, the emphasis on struggle [*lutte*] within the notion of freedom excludes an adequate reflection upon the nature of the struggle itself.⁸¹ Namely, the notion of freedom conceals the source of the conception of the “I” that is presupposed. The “I” does not gain its identity from its own self-sufficiency but is derived from the “image of pure being.” The identity of the individual is dependent on the absolute fact of being, the fact that things are.⁸² The “I” or ego wants simultaneously to mirror itself to and against the durability of the outside world. Without the image of the world or existence as sufficient and absolute, the “I” cannot maintain

⁷⁸ Ibid, 49-50.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 53.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 50.

⁸¹ In addition, Levinas contends that this struggle for harmony is not necessarily directed towards the world at large but the stranger [*l'étranger*] or the outsider. This is the only point in the essay where the “other” or the “stranger” is mentioned. There is no direct reference to an ethics here, but we can see in these early reflections that there is an ethical challenge to the outcome of particular discourses.

⁸² Ibid.

its “definitive” or essential character. In particular, here deficiency is defined by the absence or faultiness of faculties; it is always related to an individual’s ability to act. Losing the battle against pure being is the self’s inability to preserve its unity—this can also take on the form of irrationality or degeneracy in character in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy. If the existence of the social world is the model of being the subject, insufficiency would be overcome by values of society or be subject to tyranny. This is quite obvious following from Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, where the exercise of reason and autonomy entails an assertion of force and ability to self-legislate.⁸³ As mentioned above, the notion of deficiency correlates to the struggle to exist. If the unity of the “I” involves both the categories of sufficiency and deficiency, then it must *struggle*, either in its perfection (as sufficient) or in its basic and bare survival to be. The latter conception of the struggle will be taken up in *Existence and Existents*. The inability to surpass the model of pure being is not an outcome of modern philosophy but is the tragedy of Western thought throughout its history.⁸⁴ Every attempt to go beyond the “fact of being” in contemporary discourses appears to be confined by this double gesture found in the assertion of the sufficiency of the “I.” The “I” is conditioned by a double positing. For the ego to be posited (an identity), it must simultaneously be posited as something against what it is not (its negation). But as we have seen, the ego’s negation is derived from the structure of pure being. The individual has no identity or existence of its own but has it in the form of a relation, which is always a relation of struggle. The double positing of the self repeats itself in philosophical discourses; this can be seen in the effort to better the human condition by transcending the perceived antagonisms placed in between the existence and the existent. Levinas will state that this effort in philosophy is “combating the tendency to ontologize.”⁸⁵ The effort to transcend or escape the model of pure

⁸³ See Book I and II of Rousseau’s *Social Contract*.

⁸⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 51.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

being in contemporary discourse is to abandon the ego's opposition to the world by conceptualizing its harmony or continuity with being. The individual's harmonious relation with the world (instead of a struggle against it in the experience of freedom) is in one sense to elevate the "human" from the harsh reality of pure being and in another sense to construe an existent to be "compelled" to its existence.⁸⁶ Specifically, an individual's "nonremittable obligation" is to be assigned as a destiny; this can be conceptualized as the unification with an "infinite being" or inscription in creation. Although this dynamic in being should be distinguished from the *lutte contre l' être*, there is no struggle against 'real entities,' but the subject is still weighed down by existence; the subject is purely obliged to Being and wishes to satisfy the task of his existence. Levinas highlights this in his reading of Bergson, but this is also an indictment of Heidegger's Dasein, namely his "reduction of the human to the task of being."⁸⁷

For Levinas, the question of escape in contemporary discourses points to the same failure to transcend the model of pure being as discussed in the individualism found in modern philosophy. At first glance the "vitalist" conception could not harbor this traditional model of being as its vantage point in so far as there is no strict distinction between an existent-existence. Namely, it would entail no idealization or "fixed end[s]" attached to a subject's existence. Rather, the notion of becoming posits a pervasiveness of a life-force which is able to continuously renew itself. Therefore, in view of the notion of the *conatus*, the "vital urge" appears to have no destination and would not necessitate a struggle or opposition. Here, Levinas has Bergson's creative evolution in mind. He elaborates:

[...] yet the need to escape could not be confused with the life force [...] it is true that the continuous renewal of the vital urge breaks out of the imprisonment of a present time...and that creation never stops with the approval of its work; but it is nonetheless the case that within the vital urge renewal is interpreted as creation and thereby denotes a subservience [*asservissement*].⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid, Jacques Rolland's Annotation 1, 75.

⁸⁷ Ibid, Annotation 2, 77.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

The relationship between existence and the existents, as seen in Heidegger and in Bergson, is not necessarily a problem of domination as discussed by Derrida in “Violence and Metaphysics.”⁸⁹ The subservience to being found in contemporary philosophical discourse corresponds to an adherence to Being as an obligation. This obligation, which Levinas sees operating in Bergson’s notion of vitality, also points to an inability “to get out” [*sortir*] of being but also even more importantly the “nonremovable quality” of an existent’s compulsion to its existence, its compulsion to be. There, the subject’s obligation to being operates at the level of the vitality urge (or desire) since it is confined to existence as an event—an event that accomplishes existence. This for Levinas is an irresistible urge to fulfill a destiny. Although Levinas recognizes that in Bergson with “the vital urge we are going towards the unknown,” he still wants to emphasize that, in its entirety, “we are going somewhere...”⁹⁰ According to Levinas, in Bergson the “I” is always moving ahead of itself, as a struggle towards the future, the *essè* of the created being. Levinas calls this being “destined to a race-course.”⁹¹

The struggle for being [*lutte pour être*] as I have interpreted it in Levinas’ brief analysis of Bergson and Heidegger must be recognized as a temporal relation, as a projection towards the future. As already discussed above, Levinas’ description of the “heroic struggle” against the external world plays an essential role in modern discourses on freedom. In those instances, although the act of revolt against the traditional notion of being is central to recognizing the motivations behind these discourses on freedom, the discourses themselves conceptualize the individual through this model of being. The relation to what is external to the ego as the concrete experience of struggle for independence also holds in Levinas’ analysis of bourgeois individualism. However, the distinctive form of bourgeois individualism is that the non-I or

⁸⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Allan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 77.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

foreign reality that the individual struggle against is the unknown reality of industry and production. The non-I, which is “highlighted the exercise of freedom,” is the “restless and enterprising capitalism.”⁹² The temporal and material relation in capitalism is an existence that marks the individual’s fleeing the present in his material preoccupation with the future. This temporal relation with existence was seen in Levinas’ evaluation of the notion of “becoming” in Bergson. Not only is becoming not the opposite of being; it bears the same “propensity towards the future.”⁹³ In Bergson the subject is destined to a “race-course,” always being oriented ahead of itself and towards its own biological fulfillment. As we will see, for the bourgeois the projection towards the future always refers to the possession of material objects in order to preserve the independence of the ego. The temporal character of the notion of the *conatus* will have a richer treatment in Levinas’ critique of Heidegger’s account of authentic being-towards-death in *Being and Time* and in Husserl’s notion of intentional consciousness. In *Existence and Existents* the notion of the “struggle for life” will also be deemed primarily a temporal relation to the future. There, as will be discussed, the “struggle for life” is a “struggle for future.” This will qualify the act (*esse*) of being as the “care that a being takes for its endurance and conservation” of life.⁹⁴

In *On Escape* bourgeois individualism is its self-sufficiency, its autonomy as an inclination towards peace and security in the present. Everything is accounted for, gaining interest and insured. This can be conceived of concretely as the inclination for security or material durability in relation to the world. This is most evident in the economic relations instilled in the bourgeois spirit. The preoccupation of the unforeseeable future, its weariness, is the task of securing material things that belongs to capitalism according to Levinas. Similar to the heroic individualism portrayed in eighteenth-century philosophy, the bourgeois’ identity is corralled by

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid, 54.

⁹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 10.

his supreme confidence in himself. This not only reflects an articulation of the “I” in its identification with itself against the world but also an image of being as something that is given or offered over to the individual. Here, the given-ness of existing things, the apprehension that “they are,” is not the identification of the social world of convention or the natural world at large. Rather, the absolutism of the world from which the bourgeois imagines his own self-sufficiency is that of material objects. This is a point underemphasized in Levinas’ analysis. The sufficiency of the individual from which the identity of the “I” is modeled from is predicated on the objects that it attempts to possess and intergrade into a system of capital. Therefore that petit bourgeois must have an instinct for possession and integration. The inclination towards possession is not towards satisfaction of needs or the experience of pleasure. It is possession for the sake of possession within the individual’s struggle for a tangible future. The struggle-to-be (in both structure, the *in* and *against* existence) in bourgeois individualism is simplistic; it is simultaneously as struggle *in* [*pour être*] a projected known and durable future and *against* [*contre l’être*] the unknown future. Even more so, the individual’s material persistence follows from the category of sufficiency, since the individual or ego and existence is articulated by material existence of objects—they are one and the same. Unlike the race towards the unknown as seen in Bergson and Heidegger, the bourgeois’ destiny is the act (*esse*) of preparation. The bourgeois, Levinas writes, “demands guarantees in the present against the future, which he introduces unknowns into those solved problems from which he lives. What he possesses becomes capital, carrying interest or insurance against risk, and his future, thus tamed, is integrated in this way with his past.”⁹⁵ In view of this it is tangibility of the world, the world of things, that is the site or platform where the struggle takes place. The battle-to-be in this respect is the appropriation of things and how they can be integrated to preserve the “uncontested equilibrium” of the ego. In a similar fashion the heroic

⁹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 50.

act of freedom, where the struggle against existence is for Levinas always directed towards the external world, becomes a struggle that “is turned towards the stranger [*l'étranger*].”⁹⁶ Levinas does not elaborate on this point in detail. The fight against the other or the stranger will be a central theme throughout Levinas’ body of work. Furthermore, the final outcome of autonomy of the individual is the condition of mobilization of the subject for war or what Levinas calls “the final reality.”⁹⁷ The final struggle for the autonomous individual is not to reclaim his lost identity or self but to offer his will to sacrifice for a cause. This appears to be a step forward from “the solid terrain he has conquered” to the feeling of being “liable to be mobilized.” The struggle-to-be becomes transformed to the submission to absolutism, “temporal existence takes on the inexpressible flavor of the absolute.”⁹⁸

2.1.4 *The Problem of Reversion and Thinking of Being*

The fullest articulation of Levinas’ argument against the notion of the *conatus* is that it is something that is predicated and necessitated within the notion of being. As mentioned in the Introduction to the analysis, the *conatus* is essentially defined as being’s self-interestedness, but this formulation follows from the notion of *essence* and its relation to the *esse*. My account of the function of the two different forms of the term struggle [*lutte*] was treated above to introduce an alternative reading of *On Escape*, namely within the scope of Levinas’ critique of Western metaphysics and, even more importantly, to qualify the ways in which the *conatus* is conceptualized in Levinas’ work as a whole. However, the struggle towards and against being analyzed here merely reflects a descriptive account of the outcome of the model of pure being. A more complex account of the term struggle and its connection to latent critique of the *conatus* is its

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid. Again, this theme is not treated in depth in *On Escape* but holds dramatic similarities to Levinas’ descriptions of total war in the Preface of *Totality and Infinity*. The experience of total war is a topic that will be taken up in Chapters IV and V.

presence in the structure of thinking of being in general, as something harbored in the thinking of being. And, as we have seen, it is through the category of sufficiency where we can pinpoint the problem of *conatus* as a problem of metaphysics. For instance, the repetition of thinking of being through the category of sufficiency is not a coincidental feature in Western thought but a logical imperative. The logical imperative is included in the verb to be that is replicated in various discursive forms, as was seen in Rousseau, Heidegger, and Bergson. *On Escape* demonstrates that the inability to get out of being is not because being is a consciously motivating principle but rather because it operates within the process of thinking. Precisely, it is a repetition of a logical form, a tautology.

Jacques Rolland in the second Annotation of *On Escape* highlights the logical outcome of thinking of being. As Rolland brings to light, the problematic outcome to the adherence or subservience to Being is that it operates as a restriction or limitation qualifying being [*l'astiction a être*], “a reduction of the human to the task of being.”⁹⁹ We have to take Heidegger’s words seriously that Being does not subdue or subvert a being. However, the obligation to being, which reduces the subject to the task of maintaining or fulfilling being, is already presupposed in any theoretical assertion of being. Rolland does not directly discuss this problem across the history of philosophy, but in his treatment of Heidegger’s being-there, he does point to this logical necessity of thinking of being that follows. Rolland elaborates, “[...]the *essance* of being or being-in-question is in question in the being-there as having-to-be, which is the being of man. Man is: this is equivalent to man has to be [...] the ‘property’ indicated in the having [*avoir*] of the having-to-be [*de l’avoir-à-être*] measures all that is irrecusable [...] in the strict obligation to be, included [in the verb] to be.”¹⁰⁰ Rolland’s additions to Levinas’ argument approximate not only the outcome

⁹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 77.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

of the decisive formulations in Heidegger but the tautologies contained within the question of the nature of being. It is the necessitation of the thought of being and its connection to existence of a being that appears to be problematic. A being does not have to be in an abstract sense (as an isolated proposition), but it always has to be because the question of being necessitates that it is being-there, which “measures” all that can be thought about an existent. This logical necessity demanded in thinking of being is that it makes existence irrecusable. There is no departure in being, nothing that can be refunded or recused. The irrecusability of being always involves effort by the individual to uphold its status as a being that is already always projected towards its existence. For this reason a being, in its projection towards Being, is always projected outward of itself, not inward. Rolland adds that the “the ‘epic of being’ [is a] being’s preserving in its [existence], when the latter is no longer defined as ‘actual essence’ but rather dynamically, as having-to-be or as the task of being.”¹⁰¹

We have already seen this logical imperative operating in the notion of pure being, namely that “we envision in a being only its existence.”¹⁰² Being always mediates and is assumed in advance. We already saw that the self-sufficiency of the “I” is presupposed by the absoluteness of existence. But in Bergson we saw the connection between the “effort to-be” and the “necessity to-be” disclosed in his notion of becoming. There, becoming, the vitalist perspective of existence, still harbors that stigma of being, where the Being’s “fulfillment is fatal, inevitable.”¹⁰³ However, the struggle to-be operating in these early reflections on Bergson will not find its fruition in *On Escape*. Later, Levinas associates the *conatus* not only as a struggle to-be but endurance in being. This aspect of the critique of *conatus* will be treated in Chapter III. Moreover, it is the absolutism and self-sufficiency signified by being, the fact that “things are,” is the basis from which thinking

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid, 50.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 54.

is possible. Even thinking of “nothingness” requires existence to be at the forefront of any consideration, since being is the object from which nothingness opposes itself. As Bergson himself notes, the representation of the notion of the void to thought is “always a representation which is full.”¹⁰⁴ Levinas here will insist that there is double gesture of thinking of being in the process of thinking. He asks, “[...] does the pure form of the object—which everything that thinking thinks must take home—already transform this matter into a being?”¹⁰⁵ The form of the object, even theoretical distinction from matter, is still “conceived on the model of being, and the affirmation of possible existence is contained in the copula.”¹⁰⁶ Theoretical thought can posit proper definitions, distinctions, and assertions of truth or fact; Levinas argues that none of these proclamations of thought is separated by the basic “assertion of being.” From this we can conclude, according to Levinas, that thought, thinking, and consciousness are all contained in being and posit being in its basic modes of operation.

Idealism would appear to operate as something distinctive from Levinas’ account of the interdependency of thinking and being in *On Escape*. Idealism professes to move beyond the “realms” of existence because it opposes realism. The ontic conception of being ties thinking to an object, it attaches itself to it, idealism surpasses the “task of interpreting existence” in this respect. According to Levinas, although the tendency of idealism is to surpass the question of being proper, in effect it only “modifies” the outward expression of the structure of existence; it does not change this structure internally and cannot transcend it. For Levinas “there is” being but the nature of this assertion has been unexamined.¹⁰⁷ Idealism’s abandonment of pure being (the existence of real entities) results in the blind acceptance of the being rather than a resolution. Idealism does not have existence as its object of thought according to Levinas. Therefore it

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 116.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 71.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ In *Existence and Existents* Levinas take up the question of the ‘there is’ [*il y a*], which is central to his revision of the notion of existence.

cannot claim an opposition to it. But as a result, according to Levinas, it is “unable to command or guide” thought.¹⁰⁸ Levinas adds, “...indeed, at the level to which it leads us, idealism finds being—in a subtler form, one that beckons us to a false serenity—always the same, having relinquished none of its characteristic.”¹⁰⁹ The charge that Levinas levels against idealism in the final pages of *On Escape* is not a mere assertion of its ineffectiveness in thinking or its theoretical naïvetés. Rather, idealism’s goal to surpass being holds a tragic quality. Idealism’s “aspirations” in effect excludes the experiences of the everyday: the “sensuous reality,” the demands of society, and the weight of being in general. Following these reflections we are confronted by two responses to the analysis of the idea of being in the Western tradition in Levinas, the value of idealism in European civilization on one side and the blind acceptance of being on the other side. However, according to Levinas there is an alternative path between these two different responses to the idea of being, namely that of interrogation. Particularly, it is the interrogation of the inclination or need to fulfill being to which thinking itself is inclined. For Levinas this is not merely a critique of the metaphysics of being; it is “the matter of getting out of being by a new path.”¹¹⁰

2.2 *Time, Existing, and Bare Existence: Locating the Struggle-To-Be in Existence and Existents*

The previous section outlined Levinas’ argument against a certain conception of being, which is presented as an intrinsic feature to Western thought and was revealed as something decisive within the thinking process itself. These arguments provided insights into the nature of Levinas’ critique of the *conatus* since they highlighted the theoretical inclinations in the notion of being towards the view that existence is a struggle-to-be. The basic or primary articulation of

¹⁰⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 73.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

being is proclaimed as absolute and self-sufficient with no reference to anything external to being. On a concrete level the notion of pure being or being as presence is reflected in our experience of not having the possibility of escaping. It indicates our inability to escape being in thought and action. According to Levinas this inability to get out of being is the experience of pure being. The enchainment to being is marked by the lived life of the body; this is formally indicated by being posited as it, a thing, an object, or being one-self. The positing of the “it” [*il*], I-am, is the experience of sheer existing, which is essentially an embodied experience. For this reason the experience of pure presence is reflected in the feeling of nausea, the feeling of wanting to get out of one’s body “without knowing where one is going.”¹¹¹ Levinas states that malaise, being-ill, is the experience of pure being.¹¹² This experience of reversion, wanting to get out of oneself but constantly being reverted back to one’s being, back to the confines for the body, is based upon the fact that we exist and that there is being [the *il y a*]. But the brutality of this proclamation of being’s existence is that there is nothing more to add to it or to be done in the experience of pure being. There is no way out; therefore being is ultimately an experience of powerlessness.¹¹³

The repetition of the model of pure being in philosophical discourse results in two essential conditions that determine an existent’s relation to existence: (1) the first is the subservience to being and (2) the second is being’s relation to being as determined by a struggle against or a striving to exist—*lutte pour être ou contre l’être*. We saw this struggle against being in the modern definition of freedom and struggle in being in the notion of “becoming” and finally a determination of both within Levinas’ descriptions of capitalism. The similarity between both notions of struggle (*pour et contre*) is that the struggle-to-be is necessitated by an obligation or subservience to being. Furthermore, the dynamism between existence, existents, and struggle

¹¹¹ Ibid, 59.

¹¹² Ibid, 67.

¹¹³ Ibid, 69.

within the notion of pure being follows from Levinas' argument that we envision in a being only its existence [*n'envisage dans un être que son existence*] or (given the interpretation outlined above) in other words we only envision in an existent its struggle to exist.¹¹⁴ Moreover, the model of being entails that a subject does not have or possess its own existence but only holds a relation to it. The non-possessability of an individual's existence is due to its temporal relation with existence. The individual is always projected towards a future and towards a non-possessable present—his existence is not at hand to himself; therefore he continuously struggles to be, to exist. We will see this relation or projection towards future in Levinas' analysis of Heidegger's authentic being-towards-death in Chapter III. In the present analysis we have seen struggle as a relation and projection towards the future in Bergson's notion of becoming and in Levinas' characterization of the bourgeois spirit. The relation towards [*pour*] the future will stand as a decisive feature in Levinas' qualification of the notion of the *conatus*.

The interdependency of being's orientation towards the future, a notion of pure being and idea of "struggle," shows up again a decade later in 1947 in his work *Existence and Existence*. Here, as will be discussed below, Levinas is again indicating a certain relation between existence and an existent. However, in *Existence and Existents* the problem of thinking about being is only the subversion or unreflected adherence to the notion of Being but also the question of a possible anonymity of Being, an anonymous existence. As Levinas argues, the trajectories of specific philosophical attitudes or notions from which we translate human existence turn Being (existence) into a being (an existent), and, as we saw in *On Escape*, the reverse is also present. Levinas' thesis on the disconnection or separation between Being and being emphasizes the original or primordial emptiness of Being. Being or existence is void and without content. What and who an existence is can never be presupposed but is something that occurs when an

¹¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'évasion* ((French Edition: Fata Morgana, 1947), 93.

existence “takes up this existence in the fact of existing.”¹¹⁵ This taking up of one’s own existence is something that happens as an “instant” instead being understood as a Heideggerian notion of a way or mode of being. The problem of the *conatus* is in a sense conceptual. As we recognized in *On Escape*, the notion of “struggle” arises when we consider the relation of Being and the concrete forms of a being’s obligation or ties to existence (*its fait accompli*). Even more so, the notion of the struggle for life (1) reflects the idea of an objective or pure existence and (2) accounts for the ways an existent takes over its existence in the form of effort to conserve it. The latter is not only predicated on the model of pure being (objective existence), but it is also an account of what Levinas calls the event of birth, the *hypostasis*, where an existent takes up its existence. The *hypostasis* will articulate the struggle in existence in its most basic sense. In contrast, the notion of the struggle for life would entail that an individual takes up its existence not in a passivity or a refusal to-be but as an “overtaking” and a command by which an individual can conserve its existence. The “struggle” to conserve one’s own existence is not just a simple affirmation of life in reflection or a heroic act from which individual can claim its own individuality; according to Levinas it refers to a task or “care that a being takes for its endurance.”¹¹⁶ The affirmation of a being’s struggle accounts for the ways in which power persists. It is not a coincidence that the conception of existence as absolute produces a relation between an existent and existence in terms of power, where the “I” seeks mastery and domination. The “I” not only seeks power over existence (in the act of conservation) but the persistence of a being’s power as such. The emphasis on care as being’s *esse* will be an obvious indictment of Heidegger, but it will also reflect something essential to the legacy of biological sciences and their influence on contemporary thought.

¹¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 51.

¹¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 10-11.

Levinas returns to the problem of being in general in *Existence and Existents* by bringing to light the ways in which what can be referred to existence is anonymous and undetermined: it merely asserts that *il y a*. The *il y a* counterpoises the idea of pure being that was discussed in *On Escape* in so far as the *il y a* does not deny an ontic existence of “real entities.” This idea of pure being is not colored by any content, nor can it be expressed by any presupposed values or attitudes or even an act of consciousness. All of those categories are finalities or effects of human existence.¹¹⁷ Although the concept of the *il y a* is undefinable in the typical philosophical terminology, Levinas accounts for the *il y a* phenomenologically as a presence behind nothingness. Levinas elaborates, “[...] one watches on when there is nothing to watch and despite the absence of any reason for remaining watchful [...] One is detached from any object, any content, yet there is presence. This presence which arises behind nothingness is neither a being, nor a consciousness functioning in a void, but the universal fact of the *there is*, which encompasses things and consciousness.”¹¹⁸ In view of this pre-reflective state, there can be no relation to existence, given that the *il y a* holds no content for consciousness, reflection, or action. As a result, the ego or the “I” has no essential relation to Being in so far as the ego or the “I” cannot adhere to it or struggle against it in order to establish its own identity. Rather, in Levinas, this experience of depersonalization is that from which the “I” or the ego can give birth to itself, which Levinas calls the *hypostasis*. Levinas writes that the “ego is swept away by the fatality of being. There is no longer any outside or any inside.” The ego find itself “over a void” of the *il y a*.¹¹⁹ The model of pure being as an account of existence is opposed to the *il y a*. At its most basic formulation, the formation of the ego out of the *il y a* denotes an event, an occurrence, or even a birth to the self; therefore it does not reflect the existence of an already existing being. However,

¹¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 82-83.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

the *ily a* also necessitates that we can no longer conceive of the “I” as maintaining an identity from the model of pure being. The absolute character of the notion of pure being as a model of identity projects a self that is already present to itself as a “real” existing entity, but the birth of the ego in the *hypostasis* is also an experience of presence. We already saw that in *On Escape* that the experience of pure presence enchains the “I” to the “me,” but even here we are dealing with an already existing subject. The experience of presence of the ego to itself in the *hypostasis* breaks from Levinas’ account of the traditional notion of being, because it does not take place in the context of time (not the here and now, but in terms of the past and the future).

The decisive feature in the notion of struggle in both *On Escape* and *Existence and Existents* is that it highlights a temporal relation where the ego’s temporal existence is qualified as a projection towards the future: “Existence is conceived as a persistence in time.”¹²⁰ The self is always ahead of itself in order to maintain itself in the present. In *On Escape*, the projection was qualified as the unknown reality that the “I” attempts to capture or fight against. The account of the *hypostasis* in *Existence and Existents* would appear to counteract this form of individualism since the event from which the ego is formed, as Levinas describes it, “...refracts the future.”¹²¹ To understand this claim we need to recognize that in Levinas the birth of the ego out of the *ily a* is something that takes place outside of a relation, namely that of time and space. Therefore, the “I” cannot take claim of its existence by its orientation towards the future. This is due to the inherent evanescence of the event of the *hypostasis*. The process from which the existence of the “I” is brought about is not out of a fight or internal antagonisms from which an individual can take hold of himself but from a complete solitude where there “is not only being in general, but there is a being, a subject.”¹²² In the solitude described in the *hypostasis* the subject starts with

¹²⁰ Ibid, 73.

¹²¹ Ibid, 71.

¹²² Ibid. Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 42-44.

itself (situated in its own being) but at the same time lacks unity, solidity, or internal coherence. The ego is radically insecure. While there is a transmutation of the self involved in the *hypostasis*, it cannot be conceived as a “becoming.” Rather, it is a movement of “coming to oneself without having left anywhere.”¹²³ It is not a transmutation signified by decay or death but by a gradual conversion, where an event becomes a substantive. Although this will not be treated here, Levinas’ description of the transmutation of the ego should be conceived in the context of his account of creation *ex nihilo* given in *Totality and Infinity*. Here, in the context of the history of philosophy, the transmutation of the ego as an instant should not be conceived in the dynamism of time or a mechanism where the instant is conceived either through a mathematical abstraction (as a limit between two lines) or a concrete stance as an interval in or a moment to be joined into another moment in a duration. Instead, the instant is conceived as a simple act of positing an entity.¹²⁴ According to Levinas modern and ancient notions of time cover over the “drama” of the instant as an isolated act of positing because they conceive the instant as relational.¹²⁵

Levinas’ instant does hold the character of creation, but it is opposed to a theory of continuous creation put forward by early modern philosophers, such as Malebranche and Descartes. Both authors conceive of the instant of creation in terms of its origination from a divine decree and in view of the nothingness that risks its existence if God withdraws itself from existence. In this respect the *esse* (act of being) of the *ens* (a being) is not an actualization of its own *essence* but rather that of the *ipsum esse subsistens* (subsistent act of being itself). Malebranche does conceive of the instant in a non-temporal fashion in so far as the event of creation that does not conjoin with events or instants. Instead, for Malebranche the instant is singular. However,

¹²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 71, 75

¹²⁴ Levinas makes the distinction between conceiving time in the abstract and the concrete. Abstract time will appear not to offer a notion of presence. As he writes, “...we too agree with the criticisms which, since Bergson, have been made of the confusion of abstract time with concrete time. But the two have to be distinguished not because abstract time is spatialized and homogenous, and concrete time is a duration inseparable from its heterogeneous contents, continually renewed and unpredictable,” *Ibid*, 73-74.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 74-75. The model of time as dialectic, which Levinas will contribute to the dogmatism of modern philosophy, and the model of time conceived through the image of eternity in Ancient thought, would both posit the instant as something relational.

according to Levinas' interpretation, the instant of existence in Malebranche is not conceived as a point of accomplishment of existence, because it is defined in view of the divine efficacy of a Creator. In this sense Malebranche does not conceive of the instant in term of a "upsurge towards the future." He does, however, conceive of existence as a relation of struggle. Levinas elaborates, "[...] unlike in the theories of Bergson and of Heidegger, here [existence] is devoid of power to be beyond itself [...] Malebranche places it in its inability to preserve itself in existence, in its need to resort to divine efficacy at each instant."¹²⁶ Given the relation between *esse*, *ens*, and *essential*, existence here appears again to be qualified as an adherence to Being. Malebranche's formulation of existence highlights an inherent lack in existing and therefore necessitates a struggle. This relation between the ego and existence is a dynamic founded in lack and results in the struggle we saw in decisive moments in the history of Western philosophy. However, Malebranche's interpretation is unique in so far as the struggle-to-be signifies both passivity of existent and, as Levinas states, "a conquest" over existence.¹²⁷ According to Levinas, Descartes' *cogito* bears a similar dependency on a divine efficacy for its existence. The *cogito* appears to be created *ex nihilo* because it alone is that which makes the "I" certain of its own existence—"I think therefore I am." In this sense, as Levinas acknowledges, the *cogito*, given its proclamation of the identity of the ego, "rests on the absolute effectuation of being by the present."¹²⁸ Despite the character of the instant, according to Levinas' interpretation of the *Meditations*, the role of the *cogito* in Descartes' metaphysics operates under the same fragility of extension (*res extensa*), since they both are always "at risk at following into nothingness if God...would withdraw from it...the evidence of cogito is supported on the evidence for divine existence."¹²⁹ The dependence of the created entity upon Creator in theories of continuous creation is problematic in Levinas, not only

¹²⁶ Ibid, 74.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 75.

¹²⁸ Ibid, 79.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 79-80.

because it reflects a polemic against a notion of a “given” or preconceived existence but even more so because the ways these theories enroot the creation of the ego in the *esse* (the act of being) while also deferring a creator’s existence to a will outside of itself. That is, the ego’s initiation into being is never complete or accomplished but a continuous struggling to exist outside of its own accord or powers.

At the phenomenal level, the dependency upon a Creator in creation is something distinct from the self-reference that allows for the identification of the “I.” The disjunction between the experience of the birth into existence (of the “I” or ego) and the quantification of existence (from the point of view of a Creator) necessitates that a being has an inherent lack or deficiency in existing. This point is brought to bear by Levinas in his final comments on the operation of Descartes’ *cogito* in reference to the past. Levinas writes, “[...] the certainty of the *cogito* in the past is not enough. Against the always-possible failings of memory, it is necessary to have recourse to God. But at the same time the personal form of the *cogito*, the ‘I’ of the ‘I think,’ imposes that certainty.”¹³⁰ In view of this, the essential act of the *esse*, the ego’s affirmation of itself, is incomplete. The ego simultaneously exists from within (its self-creation, in the case of the *cogito* its certainty of itself) and also from without (by divine efficacy). A crucial outcome to this early modern formulation is that it is unable to account for the ways the “I” or the ego is able to accomplish its own existence, although it denotes the “inward relationship between the ego and its act,” which in Levinas is the appropriate meaning of the verb to be [*être*] in relation to the “I.” Moreover, Levinas’ engagement with Malebranche and Descartes provides a foundational argument for understanding Levinas’ own apprehensiveness about certain qualifications of the existence of the ego.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 80.

Levinas' emphasis on the birth of the "I" in *Existence and Existents* over an account of an already existing ego in the setting of a world, a society, or even a biology offsets a notion of struggle or a perseverance in existence since there is nothing external to the "I" in the event of the *hypostasis*. Therefore, there is nothing to be fought against or won. In addition, the negative form of the struggle for existence is one that is constituted by the anticipation of the future.¹³¹ Although Levinas argues that the experience of the instant is distinct from the struggle-to-be in existence and its projection towards the future, he also does not want to reject the attribute of struggle to existence either. The instant is a struggle. Levinas claims that the existence of the "I" involves an effort to-be that is coupled with a resistance to-be. Both the effort and resistance in the ego's existence is necessitated within the event of the upsurge of the ego into existence in the *hypostasis*. The mechanics of Levinas' revision to the notion of struggle follows: according to Levinas the self-reference of the ego, its being present to itself, out of the *hypostasis* entails a taking of a position or halt "in which the present joins with itself and takes itself up."¹³² The "taking a position" with oneself is an experience of tension; it is both an effort and resistance. Creation *ex nihilo* is an effort, a triumph.¹³³ The event that corresponds to the upsurge of the ego out of the *there is* is a unique understanding of effort since it is also a fatigue, both a lurching forward and falling back. For Levinas, movement or effort (the lurching forward) is a creative force that propels the ego into a *self* but also harbors a resistance to this effort, a fatigue. Therefore, the effort or type of struggle that Levinas wants to appropriate to the ego in the *hypostasis* is dysfunctional. It is never intentional or determined by a need or inclination. In addition, the struggle of the ego here does not illustrate the mastery of action or a need for survival but the

¹³¹ Ibid, 20.

¹³² Ibid, 81.

¹³³ Ibid, 20.

recognition of the ways in which a being condemns itself to existence. In this respect the ego wants to exist, to-be, but does not want to persist in its being. Levinas elaborates:

But, if fatigue is a condemnation to being, it is also stiffening, a withering up, a breaking with the sources of life. The hand does not let go of the weight it is lifting, but it is as it were abandoned to itself, counts only on itself. Here is a peculiar form of forsakenness. It is not the solitude of a being forsaken by the world with which it is no longer in step, but a being that is no longer in step with itself, is out of joint with itself, in a dislocation of the *I* from itself, a being that is not joining up with itself in the instant, in which it is nonetheless committed for good.¹³⁴

The significance of the description of fatigue being made here is that the condemnation of being involves a proclamation of life or existing but also of its abandonment. We saw this withdrawal from being in the need to escape or depart from being in *On Escape*. The inclination to “drop everything” and leave life behind also negates the notion of a unified and coherent self. The “I” is not attached to itself but disjoined. The disjunction of the “I,” its lack of unity, oddly enough also indicates its self-possession. Since the ego takes up itself in the instant, and from its triumph over its inclination to abandon itself, the ego comes in contact with its existence. It takes a position in its resistance. Similar to Maine de Biran’s account of the dynamic between effort and resistance in action, in the effort to take a “position” or stance the resistance or fatigue acts as a base for effort. Resistance is the condition for effort. However, unlike Maine de Biran, effort or action does not consist in willing or not willing but in being as a whole.¹³⁵ Moreover, the inherent tension of the “I” in effect diminishes a notion of a destiny or an inheritance of the past, a pretense towards the future or even a philosophical reflection from which the ego can model its existence. In all of these instances, there is a dynamic between the existence and an existent that in no way implies that there is a “possession of being” by an existent.¹³⁶ For instance, as was already discussed, the model of pure being demonstrates an inherent non-possession of the “I,” a

¹³⁴ Ibid, 24.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 80-81.

¹³⁶ Ibid. See arguments outlined for self-possession, 79-80.

proposition that entails that an existent's existence not be of its own but only can adhere to or act against Being.

The significance of Levinas' revision of the notion of struggle as an inherent passivity in existence will be the foundation to his account of the *conatus existendi* in *Otherwise Than Being*. The *conatus existendi* will be Levinas' resolution to the problem of *conatus essendi*. Levinas acknowledges the existence as an instant to reflect a struggle but not in the frame of reference to an origin or even a legacy or a temporal relation. The struggle is described as the event of an instant, which is a dynamic between effort and resistance. Levinas' emphasis on the *esse* as one and the same as *ens* but radically separate from *essence*. Levinas will treat the connection between temporality and *essence* in his later works. Both elements will be the foundation to the reoccurring critique of the *conatus*.¹³⁷ The notion of presence operating in the *hypostasis* is a halt in time and something that cannot be conceived under the notion of duration. The continuity (persistence) of the ego across time (and even space) requires a conception of the ego that is either unified or has an essential identity. Furthermore, the problem with the notion of struggle is that it is articulated within the context of physical survival. The result of thinking of life as a struggle is that it conceals the event of positing the "I." The "struggle for life" conceives of the struggle in view of an already existing being instead of conceiving it as a terminus. Here, we can posit the early stages of the particularities of the argument against the *conatus*. As will be discussed in proceeding chapters, the problem of the *conatus* reveals something essential about thinking of time as the task of survival. This component of Levinas' engagement with the *conatus* will have its clearest articulation in his critique of Heidegger's authentic being-towards-death. According to Levinas' interpretation, time or temporality in Heidegger is thought on the basis of death and is concretely articulated as Dasein's anxious anticipation of its own death. Life or human life in this sense would be defined

¹³⁷ Ibid, 71.

as a projection or a race-course towards death; time or future (*Zukunft*) and the disposition of “to come towards” (*Zukommen*) are going to be intricately linked in a being’s being.

2.3 Conclusion

As Levinas makes known in the early pages of Chapter I in *Existence and Existents*, existence in many respects posits a subject who can take up an attitude regarding the finality of existence. The notion of the “struggle for life,” Levinas argues, has been “supported by the development of the biological sciences in the 19th century” and “has had incalculable influences on the whole of contemporary philosophy.”¹³⁸ But the idea itself indicates something beyond its value or effort for survival. The notion of the “struggle for life” does break with the philosophical tradition because it points directly to the relation between “what exists” (real entities) and “the existence” of these entities. That is, it focuses not necessarily on the nature of an *essence* of a plant, horse, or human but the means and conditions by which it can exist. At face value this would indicate that the relation to life in the struggle for it focuses on biological needs or bodily pleasure of the living entity. But, as Levinas wants to highlight, the struggle for life, the urge to preserve life itself, is “over and beyond the things capable of satisfying our needs which that struggle intends to acquire.”¹³⁹ The objective of the struggle [*lutte*], as we saw in *On Escape*, is pure and bare existence. Naked existence—life absent of a world, of a divine decree or essences—is the life of the “natural,” which is hidden but also “quasi-perceivable.”¹⁴⁰ According to Levinas, in order to recognize the interworking of the problematic form of struggle we must conceptualize it not in term of its needs in existence but in view of time itself. As we saw in Bergson, the concept life, or pure and naked being, is defined by its “struggle for the future.” The task of pure being is the

¹³⁸ Ibid, 10.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

endurance and conservation not of bodily life (and all its various articulations) but the prolongation of existence proper, against its fatality. The fatality of life or death is not related to nativity or continuous birth; they are of a different order. Rather, the orientation towards the future in the face of (or the possibility of) death necessitates the ways in which a subject takes up existence, as a care for prolongation. The care for and endurance in existence proper is a theme that will be treated in the following chapter in Heidegger's authentic-being-towards-death. The preceding chapters will also elaborate the dynamics involving temporal nature of the *conatus* as a struggle-to-be within the notion of intentional consciousness.

As demonstrated in *On Escape* and more vividly in *Existence and Existents*, the basic articulation of existence found in thought and the thinking of being unfolds as the struggle-to-be [*lutte*]. In particular, the struggle [*lutte*—following from the original lack in being—arises in thought in positing the relation between a being and Being. The relation between being and Being (or existent and existence) is not a relation in a strictest sense but a dynamism that subordinates a being to Being. The subversion is not domination between beings but should be recognized as the very urge and struggle to fulfill one's being. As we saw in Levinas' concrete descriptions of the bourgeois spirit, Rousseau, the Romantics, and Bergson, the struggle to fulfill one's own existence could be hypothesized to exist *towards* or *against* existence itself. However, as already discussed, the lack in being, which becomes articulated as a struggle, does not originate from relation with being to Being but in the experience of solitude. In *Time and the Other*, the existential analysis of solitude reveals that the inclination towards self-mastery and sufficiency thematized in modern Romanticism reflects more of experience of despair and abandonment. We also saw in *Existence and Existents* the subject's struggle to-be in this view is not in vain or a mere constructed illusion. Rather, the "struggle" or effort to existence is originally experienced in the *hypostasis*, the effort in the upsurge of the ego from the *there is* [*il y a*].

The early conceptual framework of Levinas' engagement of the notion of struggle should be conceptualized alongside his critique of the *conatus essendi*. Levinas himself does not make the differentiation between the different usages of the *conatus* in his work but the distinction itself follows from the argumentations against *essence* versus his arguments against a notion of bare life. Each critique attends to a different dimension of the *conatus* and the problem of identity of the ego following from the *hypostasis*. Chapter III will take up this critique in terms of the distinction that can be placed between the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi*, which will be detrimental to recognizing Levinas' conception of the *conatus existendi*. The most evident distinction that can be placed between the different usages of the *conatus* is the aspects of the ego it illuminates. The general sense of the *conatus* should be conceived as the basic urge or struggle-to-be in the ego's articulation or relation to its own material existence. As already treated above, the basic urge or inclination to-be is misrecognition of the experience of the ego's emergence from the *hypostasis* or the perseverance of its existence. The analysis given in *Existence and Existence* suggest the struggle-to-be is connected to the misappropriation of the emergence of the "I" out of the 'there is.' We do not struggle to be in and against a world but out of an abyss. The primordial *conatus* is first articulated in the experience of "solitude," the beginning or the instant, "starting out from itself neither to act nor to thinking, but to-be."¹⁴¹ The misappropriation of the *conatus* (as a struggle for existence) with the *hypostasis* finds its clarity in Levinas' critique of Malebranche and Descartes.¹⁴² Moreover, the concrete articulation of the *conatus* can also be viewed in Levinas' discussion of the natural or animal inclination to exist that reflects a mode of existence. In view of this, the *conatus essendi*, as the persistence of *essence* or identity, is an abstraction of the primordial or pure *conatus* in so far that it takes on the urge or inclination to-be. We can see the first articulation of the *conatus*

¹⁴¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 67.

¹⁴² See arguments treated in 2.1.-2.1.3

essendi in *On Escape*. The struggle of the *essendi* is not primarily relation with objective existence or the impersonal abyss of the “there is” or even an animal inclination (although it sometimes takes on the appearance of this) but a relationship of identification. Here, the struggle of the *conatus essendi* is against the modification of the ego—its persistence of the ego’s self-identification and unity. Here, the objective of the *conatus essendi* is to preserve the domination of identity of the “I.” The persistence of the ego’s identity or its *essence* unfolds at the level of theorizing or philosophical reflection but also can be seen in the most basic articulation of the ego’s awareness of itself. The problem of the *essendi* will not just be its fight against what opposes the “I” but the morality that it instills, what Levinas describes as the “good conscience of being [...] the morality based upon the inalienable right of the *conatus*.”¹⁴³ Here, the main proponents of the dangerous morality (specifically a morality without the ethical) are Heidegger and more severely Baruch Spinoza. The outcome of the morality of the *conatus* is not just our inability to think of the ethical but that it justifies perpetual war and ultimately total war.

¹⁴³ Emmanuel Levinas, “Nonintentional Consciousness” in *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 130.

Chapter III
Being-Towards-Death as Being-For-Death:
The Axiology of the *Conatus Essendi* in *Being and Time*

3.0 Introduction

I have not yet treated Heidegger's role in Levinas' preoccupation with the *conatus* in any depth. This exclusion of Heidegger was partly due to the nature of the critique itself. The notion of struggle, as we have seen, does not prioritize or emphasize a particular figure or model of knowledge. Rather, the term itself is a structure that in Levinas denotes a relation between existence and existents. Therefore, the term has recourse above and beyond Heidegger.¹⁴⁴ This exclusion is also due to the scope of Levinas' critique of Western metaphysics, where the chief problem is not the separation or distinction between essence and existence but the priority of the *esse* of being in the articulation of the relationship between essence and existence. And, as we saw, this relation from which the *esse* or the act of being (to-be) is primary posits a relation between existence and the subject as a struggle that at its foundation is an adherence to being. The iterative form of struggle [*lutte*] or the *conatus* is central to the function of existing or being. Moreover, Levinas' interpretation of Heidegger's notion of authentic being-towards-death in *Being and Time* is tantamount to the critique of the *conatus*. Dasein's authentic being-towards-death will be the mode in which Dasein's *esse* can have power over its existence. Levinas' engagement with Heidegger's notion of death in the lectures in *God, Death, and Time* and selected essays in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* will present another revision to the scheme of the *conatus*, because it directly takes on the problem of time or temporality in respect to being's *esse*. In these works, the critique of the *conatus* will be directed towards Heidegger's ontology. In many respects in Levinas'

¹⁴⁴ This is the point of departure of prior analysis done on the *conatus*, Robert Bernasconi, "Levinas and the Struggle for Existence," in *Addressing Levinas*, eds. Eric Nelson, Kent Still and Antje Kapust (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 170-184. Richard Bernstein "Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 252-267.

engagement with Heidegger, as we saw in the temporal relation of struggle in *Existence and Existents* and *On Escape*, time will be solely defined as a future relation of being-towards-death. And in this relation with death, as time, the totality of Dasein's existence is brought to light—the *esse* of its *essence* is its authenticity, its mode of being proper to itself [*eigentlich*].¹⁴⁵

Heidegger's ontology of existence as it relates to the notion of struggle in Levinas will present an impasse in Levinas' early arguments against the model of pure being or being as presence in the history of Western metaphysics, as discussed in *On Escape* and *Existence and Existents*. The struggle [*lutte*], which, as we saw, followed from the original lack or deficiency in being, arises in thought when positing the relation between being and Being. The relation between being and Being (or between an existent and existence) is not a relation in a strictest sense but a dynamism that subordinates a being to Being. However, on the surface this subversion appears to be domination over beings but should only be recognized as the very urge and struggle to fulfill one's being. This structure only has partial bearing on the role and the formal structure of the *conatus* in Heidegger's ontology. Overall, in Heidegger, the formulation of the *esse* as the existential act of being collapses so that existence and *essence* are one and the same. Dasein's essence is its existence.¹⁴⁶ According to Levinas' interpretation of Heidegger, being's *esse* always designates the necessity placed upon being. We already saw this point made in Jacques Rolland's Annotations to *On Escape*.¹⁴⁷ There, Heidegger's conception of existence was treated as always placing "a strict obligation to being."¹⁴⁸ And, as will be discussed later, the collapsing of the *esse* with *essence* as the existence of Dasein in Heidegger reproduces the structure of the *conatus*.

¹⁴⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, "Time Considered on the Basis of Death" in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 49-52.

¹⁴⁶ It is important to note that Heidegger's treatment of the *esse* also encompasses the question of the condition of the *esse*, the possibilities in existing. Levinas will focus solely on death because it reflects a treatment of the *esse* that is not connected to the question of possibilities. Since death is the culmination of all possibilities, it is of one's ownmost, non-relational, and insuperable possibility of being.

¹⁴⁷ See, "Annotation" Number 2 in *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 77.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. Here, Rolland pointed out that the emphasis on Dasein's having to-be in its being-there bears "the (surprising) proximity of the Dasein understood this way to Spinoza's *conatus essendi*." Chapter IV will more broadly treat the role of Spinoza in Levinas' critique and revision to the formal structure of the *conatus essendi*.

In Heidegger, in accordance with the critique of the *conatus*, the relation between a being and Being will simultaneously reflect a struggle against Being (for Dasein in its authenticity in view of the nothingness of death) and a struggle towards Being as an obligation or adherence to it.

A claim can be made that there is a dynamism operating in Heidegger's ontology that reflects a struggle-to-be in a more passive sense within his conception of 'in-standing' [*Inständigkeit*].¹⁴⁹ In view of a Levinasian interpretation, the in-standing of being exhibits the character of an adherence to Being because it designates the *essence* of existence as a being-towards or openness to Being. Heidegger defines the struggle towards Being [*lutte pour être*] as a disposition or the mode of being that sustains this openness or being-towards Being as maintaining "being" in care and, as he puts it, enduring "in what is most extreme (being towards death)."¹⁵⁰ This dimension in Heidegger is discussed in *Existence and Existents* and even attributed to the notion of the struggle for life.¹⁵¹ But this is not critical to recognizing the critique of the *conatus* as the *conatus essendi* in Heidegger. I will continue to argue that the notion of struggle [*lutte*] reflects the notion of the *conatus* rather than the *conatus essendi*. The *conatus essendi* in Heidegger does not proceed from the notion of existence that is conceived from its givenness [*le donné*] or an offering up of existence from which an individual struggles to maintain its own identity. Rather, the *conatus essendi* reflects a production of being. The role of the *conatus essendi* in Heidegger, according to Levinas' analysis, is found in Heidegger's emphasis on the ways in which Dasein is authentic in *Being and Time*. Dasein's authenticity should be recognized by its self-reference or identification with itself as primarily a self-concern. The self-concern of Dasein's mineness, its authenticity, is brought to bear once one distinguishes Dasein in its everydayness where it is not itself and is unconcerned (in the strictest sense) for its own being. The they-self [*Das Man*] is the

¹⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, "Introduction to 'What is Metaphysics,'" in *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeil (Chicago: DePaul University Press, 1998), 284.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 10-11.

condition or state of Dasein's losing its self-identification, its authenticity. Levinas will interpret Dasein in its mode of everydayness as contempt for the everyday and a prioritization of Dasein's authenticity, a self-identification or concern as a being-for-itself as an expressed self-interestedness. Although the self or Dasein in the everyday is conceived as distinct from Dasein portrayed in the authentic mode of being, the everyday reflects a continuity of the axiology of the *conatus*. Heidegger's formulation of authentic being-towards-death is founded on a presupposed value or axiology that will account for both being's deficiency and its perfection (or its ownmost being [*eigenst*], authenticity).¹⁵² However, according to Levinas' reading, both dimensions and modes of being (inauthentic and authentic) are conceptualized in such a way that priority is always given to the authentic, Dasein's being most proper. Levinas will argue that this value of self-concern is pervasive throughout the primordial structure *Jemeinigkeit*, Dasein's mineness or selfhood, which is the *ontological constitution* of being-towards-death in Heidegger.¹⁵³

Overall, Levinas will locate the *essendi* of the *conatus* in intentional consciousness and the act of representation. The ways in which entities or things are designated and identified by the mind or consciousness for Levinas are the "very scenario of the unceasing effort of the *esse*" in being.¹⁵⁴ In Levinas representation or presence has its own process of unfolding. Presence is an exposition to "prehension [*la saisie*], to grasping, to comprehension, and to appropriation."¹⁵⁵ These are not just mere acts of consciousness or mental activity, but they are where the "being of beings unfold."¹⁵⁶ And it is for this reason Levinas will consistently argue that intentional

¹⁵² Here, in the lecture titled "Dying for..." Levinas introduces the theme of the lecture as a whole when he asks if Heidegger's ontology in *Being and Time* has not "already gone through the axiological alternatives and chosen between values and respected the authentic and distained everyday, which, nevertheless, proceeds from it? Even if, to begin with, the fall—the *Verfallen*—was exposed as being existential." Levinas questions this value for the authentic, namely Dasein's *Eigentlichkeit* and *Jemeinigkeit* (its mineness and its being proper) in his analysis of the everyday and death in the lecture, *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 211-212.

¹⁵³ For Levinas this designates or determines the verbal expression of being, the to-be, and the category of the *esse* to its ipseity. This is reflected in his description of "*essance*." Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 43, Note 1.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

consciousness is the concrete practice of the ego's perseverance in being.¹⁵⁷ Even more so, Levinas will locate the problem of the *conatus* in intentional consciousness and its expression or designation of a morality or intentional rectitude in a being's being. The threat to a being that the *essendi* expresses is not death in the strictest sense (the *conatus essendi* is not concerned with prolonging life as the preservation of material or biological life) but the subject as it pertains to the continuation of the identity of the ego. Levinas' interrogation of the *conatus essendi* will be invested in what he will believe to be the self-interested *ethos* it instills, as a good conscience. This charge will be against Heidegger, Husserl, Brentano and, as we will see in Chapter IV, Spinoza.

3.1 *The Argument*

The task of the analysis is not only to show the bearing of the critique of the *conatus essendi* on Heidegger's ontology but also to demonstrate the ways in which the *conatus* introduces a non-reflected axiology into key concepts in contemporary thought. The problem here is not that there is a lack of ethics or morality in the notion of the *conatus*; it is that the *conatus essendi* expresses itself as a "good conscience" and a morality.¹⁵⁸ In order to demonstrate this connection in Levinas' thought, the following analysis will be divided into four sections. The first section (3.2) will treat the notion of the *conatus essendi* as distinct from but also complementary to the notion of the *conatus* as treated in the earlier chapter. Levinas himself does not explicitly differentiate between the different usages of the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi* in his work, but the distinction itself is clearly revealed in his analysis of *essence* in *Otherwise Than Being*, which does not resonate with the notion of struggle or bare life as we saw in *On Escape* and *Existence and Existents*. Although each notion of the *conatus* is derived from and implicates each other, they must be separated to recognize the

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 175.

trajectory of Levinas' critique of Western metaphysics. With respect to the larger discussion at hand, the distinction between the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi* is important to conceptualizing Levinas' reversal of the *conatus* in the form of the *conatus existendi* and his critique of Spinoza's *Ethics* in Chapter IV. The second (3.3) and third section (3.4) will analyze the role of the *conatus essendi* in Heidegger's ontology as Levinas interprets it, namely in the notion of authentic being-towards-death. Here, I will draw upon his minor works, specifically his lectures in *On God, Death and Time*, essays in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, and excerpts from interviews given in *Is it Righteous to Be?* I will give the most attention to a 1987 lecture titled "On Dying For."¹⁵⁹ There, Levinas conceptualizes the *conatus* as an axiology located in Heidegger's conception of the authentic. The *conatus essendi* is most clearly articulated in Dasein's confrontation with its own finitude, which for Levinas is not a confrontation with death itself but of the possibility of the discontinuity of Dasein's identification with itself, its essence, its ownmost being. Although Heidegger departs from Husserl's and Brentano's conception of representation and intentional consciousness, Levinas interprets Dasein's event of individuation in authentic being-towards-death as upholding the structure of *protention* in Husserl. Protention in this respect is Dasein's prior grasping of its own death. In the lecture in *God, Death and Time* Levinas describes Dasein's protention and anticipation of its death as a power of being, specifically a capacity of an imminent power [*je peux un pouvoir imminent*].¹⁶⁰ The power of Dasein's being is a triumph over all that negates Dasein's identity; it is a power that is proper to it, and it is a power or capacity to go to its end. The power of Dasein to go to its end in Levinas is Dasein's power over its end or, as Levinas also describes it, as the power of the "possibility to seize."¹⁶¹ This part of the analysis will be the continuation of

¹⁵⁹ The lecture "Dying for..." was originally published *Heidegger: Questions ouvertes*, ed. E. Escoubas. Paris: Editions Osiris, 1988, 255-264. The present English translation is taken from *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. M. b. Smith & B. Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 207-218.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 44.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 51.

the analysis of *essence* in *Otherwise Than Being*. The final section (3.5) will treat the idea of sacrifice in Levinas following his critique of Heidegger. For Levinas Dasein's preoccupation with itself in its authentic mode of being excludes sacrifice, as he understands it. The exclusion of sacrifice will ultimately be the exclusion of the ethical in Heidegger. On a conceptual level, in the possibility of sacrificing oneself for another and in the experience of the guilt of the survivor is that which dissipates the force of the power of the *conatus essendi* over the meaning of being in so far as it severs the identity of the Same with the subject. The possibility of sacrifice necessitates that I can be for another despite myself. This line of critique of Heidegger's ontology extends beyond his particular engagement with Heidegger, because it approximates more distinctively what Levinas means by the ethical and its difference from the morality and "good conscience" of the *conatus essendi*.

3.2 *Essence, Intentional Consciousness and the Conatus Essendi*

The most evident distinction that separates the *conatus* from the *conatus essendi* is related to the different dimensions of the ego it illuminates. In both cases the struggle is about identity itself. The general sense of the *conatus* should be conceived as the basic urge or struggle-to-be in the ego's articulation or relation to its existence; it is a negative affirmation of being. We saw that this basic struggle-to-be should be conceived as primarily a material and spatial relation. This dynamic was seen in modern and bourgeois individualism. If we take into account Levinas' descriptions of the *hypostasis* in *Time and the Other*, the *conatus* would reflect the point in which the ego is placed in front of the world, the point where the ego or the subject maintains "a participation in existing."¹⁶² Levinas has shown in the previous chapter in *Existence and Existence* the struggle-to-be is a misrecognition of the experience of the ego's emergence from the

¹⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 67-68.

hypostasis.¹⁶³ Although the *conatus* or the struggle-to-be reflects an already existing being, Levinas attempts to dismantle this image of being by offering an account of the beginning or the instant of being, the “starting out from itself neither to act nor to thinking, but to-be.”¹⁶⁴ Levinas revises the idea of struggle in the notion of the *hypostasis* in order to conceptualize a notion of the self that is excluded from the ontological categories and the material conditions of a world.¹⁶⁵ Overall, the concrete distinctions we can draw from the notion of the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi* can be conceived as derivative. The *conatus essendi* will be the persistence of *essence* and will be proved to be an abstraction of the *conatus* in so far as that process takes on the character of a basic urge for survival. However, instead of being a negation (a negative affirmation), the *conatus essendi* is a positive affirmation of being. Similar to the struggle-to-be of the *conatus*, the *conatus essendi* operates within and as a temporal relation, an orientation towards the future. The struggle of the *essendi* is not primarily relation with “pure being.” It is also not an animal inclination. Rather the *essendi* of the *conatus* is the “good conscience” of the *conatus* or the “the animal perseverance in being.” For this reason the *conatus essendi* points to the workings of an intentional consciousness, an intentional consciousness that is directed towards *essence*, that essentially affirms the good conscience of the *conatus* through which being is not is merely a “given” but a right—the right-to-be.

In order to recognize Levinas’ account of the *conatus essendi* as intricately tied not only to the critique of intentional consciousness, but also, more significantly, to Heidegger’s account of Dasein’s authentic being-towards-death, I need to give an extensive introduction to Levinas’ revision to the traditional understanding of *essence*. It could be argued that Levinas’ body of work is chiefly concerned with the function of the term *essence* in Western thought. *Essence* is generally

¹⁶³ See argument treated in 2.6.

¹⁶⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 67

¹⁶⁵ See argument treated in 2.3.

treated as that which reflects sameness or a totality because it accentuates an understanding of being that is enclosed by essentiality or innateness of qualities or nature, which is graspable through rational or ontological inquiry. The notion of *essence*, in this respect, allows for the exclusion of an experience or encounter of alterity when conceiving of what is essential to the human subject, which, in turn, prevents us from conceiving of the subject as being formed or conditioned by what is exterior to its own abilities and powers.¹⁶⁶ As we already saw in the prior analysis, accepting the *essence* as a primary reflection on the existence of a being conveys an ontic-ontological domination. We have already seen this dynamic in his early work in *On Escape* and *Existence and Existents*. On a discursive level *essence* will be tied to claims of freedom but results in domination and violence, because what it signifies projects itself as pervasive or all-encompassing. The *essence* of an entity always unfolds or is expressed in the “domination of a totality.”¹⁶⁷ However, Levinas does not reject the ontological structure of *essence* but interrogates its function, namely the ways in which it designates identities. *Essence* in later texts such as *Otherwise than Being* and selected essays in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* is the site of the production of identity—its appearance—and the continuity of identity—its re-presentation to consciousness as truth or knowledge.

Levinas’ analysis of *essence* will reject traditionally understood categories in Western metaphysics, namely the ontological distinction between a hidden (concealed) or internal unity of an object and its manifold appearance or manifestation. A being’s appearance is not just an instant or external form of an essential quality but also the *essence* of being. To present this from a different angle, the “thing-in-itself” denotes the process in which the multiplicity and

¹⁶⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 35-40

¹⁶⁷ See, Simon Critchley, “Prologomena to Any Post-Deconstructive Subjectivity” in *Deconstructive Subjectivities* (New York: State University New York, 1996), 13-45.

contradictory dimensions of a thing or entity is identified.¹⁶⁸ Thus *essence* cannot be qualified or identified in relational categories, in terms of common properties and a relation between other identified entities. Rather, the *essence* is an isolated structure that does not designate any “namable content.”¹⁶⁹ It is nothing but its exercise. Despite the fact that the *essence* reflects the ways in which identity (and eventually meaning) is brought about, the interestedness or determination that is *essence* does not imply that *essence* operates in the mind as a negation of a non-identity or is to be taken up by a subject as an existential reflection of the nothingness or meaninglessness of dying. The connection between essence and being does not return to the dualism between being and non-being.

The ways in which *essence* operates should be primarily conceived of as a persistence of the Same, which is enacted as the “filling up every interval of nothingness” of the *il y a* (the there-is), of the ambiguity of being, or of all that which “would interrupt its exercise.”¹⁷⁰ *Essence* functions to conserve its function, its *esse*, in a totality. It can be characterized as concern or interest. “*Esse* is *interesse*; *essence* is interest” in Levinas.¹⁷¹ Essence in this sense is a movement from the Same to the other that continuously posits an identification with the Same over and against the other. This effort of the Same against the other is an effort to cover over any ambiguity or lapses in meaning or signification. The signifier must always correlate with the signified. The effort of the Same or *essence* does not function as a negation but positivity. *Essence* is a positive affirmation of being in so far as it is the form or structure in which being unfolds. This is due to the amphibology of being.¹⁷² And, as will be discussed below, the positive affirmation of being’s essence in Levinas is “confirmed positively to be the *conatus* of being.”¹⁷³ The *conatus* of being and

¹⁶⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 30, 32-42.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 4. The *interesse* of the *esse* can be conceived in Latin, which the *inter* mean “along” or “between” and *esse* “to be.”

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, Levinas’ account of amphibology, 23.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

the exercise of being as its *essence* will be one and the same for Levinas. And for this reason, the qualification of the *esse* in Heidegger's authentic-being-towards-death will be essential to connecting the authentic-being-towards-death and the exercise of the *conatus*. This is not only a charge against Heidegger but against ontology in general, especially how it is affirmed in Husserl.¹⁷⁴ *Essence* will be explicated as what Levinas calls "temporalization" in *Otherwise Than Being*. Although this argument in Levinas will not be treated in depth in the present analysis, it is important to note that the temporal dimension of *essence* is necessary for the continuity of the function of the *esse*. The *esse* of *essence* does not yet offer a meaning to or qualify what is meaningful in existence but rather it primarily functions as an exposure of being and designates them so that entities and things are qualified. Only from the space of identification can meaning, truth, and knowledge be made obvious. However, if essence provides comportment for truth, it is time or temporality that enables truth's arrival. Truth, as Levinas describes it, "is something promised. Always promised, always future [...]"¹⁷⁵ The future promise of truth does not originate in a claim that truth is unattainable and must endure the "test of time" but rather that the disclosure of being and entities is not present or evidently given. This disclosure is something that is recaptured and represented to consciousness.

The effort to recapture being and represent it in truth or knowledge is not due to the original ambiguity within the correlation between thought and object or in sensory perception but in the amphibology of being.¹⁷⁶ The question of the "what" of an entity (*to ti esti*—what it is) is never wholly correlative to the "who is looking."¹⁷⁷ Rather, in Levinas, the question of the "what" takes priority over the question of the "who." Levinas elaborates: "[...] in this form the

¹⁷⁴ This is the subject of Levinas' analysis of Brentano and Husserl in "Notes on Meaning" and "The Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

¹⁷⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 29.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

question asks that the looker' be identified with one of the beings already known, even if the answer to the question 'Who is looking?' should be stated in the monosyllabic 'Me,' without any content."¹⁷⁸ In other words, the ontological priority of the question of being's essence absorbs the subject in a totality where the person or subject is placed within the "conjunction of being and things" and within a "system of [...] history."¹⁷⁹ Moreover, the ambiguity between being and a being is a direct result of the inability of consciousness simultaneously to identify itself with itself (be self-consciousness) as a known entity and identify the thing or object of consciousness as knowledge or truth. This would be a totality being presented to another totality. This conjuncture would also require that the "I" can step outside the "event of being [...]" in which knowledge is deposited [...] then things would happen outside of being, and there would be being there, which would be a contradictory in terms."¹⁸⁰ As a result, for any ontological assertion or the identification of being and entities to take place, it would, in effect, necessitate a separation or opening in being to allow for being's continuous manifestation. According to Levinas, the manifestation of being as a separation or being's "getting out of phase" with itself requires time to recapture or represent the present, "the temporality of time," for being. In view of the categories of being, the *esse* of *essence* concerns time. In this respect the exercise of the *esse* operates within the diastasis of being and its manifestation, which operates in duration or a temporal unfolding. The *esse* in/of time for Levinas is reflected in the form of recollection (reminiscence) to consciousness. This is because it reflects an apprehension of the past as a present, as presence. The temporal unfolding of the *esse* also reflects a forging of *essence* and intentionality; for Levinas "[...] time is reminiscence and reminiscence is time, the unity of

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 27.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 28.

consciousness and essence.”¹⁸¹ Time or “temporalization” as the exercise of the *esse* should not just be conceived in the form of the past present (similar to Husserl’s retention) but also as an anticipation of the future (both a projection and pro-tention). Levinas qualifies this effort, the *esse* of every being, as a “modification without alteration.” But he describes this effort of *essence* as a “recuperation,” “rehabilitation,” but also as an “endurance.”¹⁸² The future anticipation of the same is the function of the *esse* of intentionality or intentional consciousness that operates to recapture. The perdurance of identity, its reoccurrence, is not solely based upon being’s *esse* but also the intentional structure that binds *essence* by the mind’s prehension [*la saisie*] and essentially the comprehension of being.

It is important to note that Levinas’ specific treatment of *essence* and the ontological structure of the *esse* accounts for the process of identification, but it is a reappropriation or at the very least challenge to the voluntary and active nature of intentional consciousness found in phenomenology. It is unclear in Levinas if the conjoining of intentionality with the *esse* illustrates the priority of consciousness or thought in being (as a form of idealism), or if the movements of *esse* or being’s persistence dominates consciousness. Does the *conatus* of the *esse* of the *essendi* denote being’s *essence* or the ego’s consciousness of itself? This confusion or ambiguity in Levinas’s account of *esse* arises from his basic understanding of representation, specifically that presentations to consciousness are always expectations of consciousness itself. This is due to the temporal dimension of *essence*. This projection is always a temporal relation that is directed towards a certain manifestation or disclosure of being. It is anticipatory, it is directed towards the future. This is not due to a Heideggerian interpretation of the intentional structure but an outcome of the ontological structure of *essence* as it unites with consciousness. According to

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 29.

¹⁸² To fully capture the meaning of Levinas’s depiction of the exercise of the *esse* with respect to the question of temporality, we need to examine his minor essays written after *Otherwise Than Being*, namely “Hermeneutics and Beyond” (1977) and “The Thinking of Being and the Question of the Other.” The English version of both essays can be found in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*.

Levinas's reading of Brentano and Husserl (and in many some respects Heidegger), intentional consciousness implies simultaneously an exposition or disclosure and a "prehension" [*la saisie*] and an appropriation.¹⁸³ In this respect intentionality is a continuous movement of seeking and retrieving or seizing and allotting; it is a seizure of the present for the future. This reflects a "stretching out of consciousness" in time, in duration, of what Levinas will first assign to the lived sensual experiences but will then within the efforts of intentionality (the *esse* of being) fix entities into identities, into substances.¹⁸⁴ Levinas asks, "[...] is intentional consciousness not, therefore, the detour according to which perseverance in being is practiced concretely; is it not the detour according to which is practiced an active hold upon the scene where the being of beings unfolds, is assembled and manifested?"¹⁸⁵ However, despite the efforts of the *esse*, consciousness anticipates the disclosure of being in such a way because the ways in which consciousness apprehends the object, which is never engaged as immediate and present. Levinas will argue, following Brentano's insights, that the structure of intentionality, intentional consciousness, is characterized by representation.¹⁸⁶

Representation, or the structure thereof, will be articulated for Levinas as intentional aiming, but this has a twofold structure: namely, that the apprehension of the object requires both a self-consciousness in the grasping of the object (a representation of an object in reference to the "I" or ego) and a consciousness of the object that is being apprehended. In a formal sense this totality that is formed by intentionality is incomplete by virtue of the indeterminate determination of *essence*, its modification. As already mentioned above, the immediate

¹⁸³ See, "The Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 172

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 31-32. For this reason Levinas will state that the "flow of the lived is always on the verge of coagulating into ideal entities."

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 172.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 172-177. In view of Levinas's analysis of essence in *Otherwise Than Being*, being's disengagement from its identity is the emergence of the intentional consciousness or thought. The duration of time is the stage from which identity can continuously be recaptured and preserved across the nothingness of ambiguity can come about. For this reason Levinas will argue that all presentations are merely representations. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 26-34.

presentations of entities are re-presentations to consciousness and should be conceived in view of the inability of consciousness (via *essence*) to fully disclose “the immanence of the whole in the whole.”¹⁸⁷ The lag or disjuncture or diastasis within the exposition of being’s identity (as knowledge or truth) requires an affirmation “same” or the identified entity as the aim of consciousness and that which is discovered by consciousness. *Essence*, as a temporal modification, harbors a difference or an alteration within this diastasis but without change by virtue of the *esse*. There is a monstration needed within all mental acts of an intentional consciousness, specifically to “what shows itself and the aim it fulfills” because “there is the same as this aim and the same as discovered, only discovered and amounting to the same—truth.”¹⁸⁸

The effort to disclose being, the exercise of the *esse* of being, is never the act of the ego to recapture the whole of being (the totality of being’s manifestation) but to assemble or gather the dispersion of its parts (its multiplicity) from the original openness of being’s disengagement “from its identity.” This is because the whole of being “is reflected in a part” as an image, which is sensible and immediate. The effort of the intentional consciousness (or intentionality) is to “search for a complete presence” through and with this sensible lived experience of being. This aspect of Levinas’ account of the effort of the *esse* in intentional consciousness is a direct engagement with Husserl. According to Levinas’ interpretation of the noesis in Husserl, the sensible (sensible qualities) is not just an exposition that would amount to “the fulgurating instant of the noesis.” Rather, the sensible, the temporal lived experience, refers to noesis “in its intention.” Levinas writes,

[...] the noesis itself has a temporal stretching in it, and is constituted in time [...] One can very well attribute to sensing an intentionality that identifies colors and sounds. It “resembles” the sensed. There is something in common to the objective and the lived. It

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 28.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 29-30.

is as though the sensible—whose meaning is *multiple* and whose status in consciousness was fixed only on the basis of *knowledge* [...].¹⁸⁹

The close intimacy of sensibility and objectivity in the phenomenon of *essence* does not in any way make Levinas (or Husserl) a Berkeleyan, the *esse* is not just a *esse-percipi*, but there is a “giving” or givenness of objects to knowledge (to an fixed identity, thematized) in synchronization (synthesis) of apprehension. There is a handing over of the immediate and informal to the known and the concrete. In this sense, the truly immediate and the sensible dissolves or “withdraws itself from appearance to give room” for the identity and the identification of beings. The “immediate, pre-reflective, non-objectified, lived, and from the start anonymous” are subdued and given over to the “letting appear of present beings.”¹⁹⁰ The overcoming of the anonymous, the “filling up every interval of nothingness,” is the power and force of the *esse* of *essence*. Levinas further adds, “[...] this is a consciousness in which identifying intentionality is turned teleologically towards the ‘constitution’ of *essence* in truth, but which the energy or entelechy commands according to its own mode, and in a truly *a priori* fashion.”¹⁹¹

The convergence of the phenomenon of *essence* with intentionality forms or is the psychic life of the individual. The “*life* of presence in re-presentation is certainty also *my* life.”¹⁹² The ego affirms its being, its identity, in the persistence of consciousness directed towards *essence*. This is due to the double consciousness of intentional consciousness. Presence or consciousness always refers to taking-a-position (a position-before-oneself) not only in terms of its mental activity—how consciousness directly or indirectly represents the world to the ego or the “I” through objectifying acts—but also through the ego’s identification with itself in these intentional acts of the mind. On the one hand, this “doubling” of consciousness reflects that there is a consciousness that is

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 32.

¹⁹⁰ “Hermeneutics and Beyond” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Betina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 102.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid.

“without intentional aim.” The non-intentional conceived of is the simple awareness, self-consciousness, of the ego or the “I” in its mental acts and states. This simple awareness, or what Levinas describes as a reflected consciousness, assists or aids the intentional consciousness, which experiences of the world are always precarious given its “intentional rectitude.”¹⁹³ The rectitude of consciousness always directs the ego outside of itself in order to command, to know, to seek for truth but always falls short in so far as the “indirect experience [*du vécu indirect*] of the non-intentional and of its horizons, forgetful of what accompanies it.”¹⁹⁴ This means that intentional consciousness forgets itself, the ego, in its prehension [*la saisie*] and appropriation of the world into knowledge. On the other hand, the non-intentional consciousness, which is the undercurrent of all intentional mental activity, must be reaffirmed in being in order for intentional consciousness to prevail in its position in being.¹⁹⁵ This is because its memory of the world in which the “I” “already posits and affirms itself” is the manifestation of ipseity of identity.¹⁹⁶ According to Levinas’ scheme of *essence*, the ego finds itself in a totality and persists (*esse*) in accordance with it as the perseverance in being once non-intentional consciousness is conjoined with intentional-consciousness directed towards *essence*. Here, to formulate the *conatus* in consciousness from a different angle, the “I” is affirmed in its position-before-itself and preserved via the rectitude of intention as “the good conscience of being.”¹⁹⁷ This “good conscience” that affirms and is affirmed by the rectitude of intention that directs the subject to act in accordance to its being, not in a general sense but as it pertains to its identity and the continuity thereof. The *esse* of *essence* is the *esse* of being.

¹⁹³ “The Bad Conscience and the Inexorable” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 172-173.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ For Levinas, this reflective consciousness taken on its own reflects a bad conscience of the subject that “recoils” in the affirmation of identity. This instance of Levinas’s reflection on intentional consciousness bears a similarity to the passive and active aspects of the ego in the hypostasis in *Existence and Existents*. See “The Bad Conscience and the Inexorable,” *Ibid.*, 171-177.

¹⁹⁶ This affirmation of the “I” in non-intentional consciousness is always detestable; it recognizes itself as detestable in the Pascalian sense. It is a resistance to representation.

¹⁹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 175

The problematic outcome of this ontological scheme surfaces once the exercise of the *esse* is articulated in view of its *conatus* (only in reference to its exercise) as a morality and essentially as a “right-to-be.” The *conatus* and the right-to-be is in consequence of the verbal expression to-be, not just its conceptual affirmation. Levinas states “[...] it has to speak, to have to say ‘I,’ to be in the first person or, precisely, to be me, but consequently in the affirmation of its being as I, it has to respond for its right to be.”¹⁹⁸ The announcement of the “I” in its identification with itself as right to be should also be conceived as being intricately connected to human weakness or deficiency in view of its finitude.¹⁹⁹ This brings us back to our reflections on the notion of “struggle” [*lutte*].²⁰⁰ Human lack is always at the center of the exercise of the *esse* as the *conatus* or the struggle-to-be as the right-to-be. More specifically Levinas’ later writings acknowledge that this consequence of being, following from the mode of being from which the ego’s affirms itself as identity, reflects a fear of the other. This fear of the other is not necessarily the fear of violent death inflicted by another, as we would see in Thomas Hobbes, but a fear for all “that my existing—despite its intentional and conscious innocence—can accomplish violence and murder.”²⁰¹ Although the originality of *this fear for the other* is in direct contradistinction to the *conatus essendi*, it becomes a *fear for myself* once the identity of the “I” is taken as the primary mode of being and deploys meaning. Where the ontological articulation of being is sovereign, where there is no ambiguity or lapse in meaning, it dominates all modes of being. In this respect everything is accounted for and directed towards the perseverance in being. The being in a totality is the “unceasing effort of the *esse* in view of the *esse* itself.”²⁰² We see this convergence of the persistence in being (the *conatus essendi*) and the relation to being in general as an ultimate

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Also, see Levinas’ description of good conscience of war and its relation to human weakness, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 177.

²⁰⁰ See 2.1

²⁰¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 175.

²⁰² Ibid, 172.

concern for my life. The confrontation of death—or what Levinas will argue amounts to the meaning of the question of the “being of a being”—is found in Heidegger’s notion of authenticbeing-towards-death.²⁰³ In being-towards-death there is a convergence of the authentic or the essentiality of being with the totality of Dasein’s being in Heidegger’s ontology. Heidegger’s formulation of death will be revealed as a formulation of the persistence of the *esse* in being in the way in which Dasein is towards its death, because it reflects the ontological structure of *essence* not only in terms of how Dasein can apprehend its death—have relation to it in the form of understanding or certitude—but also how Dasein posits its identity (and the continuity of thereof) in view of this exhibition of being. Here we are no longer speaking of empty structures and a mere relation of categories of being, but a strong content and meaning of being that is inscribed within Dasein’s intentional rectitude. There is a conscience in the fear of death.²⁰⁴

Heidegger in critical ways leaves behind the notions of representation and intentionality found in Husserl and Brentano. However, the decisive elements in Levinas’ reading of intentional consciousness—as directed towards the ontological structure of *essence*—reappears in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. Heidegger’s specific treatment of the *esse* of being will present an intensified form of the *conatus*. The exercise of the *esse* or the *conatus essendi* in Heidegger, according to Levinas, formulates an understanding of being’s *esse* in its proper or essential existence, specifically “according to its proper meaning and not according to a derived deformation of some kind.”²⁰⁵

²⁰³ See the argument on the affirmation of meaning and being in “Notes on Meaning,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 154-158. And, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 33-37.

²⁰⁴ Leo Strauss also makes a similar claim in his reading of Thomas Hobbes’ late works. Strauss argues that the stakes of Hobbes’ account of the fear of death are not his acknowledgement of the perpetual antagonisms of the state of nature but rather that death operates as the fundamental principle of life. Death is the most real and an inescapable necessity that is the fundamental knowledge of human morality and finitude. Strauss elaborates: “The reduction of the just intention to pride is a deviation from Hobbes’s key-thought. Not pride, and still less obedience, but fear of violent, is according to him the origin of the just intention. What does from fear of death [...] unconcerned about his *honor*, this alone is fundamentally just. Self-preservation and the striving after peace for the sake of self-preservation are ‘necessary,’ because man fears death with inescapable necessity. Hobbes’ last word is the identification of conscience with the fear of death.” See, Strauss’ (1963) *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, p. 25; Also see the subject of conscience in early modern and Heidegger, Karen S. Feldman, *Binding Words: Conscience and Rhetoric in Hobbes, Hegel, and Heidegger* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2006). Levinas’ critique of the *conatus* will have its fullest articulation in its reference to early modern thought following Hobbes and Spinoza. This subject will be treating in the preceding chapter.

²⁰⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 34.

The *esse* is treated in measure to authenticity [*Eigentlichkeit*], its totality [*Ganzheit*]²⁰⁶—the constitution and the end of Dasein. However, what remains even more distinctive of this formulation is that the act of being is wholly derived from the existence of the being as self-possession [*Jemeinigkeit*] and a self-care or concern [*Sorge*]. Its identity is predicated by its self-concern as a being in-itself and for-itself. Therefore, as will be further discussed below, the designation of the *esse* is twofold: it is an exercise or persistence of a being in its existence (*existentia*)—in its authentic mode of being—and also entails a preoccupation or concern with one’s own being. According to Heidegger’s analysis, Dasein most often finds itself in a state of non-possession. In a degraded mode of being without intentional rectitude, the inauthentic [*Uneigentlich*], or a mixture thereof, or what Heidegger describes as Dasein “being-out-ahead-of-itself.”²⁰⁶ Therefore, Dasein’s everydayness is not in accordance with its *esse* and not existing in accordance to its being proper. The *esse* of the *essence* of being in Heidegger reveals itself in its entirety in its relation to death. Dasein “gathers” itself and becomes whole. Dasein’s relation towards death does not represent a termination or finality of the *esse* but to its entire extent preserved and crystalized as a permanent thing. Levinas asks, “[...] gathered together, having come to it end and its goals, would not the *esse* of Dasein—once the hours of its life have been traversed—be dead, would it not be close to a thing and so, exhibited behind glass, exposed, like a portrait in a museum?”²⁰⁷

In addition, as was already discussed at the beginning of the present section,²⁰⁸ being’s *essence* always unfolds temporally as not only an apprehension of the past (a retention) but also a projection, anticipation, and essentially an expectation (a protention) of a future exposition of being. The relation towards death in Heidegger is a temporal relation and projection towards the future as anticipation in the form of awareness of Dasein’s future demise and the certainty of its

²⁰⁶ Reference Heidegger’s analysis of ‘being-out-ahead-of-oneself,’ in *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par.195.

²⁰⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 35

²⁰⁸ Section 3.2.

ownmost being. Heidegger's understanding of time will function as an alteration without change because it will be the determining thread of Dasein's existence that is a constant iteration in all the various modes of existence. In birth Dasein is already towards its death, and in life Dasein comes closer to its authentic or true being in relation to death—"[...] 'to have to be' also signifies 'to have to die' [...] it is also on the basis of this to-be."²⁰⁹ Furthermore, the following analysis of *Being and Time* will demonstrate that Levinas' reading of Heidegger places the *conatus essendi* at the center of Heidegger's understanding of freedom (as the authentic-being-towards-death) and as a presupposed axiology of the critical points of his ontology in general. Although Heidegger is at the forefront of many of Levinas' critical depictions of the notion of the *conatus*, this chapter will also leave open the question of who in the history of philosophy harbors the *conatus* as a value and a determining principle in their philosophical system.

3.3 On Death, Finitude, and the Conatus Essendi

Outside any reference to Heidegger's ontology, Levinas' argument against the *conatus* gains its highest fulfillment in his treatment on the subject of death. Death poses a problem to the *conatus essendi*, since it is the event that denotes an undoing and a detachment of a subject to any external or internal affirmation of its identity. The disjoining of the ego from its existence is not a matter of no longer struggling for bare life or a struggle for solitude and individualism, as we saw in the base form of the *conatus*, but the inability to identify the ego with its own existence. Although the *conatus essendi* still denotes the formal structure of the *conatus*, it is essentially the inclination or tendency to self-preserve, as we saw in the discussion on *essence*, its inclination should be conceived of in terms of the relation between the existence of the self and its ego; Levinas will describe it as the precarious kinship between the "me" [*soi*] and the "self" [*moi*]. The

²⁰⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 43.

struggle or inclination to-be in the form of the *conatus essendi* is associated with the ego's identification not in terms of what is external or other to it but what is internal to it. The "me" is always formed in the accusative case, not only in terms of the subject's responsibility to the other, but in undoing the identity of the "I" or its affirmation in consciousness of the "me" or passive form of the ego that recoils before any form of representation or identity. The beginnings of this observation can be found in the discussion of the *hypostasis*. There, Levinas' account of the dynamics of the ego in its emergence into itself describes a passive form of the self, as the inclination of the self to resist existence and recoil against identity. This will reflect the distinction between the subject and consciousness and the activity and an undergoing of the self. In *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas describes the undoing of the "I" as exposure. As we already saw, this exposure has a formal structure within being's *essence*: the exercise of the *esse* exposes entities as identities, which are retained in the reminiscence in time (temporalization) and an anticipation and expectation of its representation through discovery and in the promise of wisdom and truth—a pretention.²¹⁰ Just as *essence* exposes identity, its exercise (the *esse*) is exposed in the ambiguity of being, lapse in meaning, and most significantly as a separation or a severing of *esse* from the subject. This separation of the *esse* from being is spoken of in its concrete sense that can be recognized in pain, an exposure to affection, patience, the aging of the body, in the form of the dis-interested-*esse* and finally as the possibility of sacrifice.²¹¹

In the following chapter I will argue that these descriptions of the exposure of the ego in its passive form is Levinas' own resolution of the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi* in the *conatus existendi* in *Otherwise Than Being*. However, the danger of the persistence of the *conatus essendi* is not that it is directed towards an overcoming an external force, such as society at large, political

²¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 37.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 48-50.

institutions, biological life, or even the foreigner, as we have seen within Levinas' notion of struggle. Rather, the effort of the *essendi* of the *conatus* involves an overcoming of the vulnerability of the self as it identifies with itself. The vulnerability or openness within the self can be seen in view of the structure of *essence*, the lag or disjunction Levinas describes between intentional consciousness and the exposition of being. The formal structure of this effort or *esse* is what Levinas describes as the "movement of the same," which is a suppression of alterity of the subject as it conforms to an identity. This movement is not a hidden affirmation of a being with itself but concretely will be as intentional rectitude. The problem here is not a lack of ethics or morality that follows from the notion of the *conatus*. It is that the *conatus* expresses itself as a "good conscience" and a morality.²¹² In view of the *essendi* of the *conatus* what is at stake in death is no longer bodily-life—as a prolongation of material or biological life—but the lived-life of the body or the subject as it pertains to the continuation of the identity of the ego. Furthermore, the ultimate effort of the *conatus essendi* is to bypass death in thought, not for the sake of immortality but for a pure immanence. Heidegger's treatment of death appears to be the most vulgar expression of the *conatus essendi* for Levinas.

Levinas' own account attests to the intelligibility of death. There is a limit to what we can *know* about death. The capacity of knowledge or truth is inapplicable to the question of death. This is because certainty of knowledge or truth, Levinas argues, requires a cognitive act in a phenomenological sense—it requires an appearing [*l'apparaître*] or an exposition.²¹³ The ontic and ontological qualification for Dasein's preoccupation with its ownmost being (its authenticity) is predicated on a certainty of death. For Heidegger, in being-certain Dasein is certain of its end in so far as it is certain of its own existence—its ownmost and non-relational being.²¹⁴ Levinas'

²¹² Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 175

²¹³ *Ibid.* 50-51.

²¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 265-267

interpretation of the certainty of death in *Being and Time* is that it is not empirical, as in the certainty of death in Dasein's everydayness, but a certainty that is *a priori*.²¹⁵ Being-certain to a greater extent means that Dasein is certain of death as being something that is indefinite and incalculable but specifically reflects the existential structure of Dasein's being, its mineness [*Jemeinigkeit*] only in regards to its authenticity.²¹⁶ In regard to temporal existence death no longer signifies the end of the "I"'s duration—*death does not merely mean 'I am at the end of my days.'* Rather, death is an event that is graspable because the constitution of my being is continuous or coincides with it—*I am more of myself the closer I am certain of my own death.* And as will be shown, this relation to myself as being towards death is the basis of my freedom in Heidegger. Here Dasein's intentionality reflects a *protention*, anticipation towards its end but as a power over itself. The power of Dasein in its protention or project towards its end is the *esse* of its being because it can be or exist on its own account, by its own necessity, and in reference to itself, it is essentially a power over oneself.²¹⁷ In the specific case of Dasein's anticipation it is a pretension of its annihilation. The element of threat in Dasein's *protention* towards its own demise (the affective and cognitive representation of the not-yet) unfolds as the power of its immanence.

In the course of Levinas' own revision to the certainty of death, there is nothing to be said or understood about my own death. Death marks the very limit of knowledge or understanding.²¹⁸ The order of truth as un-concealment, *aletheia*, or disclosure is reversed in the context of the question of death. The question of death is a departure from ontology. My relationship with death will always be non-knowledge.²¹⁹ For Levinas what stands out as

²¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 49.

²¹⁶ See, "The I and the Total" in *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 15. The exclusion of alterity or transcendence in Dasein's relation to death is seen as intricately connected to the ways in which Heidegger positions inauthentic being as primarily a relation to death that involves others and authentic being towards death as an experience that Levinas describes as wholly singular and non-relational.

²¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 43-45.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 50-51.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 18-20.

problematic within Heidegger's formulation of authentic being-towards-death is that it functions as an axiology.²²⁰ Levinas believes that in Dasein's anxious-anticipation of death, the highest value of being is its concern of the perseverance of its own being, its authentic being. Levinas believes this value of self-concern is pervasive throughout the primordial structure of *Jemeinigkeit*, Dasein's mineness or selfhood, which is the *ontological constitution* of being-towards-death in Heidegger.²²¹ Moreover, as will be discussed, Levinas will assign this value to the concept of *conatus*—the tendency or inclination to self-preserve in being.²²² In view of this criticism, the death of the other is the central point of Levinas' response and departure from Heidegger's thinking of authentic-death.²²³ If authentic-death is challenged as solely being an "affair of my own" and concerns my own self-preservation, then with Levinas we must ask, how do I initially think about death? The death of the other is the source of my relation [*rapport*] to death, not only in the consideration of my own death but also as my status as an ethical subject—one who survives the other's death and can sacrifice him or herself for the other.

However, the terrain of Levinas' critique is composed of two central reflections. (1) The first is a challenge to the claim that being-towards-death can be confined to my own experience.²²⁴ Death, understood as an event, cannot be solely a phenomenon of *giving up my own* being. According to Levinas, the experiences that Heidegger attributes to being towards one's own end, in anxious anticipation of death, do not reflect a certainty of one's own death but only indicates a *preoccupation with the other's death*. As mentioned above, in Heidegger, the modes in

²²⁰ Here, in the lecture titled "Dying for..." Levinas asks the question (which will be the theme of the lecture as a whole) if Heidegger's ontology in *Being and Time* has not "already gone through the axiological alternatives and chosen between values and respected the authentic and distained everyday, which, nevertheless, proceeds from it? Even if, to begin with, the fall—the Verfallen—was exposed as being existential." Levinas questions this value for the authentic, namely Dasein's *Eigentlichkeit* and *Jemeinigkeit* (its mineness and its being proper) in his analysis of the everyday and death in the lecture, *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 211-212.

²²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 231.

²²² Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 132.

²²³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 266.

²²⁴ Here, the possibility of sacrifice will be brought to bear. The possibility of self-sacrifice in Levinas encapsulates a large part of his critique of Heideggerian ontology. Emmanuel Levinas, "Dying for..." in *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 205-217.

which I can be-with the other in his dying is to mourn for him and bury his corpse after his death. I can even tend to and care for the dying other, but I cannot “take the other’s dying away from him.”²²⁵ Levinas’ response to this portrayal of death is to say that only through the death of the other my death is brought to bear.²²⁶ The possibility of self-sacrifice is a relation with the other as Other that takes *priority* over identity—namely, the priority over the self-identification entailed in Dasein’s own self-understanding of its “ownmost, non-relational, and insuperable possibility.”²²⁷

(2) The second element of Levinas’ critique is directed against Heidegger’s privileging of Dasein’s mineness [*Jemeinigkeit*] in authentic-being-towards-death. The limitation of Heidegger’s ontology (in regard to his understanding of authentic-death) is that, according to Levinas, it attempts to account for the unity or whole of Being from a presupposed value or axiology. Levinas believes this value of being is solely a prioritization of self-concern, that which “respects the authentic and distains the everyday.”²²⁸ The prioritization of the authentic becomes translated as a concern for being, the value for the preservation of one’s own existence—*conatus*.²²⁹ Levinas interprets the orientation towards my being in authentic death (my anxious anticipation towards it) as a preoccupation of my being or existence. In Levinas self-concern or self-preoccupation is inherent within the structure of Dasein’s mineness found in Section 9 of *Being and Time*. The possibility of sacrifice, Levinas argues, shifts the orientation of being from

²²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 240. Heidegger does mention briefly the possibility of sacrifice, which will be treated later in the analysis. However, the sacrifice for the other, such as in a definite cause, can never take away the imminence of the death of the other because death is “always essentially my own.”

²²⁶ See, Levinas, “Death of the Other and My Own,” in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 17-19. Here, Levinas will argue against Heidegger on the point of having a relation to death as “nothingness.” Death is only *intelligible* to me in face of the other’s death in so far as I am responsible for the other’s death and I am able to sacrifice myself for the other. Being able to die for another does not diminish the “truth” that every person dies for himself or herself within Heidegger’s ontology.

²²⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 216-217

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 209.

²²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 132-133. Levinas, “An Obligatory Passage: Heidegger,” 25 and “The Radical Question,” 58-59 in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

prioritizing the preservation of one's ownmost being to the responsibility one has not only for the other's death but also the other's life.²³⁰

3.4 Situating the Critique: The Priority of the Authentic is the Axiology of the *Conatus Essendi*

The rigor behind Levinas' assessment of Heidegger's being-towards-death lies in the assertion that death cannot ever be considered as neutral or a certainty that arises from human finitude. The claim to neutrality is challenged by Levinas' counter claim that there is an already presupposed distain for the everyday and value of the authentic in *Being and Time*. Levinas will argue that this value Heidegger seems to place on preservation of Dasein's identity, its immanence, in a being's effort to-be, is pervasive not only in Heidegger's notion of death but in all of the various modes of Dasein's being. The impossibility of thinking of the death of the other at great length (especially in terms of sacrifice) is absent in Heidegger according to Levinas, because at the very outset the notion of being-with [*Mitsein*] and care-for [*Fürsorge*] is mediated by Dasein's being. There are two instances where Levinas directly engages with the concepts of *Mitsein* and *Fürsorge*. The first is at the end of the essay titled "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge" written in 1958²³¹ and the second is in the lecture titled "Dying for..."²³² given in March 1987 at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris. These essays present diverging treatments of the concept of *Fürsorge*. However, taking these essays together, we can see that Levinas believes that, although there is a notion of concern for the other at work in *Being and Time*, it is a superficial formulation of how the self can be for another. The superficiality of

²³⁰ For this reason, the concern for the other in death will always involve a "shattering" of my being, an *éclatement*. Levinas will assert in a 1982 interview that the preoccupation with the other (in life and death) is an alternative anthropology, which does not start with the *conatus essendi* but with my unrelinquishable obligation, my absolute responsibility. *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 136.

²³¹ Levinas' "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge" was originally published in *Philosophie des 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963. The English translation used in this essay is taken from *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 17-35.

²³² Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 207-218.

Heidegger's notion of *Fürsorge* is brought to light, according to Levinas, when (1) we consider the ways in which Dasein can be for the other and when (2) we consider the emphasis put on authentic-death as the full disclosure of Dasein's being and the commencement of Dasein's relation to other. Both of these aspects of Dasein's being entail a priority and a privileging of authenticity [*Eigentlichkeit*]. From this point of view Heidegger's ontology limits the ways in which the self can be for the other in life and death. The self can only recognize the other's death through representation, which is determined by its being-in-the-world.²³³ Since thinking of the other's death is mediated by the world, it can never be something that can be conceptualized outside of our worldly experiences and through that which can be represented to an intentional consciousness. Furthermore, in addition to the critique of *Fürsorge*, Levinas' comments in 1986 include essential reflections on the notion of sacrifice itself. These reflections, which will be outlined below, are relevant to any assessment of his criticism of Heidegger's notion of sacrifice.

The two analyses of *Fürsorge* present two diverging attitudes. At the end of the essay "Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge," Levinas separates the thinking of being-with the other from one that is based on a "spiritual friendship." The latter is a reciprocal-symmetrical relation with the other (which he attributes to Martin Buber). The former is based on a response to the other, a relation based on asymmetry.²³⁴ According to Levinas, the relation with the other must be seen from his "nakedness and destitution" where I cannot qualify the other (in a formal way) but only respond to his needs. Levinas claims the "angelic spiritualism" of Buber's account of the *I-Thou* relation in friendship has what he calls a "violent opposition" to a Heideggerian notion of *Fürsorge*, a concern that recognizes the material needs of the other.²³⁵ Here Levinas contends that *in* the response to the material needs of another we have a basic access to other's

²³³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 283

²³⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 30-32.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

alterity.²³⁶ As Levinas reminds us, we should not look to Heidegger for instruction in social justice or the “love of man.”²³⁷ However, what can be retained from *Being and Time* is the alterity of the other as approached through attending to the needs of the other, in his or her poverty or lack;²³⁸

Levinas elaborates:

It does justice to that dimension of height and of human distress, by which (far more than by *Umfassung*) the Relation is characterized. We may well ask ourselves whether clothing the naked and feeding the hungry are not the true and concrete access to the otherness of the other person—more authentic than the ether of friendship. Is dialogue possible without *Fürsorge*?²³⁹

As we will see later, Levinas will clarify why a response to the other in need does not achieve priority in the whole of Heidegger’s ontology. Dasein’s concern for the other withdraws into indifference when considering the privilege of its own self-concern and authenticity. Despite this limitation in Heidegger, there is something primordially ethical (in its concreteness) that Levinas is pointing out in Dasein’s response to the other’s needs. There is a minimal requirement that is fulfilled in thinking about the responsibility of the other in Heidegger. In the coincidence of the ontic and ontological in the care for the other being-in-the-world necessitates Dasein’s concrete response to another. As already mentioned, Heidegger’s preparatory analysis does not reflect an ethics, but in this instance, Levinas is directly deriving his evaluations from Section 26 of *Being and Time* as reflecting an element or character of an ethical encounter.

Levinas departs from these earlier assessments in the lecture “Dying for....”. Here, *Fürsorge* will not become a point of reference for an ethics, nor does it reflect an access to alterity. *Fürsorge*, along with the Heideggerian concept being-with [*Mitsein*], reflects a larger disparity of

²³⁶ Ibid, 33.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

thinking of others within Heidegger's terminology. As has been presented throughout the analysis, the axiology that presupposes Heidegger's project and the privileging of Dasein's mineness and authenticity almost makes it impossible to think of the other in its alterity. Following from Heidegger's descriptions of being-with in Sections 25 and 26 of *Being and Time*, others, according to Levinas, are encountered either (1) according to their way of being or occupation ("others are what they do") in such a way that the other is encountered amongst the world of things (the totality of the world) and (2) Dasein's authenticity marks the limit of being-with others.²⁴⁰ As already mentioned in Section 2.2, Dasein already exists with things *in* the world. Dasein's worldliness requires that it encounters things as things-at-hand (such as tools) that have relevance to its being in the world—they are "referential-relations." Dasein is familiar too because even the things that it encounters in the world signify its mineness [*Jemeinigkeit*]. In Section 26 Heidegger does make it clear that "others" are encountered in the mediation of things-at-hand in terms of their occupation (work) in the world.

The being-with of others includes Dasein's being in the referential totality of the world in so far as the world of things always mediates my being with others. According to Levinas' interpretation, in Heidegger others are not encountered as others but are mediated by the world, "care which is certainly assured, but conditioned by being-in-the-world; an approach to the other person certainly, but in terms of occupation and works in the world, without encountering a face."²⁴¹ In addition, Levinas argues that this mediation points Dasein back to itself, its *Jemeinigkeit*, its own self-concern. This holds for Levinas because the constitution of Dasein's being-in-the-world already implies a concern for another, but in reference to its own self-constitution. Dasein's authenticity necessitates a departure from Dasein's being in the world,

²⁴⁰ "...without the death of the other signifying to the being-there, the survivor, more than funerary behavior and emotions, and memories.," *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 214-15.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 214.

specifically in terms of its everydayness. The “free-determination” or freedom of Dasein’s being is made possible in its being-towards-death which is a relation (as already stated) that dissolves all other relations. In its authentic-death Dasein stands alone, concerned for itself in the moments leading up to its own annihilation. And as we have already seen, the question of death for Levinas does not remain within oneself but reaches its clarity in the possibility of sacrifice. Sacrifice demands that the “I” and the “other” are never separated, not even in death. I cannot undo my being for the other even in death. Being able to die for another does not abolish the “truth” or fact that every person dies. But dying with others holds three essential reflections of the “I” in relation with the other. The first (1) is that the force of ‘love’ surpasses the “*conatus essendi* of life”; the second (2) is that the relationship with the other in sacrifice is the self’s preoccupation in its being-there in a world before its own death; and finally (3) the concern for the other’s death is realized or actualized when the “dying his death” takes priority over authentic death. All three of these reflections are illuminated in Levinas’ reading of the biblical verse II Samuel 1:23. The story of the death of King Saul and his son Jonathan holds deep significance for Levinas because he hears in it his own language of the relation of the other-in-the-same in sacrifice. According to the “song of the prophet,” the father and son were “in their death undivided”; their love was “stronger than death.”²⁴² For Levinas, beyond the metaphorical way of speaking, the story speaks of “[...] the essence of that force of love beyond the quantitative concept of intensity.” The phrases “swifter than eagles” and “stronger than lions” reflect a surpassing of the human from the animal effort of life, purely life. Namely, this is the surpassing of the *conatus essendi* of life: “an opening of the human through the living being.”²⁴³ Life in this sense can never be conceived as an individual life lived or even the equation of life in general (animal life). The possibility of self-

²⁴² Ibid, 215.

²⁴³ Ibid.

sacrifice is a relation with the other as Other that is the basis for understanding the human, which is distinct from animal life or even life as such.

3.5 *Authentic-Being-Towards-Death and Mineness*

Heidegger's account of Dasein's self-certainty and the anxiousness involved in Dasein's being-towards its end are the two major targets of Levinas' critique. Both of these features will become problematic for Levinas in his treatment on the death of others. Even before Levinas' critique is set out in detail, we can see that for Heidegger my anxiety towards the end begins and ends within me, it "cuts all my ties with other men."²⁴⁴ My anxious anticipation is only possible because I am certain of myself as a being that understands its ownmost and non-relational being. Is the death of the other only posited as an afterthought or something that cannot hold the same intensity and extreme possibility as my own? Heidegger's analysis of being-towards-death plays a twofold role in *Being and Time*. It illustrates (1) the most imminent possibility of Dasein's existence²⁴⁵ (as the end or annihilation of its existence) and (2) the full disclosure of Dasein's being, its authentic being. Being-towards-death is the certainty and the understanding of one's "ownmost, non-relational, and insuperable possibility."²⁴⁶ However, what is distinctive or exemplary in Dasein's relation to its ownmost being in death is that it is a significant modification of its relation with itself from its everyday being-in-the-world, specifically with regard to Dasein's relation to others and care for things in the world as its being-in-the-world.²⁴⁷ I can be with others when they die and reflect on my own death with others from a distance. But in order to

²⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 51.

²⁴⁵ Dasein categorizes this as the "possibility of the impossibility of existence." See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 262.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, par. 250-251, 255-256, 258, 260, 261-62.

²⁴⁷ Another distinction that can be supported here is in Heidegger's analysis of the relation between Dasein's being towards the world through care and being-towards-death in view of the character of imminence [*Bevorstand*]. Dasein's character of imminence does not change in nature by being-in-the-world and being-towards-death. However, what is distinctive of the imminence that I bring to bear in being-towards-death Dasein is "immanent to itself." Heidegger describes Dasein here as "being completely thrown back upon its ownmost potentiality-of-being." *Ibid.*, par. 250-251

confront the possibility of my own death, in the anxious-anticipation of it, I am divested from all relations outside of myself. The death of the other, in this sense, has no direct bearing on the experience of my own death. I can only be *with* the other in death by way of representation.²⁴⁸ The authentic being-towards-death marks the determination of the whole of Dasein and brings Dasein “face to face with the possibility to be itself” without meditation or interruption.

Death in Heidegger is the *certainty* of one’s ownmost, non-relational, and insuperable possibility of being—the certainty of my existence being my own. Death in Heidegger becomes a decisive moment in the analytic of Dasein because without reference to it we cannot conceive of the wholeness of Dasein’s existence.²⁴⁹ The whole in this sense is not the sum total of Dasein’s experiences. Rather, the wholeness of Dasein, which will become problematic for Levinas, is a specific orientation Dasein has towards itself. Prior analysis within the analytic of Dasein in *Being and Time* depicts Dasein as always in relation to the world, primarily concerned with the entities in the world. Dasein’s being in the world involves various modes of care [*Sorge*], the care for others [*Fürsorge*], and the care for things within the surrounding world [*Besorgen*]. However, within these modes of being Dasein never completely faces itself, never grasps itself totally. Heidegger describes these various modes of being as Dasein being-ahead-of-itself.²⁵⁰ In these various modes of care Dasein is projecting itself towards possibilities and making these possibilities possible, or actual, in its care towards the world. Being-towards-death shifts Dasein from being world orientated towards its own imminent existence. For this reason, being-towards-death (although it bears the character of anxiety) is essentially the certainty of one’s ownmost being. Death makes a claim on *me* as an individual.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, par. 239-240.

²⁴⁹ Ibid, par. 236-240.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

In the beginning of the preparatory analysis of the analytic (Chapter One of *Being and Time*) Heidegger describes Dasein's selfhood (mineness, *Jemeinigkeit*) as a given self-possession. Here there is a threefold structure of *Jemeinigkeit* that is introduced at the beginning of Section 9, which determines the ways in which Dasein always possesses its own being as its relation to its existence. These are, namely, (1) that the being or existence of an existent entails that it always holds a relation to its existence; (2) that the existence of an existent ("the being of this being") necessitates that it is *entrusted* to its own existence;²⁵¹ and (3) that it is primarily existence about which an existent (the being that is in question) is concerned. In other words, *Jemeinigkeit* or mineness designates that *I am always myself* mostly because *I always have a relation to my existence*.²⁵² This self-relation also designates a preoccupation with oneself (a concern) and a responsibility for Dasein's being. Levinas later criticizes Dasein's self-concern as a presupposed value or axiology reflecting the notion of *conatus*, the tendency to self-preserve.²⁵³ But, in this instance, *Jemeinigkeit* should be identified as Heidegger's testament of "being always being my own"²⁵⁴ as essential to Dasein's existence. Dasein always has an unmediated concern for its own being in so far as my being necessitates that I am always concerned for my own being.²⁵⁵ However, this foundational self-concern can also be conceptualized as the glue that binds Dasein together and saves it from dispersion. Dasein's self-possession can maintain itself in the being of Dasein because it exists in a certain way—Dasein is a being that exists "there" in a world.²⁵⁶ What remains relevant to the present analysis is the role *Jemeinigkeit* has in the ontological structure of Dasein in determining Dasein's own possibilities. Every being (since it is in possession of itself) can choose its own mode

²⁵¹ Ibid, par. 42.

²⁵² Dasein *always* belongs to itself (mineness, *Jemeinigkeit*). Ibid, par. 42-43, 53-54.

²⁵³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 211. *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 34-35.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 42.

²⁵⁶ The Da of Da-sein. The "there" of Dasein can indicate Dasein's facticity, the temporal and spatial dimension of Dasein's being-in the world, Ibid, par. 105-110.

of being, either authentic or inauthentic or undifferentiated. Dasein's possibilities are its open and continuous potentiality of being-in-the-world. It is the possibility involved in choice, in choosing its way of being in the world.²⁵⁷ Dasein's own possibility involves a choice. I am "always-being-my-own-being"; my being is my responsibility, because I can and must choose my mode of existence. I can always choose how I exist. I can either choose to be "me" inauthentically, meaning I can exist in the mode of fleeing (moving away) from myself or not being myself wholly or authentically, where I "win" myself over and belong to myself.²⁵⁸ Moreover, as Heidegger stresses throughout *Being and Time*, these two modes from which "I" exist do not entail a hierarchy, a "higher" or "lower" form of being. Rather, they both can work intermittently as potentials of the other. Dasein "can only have lost itself and it can only have not yet gained itself because it is essentially possible as authentic, that is, it belongs to itself."²⁵⁹ The question of Dasein's possibilities (in view of its *Jemeinigkeit*) reaches its fullest disclosure in the analysis of being-towards-death.

As previously discussed, Dasein's possibilities is always directed towards what is possible for itself as a being in the world. Death reflects the annihilation not only of Dasein, but also of its being with others in the world. Death is characterized as no longer being Dasein "in the sense of no-longer-being-in-the-world" in terms of its care towards the world in general.²⁶⁰ Every mode of care in Dasein's being-in-the-world *is a relation*. Being-in-the-world is a relation to things-at-hand, things that are objectively present, or a relation to others that are Dasein-like. The possibility of death is not directed towards anything that is relational, reference-able, or that which can be signified or actualized. This possibility that culminates my being towards my own death is

²⁵⁷ Dasein's choice also infers and is intricately connected to its facticity, in so far that, Dasein chooses to exist in such a way in the world. In other words, I exist in so far as my existence (or being) is my own—in every moment I am still *me*. Ibid, par. 42.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, par. 42

²⁶⁰ Ibid, par. 132-133.

“possibility” itself for Heidegger. The possibility here would point to or should be understood as something non-relational in the way that Dasein’s own death is a non-relation.²⁶¹ Meaning, *what is possible in the possibility of my own death, is something that has no reference or relation to anything outside of myself*. For this reason Dasein’s being-towards-death exists at the fringes of its own being because it lies at the extreme of the possible. Heidegger describes this as “the possibility of the impossibility of existence in general.”²⁶²

The ownmost, insuperable, and non-relational being of Dasein’s existence as the disclosure of its mineness is one layer to Heidegger’s story of death. Being-towards-death is experienced as an anxious anticipation (anxiety) and certainty. The mode of being-towards-death thrives on its anticipatory nature. The more I understand the imminence of the event of death, the more my awareness of the threat of death grows.²⁶³ This awareness of death as my extreme possibility becomes manifest for Dasein in anxiety. Anxiety in this sense cannot be reduced to mere emotion. Rather, as Heidegger treats in depth in Section 40 of Division I, anxiety is a type of attunement that individuates Dasein down to the borders of its existence—its ownmost being. Anxiety is awareness of nothing; it is non-worldly and non-relational to the extent that it always is being anxious about nothing. Heidegger explains, “...neither does anxiety ‘see’ a definite ‘there’ and ‘over here’ from what is threatening approaches. The fact that what is threatening is nowhere characterizes what anxiety it about. Anxiety ‘does not know’ what it is anxious about.”²⁶⁴ Being towards death intensifies the attunement of anxiety because the nothingness that Dasein is faced with is the possible-impossibility of its existence. In anxiety, there is no place, space, or relation with anything from the outside. The anxiety over death draws me more into

²⁶¹ Ibid, par. 261.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid, par. 262.

²⁶⁴ Ibid, par. 186.

myself. Particularly, for Heidegger, anxiety, pulls me towards the possibility “to be” on its own accord.²⁶⁵

Just as Dasein’s anxious anticipation of its death creates an intimate proximity with itself, it also brings Dasein closer to the certainty of the *imminence* of its own death. Being-certain for Heidegger is, in a direct sense, “holding death for true.”²⁶⁶ However, true in this sense does not reflect an empirical certainty or a fact that can be proved by demonstration. Here, being-certain refers to that which can never be contested or disproven; it is an innate sense of truth or an *a priori*. Levinas’ foremost indictment of Heidegger’s account of the possibility of being towards death is connection to Heidegger’s notion of certainty. Although Heidegger does not connect Dasein’s certainty to knowledge, Levinas attributes Dasein’s certainty of its own death to a knowing or truth. Certainty, Levinas argues, involves a cognition or truthfulness in a phenomenological sense—an appearing [*l’apparaître*].²⁶⁷ For Heidegger, in being-certain Dasein is certain of its end in so far as it is certain of its own existence, its ownmost and non-relational being. Being-certain to a greater extent means that Dasein is certain of death as being something that is indefinite and incalculable.²⁶⁸ Dasein in its authenticity lays claim to the recognition that it cannot escape its own death just as it cannot leave its own being behind.²⁶⁹ Dasein is open to its end in every given moment without “falling back behind itself, or behind the potentiality-for-being that it has understood.”²⁷⁰ Here, Dasein is completely *free* from any illusion about itself and

²⁶⁵ Ibid, par. 266-67. Brogan’s analysis of conscience [*Gewissen*] in Heidegger links the “wanting to have conscience” to “the desire to be.” Just as anxiety (or attunement) pulls Dasein from its inauthentic modes of being towards death to the possibility to-be the retrieving of the desire to-be in Dasein conscience is primarily in view of its lostness in the mode of the they-self. See Brogan, “Listening to the Silence: Reticence and the Call of Conscience in Heidegger’s Philosophy” in *Heidegger and Language*, ed. Jeffery Powell (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 39-40.

²⁶⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 264-265.

²⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 50-51.

²⁶⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 259-260.

²⁶⁹ This awareness that is attributed to authentic Dasein, as it is certain being-towards death, is something that is not available to the experience of everyday being towards death. There, Dasein in its everydayness flees from the indefiniteness of its own being. Ibid, par. 255-256.

²⁷⁰ Ibid, par. 264-265.

the meaning of its death. For this reason the certainty of death or dying for Heidegger is more primordial than any other form of certainty.²⁷¹

3.6 *Sacrifice and Being-With of Others in Death*

Heidegger's treatment of being-with the other in death is in many respects continuous with his general analysis of being-with-others in the world. But the being-with of others in death also marks a line of demarcation between oneself, the other, and the world. The type of relation that *I* can have with another in the wake of his or her death belongs to the possibilities of being-with-others in the world.²⁷² Or, to put it into other terms, the ways in which I can be with the other in death is already existentially determined by the being-with structure. The *ontological* existential structure of being-with [*Mitsein*] is the condition for *ontically* being-with-others in the world. As treated throughout Sections 26 and 27 of Division I, my encounter with others is a not an accidental quality or an additional dimension to my existence. Rather, being-with others is equiprimordial because it is constitutive of Dasein's being-in-the-world; it discloses Dasein's being. Dasein always already exists with things *in* the world. Dasein's worldliness requires that what Heidegger calls things-at-hand (such as tools) that have relevance to its being in the world within "referential-relations." Specifically, it is the things that Dasein finds the most useful that reveal self-understanding and their "potentiality-of-being with regard to its being-in-the-world."²⁷³ In this regard, the being-with of others is also connected to the being with of things-at-hand. In Section 26 Heidegger makes it clear that "others" are encountered in the mediation of things-at-hand in terms of their occupation (work) in the world. Heidegger elaborates:

²⁷¹ Ibid, par. 265-66.

²⁷² As will be discussed later, Dasein's being-with others in the world, specifically in the mode of its concern-towards others, are the ways that Dasein can be with the other through death. Here, it is important to understand the structure of being-with so we can recognize conditions in which Dasein can even encounter another in the world in its general sense.

²⁷³ Ibid, par. 85.

[...] the work world of the handworker, showed that together with the useful things found in the world, others are “also encountered” for whom the “work” is to be done. In the kind of being of these things at hand, that is, in their relevance, there lies an essential reference to possible wearers from whom they should be “made to measure.” Similarly, the producer or “supplier” is encountered in the material used as one who “serves” well or badly.²⁷⁴

The being-with of others includes Dasein’s being in the referential totality of the world because the world of things always mediates my being with others. Even the particular things that are encountered, such as a book or a boat, always reference the person who owns them or the various uses others will have of them. However, the modalities of the relation with others in view of the world are possible because there is a relation (prior to their individual instances) that does not have the same features of the referential world of “things-at-hand.” In Heidegger, the world belongs primarily to Dasein’s being: “the world is always already from the outset my own.” For this reason, my relation to others involves the being of Dasein, not just the tools and things at hand. Others can be encountered because they have the same type of existence as Dasein; they are Dasein-like.²⁷⁵ For this reason, all of the modes in which Dasein can encounter others are always “oriented towards one’s own Dasein.” Here the being-with of others cannot be based initially upon *difference* because it is already determined that they are here in the world with me; this is so because *I am in the world* with them. Being-with is founded by the sameness of being “others of my kind also are *Vorkommen*.”²⁷⁶

For Levinas the structure of the “being-with” of others is the parameters or the limits in which Dasein can potentially be-with others in death. As mentioned, Dasein’s being-with others comes to an end (or dissolves) in its own reflections or being-towards its own end. The death of

²⁷⁴ Ibid, par. 118.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, par. 115-117.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, par. 117. There is an ambiguous distinction between being-with-others and being Dasein-with others. Dasein-with reflects a relation with others that “free” or release others from the being absorbed in the world. Others, in this sense, are disclosed as “Dasein-with us,” as a collective or a *Volk*.

the other reflects (not my own death) but the end of the other's possibilities of being in the world with me. What likeness can I have with a being that is no longer in the world to disclose itself as a being like me? Here, at least initially, we start with the ontic significance of death. What is left of the other Dasein in its departure from the world is its corpse, an "objective presence of a corporeal thing encountered."²⁷⁷ The factual or empirical presence of the corpse is, as Heidegger reminds us, signified as an "object" that needs to be tended to or cared for [*Besorgens*]²⁷⁸ in terms of its burial or funeral. Here, I can be with-the other in his memory, the *representation* [*Vertretbarkeit*] of his being-in-the-world, by honoring him and mourning him. In both accounts I am with the person who dies only "in terms of *this* world."²⁷⁹

The mode of being-with of the other in death that Levinas is principally interested in is the possibility of dying for the other. The issue for Heidegger, in thinking of dying for others, is asking whether it is possible to substitute or replace oneself for another Dasein in death. On a theoretical level the "assumption" of such a possibility would fail to take into account the mineness structure of Dasein. The question of substitution here is not unfounded because in Heidegger Dasein can be *represented* by another Dasein in the world.²⁸⁰ Dasein, outside the question of death, in its everydayness of tending to things in the world, already utilizes its representationality of others in its public being-with others. Dasein represents others in terms of the possibility of concerns tied to work or others modes of being in "its professions, social classes, and stages of life."²⁸¹ Here, Dasein is represented, or represents itself in what it does, namely its work or occupations in the world because "One *is* what one does."²⁸² The other is like me in

²⁷⁷ Ibid, par. 248.

²⁷⁸ This should be distinguished from the possibility of being-with that is entailed in *Fürsorge*. Dasein's concern-towards others would reflect a type of relation that requires the other to be in the world. In the care towards others, Dasein is simultaneously taken over the care of others and deepening its relation to them in so far that "it helps the other to become transparent to himself in his care." Ibid, par. 119. In addition the care for the corpse as *Besorgen* should also be distinguished from the ways in which care of thing at-hand were discussed previous in *Being and Time*.

²⁷⁹ Italics added, Ibid, par. 46.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, par. 46.

²⁸¹ Ibid, par. 46-48.

²⁸² Ibid.

terms of what we do day-to-day. Therefore, in this sense, Dasein can in particular contexts and limits “be” another Dasein, but being for another in its death has less effect by virtue of the simple fact that “no one can take the other’s dying away from him.”²⁸³ However, I can “go” to death of the other in terms of sacrifice. I can sacrifice my life for another or for a cause. I can put myself before another person’s death. Although Heidegger does not associate the being-with structure of representation with his account of sacrifice at the end of Section 47, it would appear (at least initially) that sacrificing oneself “in a definite cause” (at the very least) goes beyond or implies something different than the ways in which I can be-with the other via representation. Dying for another in view of a cause (political, national, religious, etc.) would reflect something different than representing the other in a profession or class, especially since Dasein can offer-up its life to it. The possibility of dying for another or sacrificing oneself *in* a cause will appear later in this analysis. Yet, here, the “dying for...” another in a cause is still mediated by the world (since it is a cause taken up in the world) and does not break with my relation towards my own death. The force of love (as already discussed above) will be something that Levinas reflects on in terms of what obligates me to the other in my sacrifice.²⁸⁴ Love, in his sense, will be a force that dissociates the future anticipation of death in the present.²⁸⁵ But this element (affective relation of love) is not present in *Being and Time* and (as will be discussed later) does not counteract the awareness of (the consciousness of) death as annihilation.²⁸⁶ This assertion is substantiated by the structure of *Jemeinigkeit*. Heidegger elaborates on this point: “[...] death is always essentially my own. And indeed it signifies a peculiar possibility of being in which it is absolutely a matter of the being of my own Dasein. In dying, it becomes evident that death is ontologically constituted by

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 216-217.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Later in this analysis I will return to the notion of sacrifice in Heidegger from Levinas’ later writings. There, I will bring into dialogue some of Levinas’ initial apprehensions of Heidegger’s account of sacrifice (or rather the lack of account) and then see if they hold with his other treatments on the subject.

mineness and existence. Dying is not an event, but a phenomenon to be understood existentially in an eminent sense [...].”²⁸⁷ The second is that the possibility of sacrifice is present in Heidegger’s project. Self-sacrifice in Heidegger would not reflect a giving-up of one’s being for the other (as a substitution of one’s life for the other) but self-sacrifice for a people or Being. Heidegger treats the possibility self-sacrifice within his account of the being-with of others in death. However, as discussed in Section I, Heidegger leaves the possibility for “dying for...” another both vague and concrete. Dasein cannot die for another because of the intrinsic structure of *Jemeinigkeit*, but Dasein can “go to his death for an other” in a “definite cause.”²⁸⁸ Heidegger does not elaborate in depth what this statement implies in *Being and Time*. In the 1943 Postscript of “What is Metaphysics”²⁸⁹ Heidegger treats the notion of self-sacrifice again. Here, sacrifice or *Opfer* is used to describe human *freedom* in the safeguarding the truth of being (for being). Sacrifice, in this context, has something eternal about it for Heidegger because it concerns (Being) something “absolutely other to all be-ing” or “no-thing.”²⁹⁰ Sacrifice [*Opfer*] is the necessity and urgency, from which every historical human being acts, to be “obedient to the voice of being.”²⁹¹ The language of freedom and the safeguarding of truth extends beyond the *Postscript*, but it is also present in the essay “On the Essence of Truth,” where freedom is thought of as “letting beings be.”²⁹² However, the *Postscript* does point to something unique in its mention of “sacrifice” and “cause” in reference to *Being and Time*, because it reflects something that is necessitated in a being that is historically situated, namely a being in the world. In the present context the question to ask about Heidegger’s notion of sacrifice is whether it could alleviate some of Levinas’ criticisms.

²⁸⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 47.

²⁸⁸ Ibid, par. 240.

²⁸⁹ This piece was written as a “letter” to the fourth edition of the inaugural lecture “What is Metaphysics” in 1943, which followed *Being and Time* by nearly two decades. English translation by Miles Groth, online document source: http://www.24grammata.com/?did=878&fname=martin-heidegger-what-is-metaphysics-24grammata-com_-pdf.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 94.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 105.

²⁹² Martin Heidegger, *Basic writings: Martin Heidegger*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993), 125-128.

Even in these final reflections the weight and urgency of Levinas' critique still stands. In Levinas sacrifice entails the giving up the self or the "I" not for the world or Being but to the infinite, a submission to the unknown.²⁹³

Levinas' specific assessment of Heidegger's account of authentic being-towards-death is not developed extensively in his major works, such as *Totality and Infinity* or *Otherwise than Being*. The fullest treatments of death are found in a series of interviews and lectures between 1975 and 1987.²⁹⁴ What is continuous across these various engagements with *Being and Time* is Levinas' contention towards the role that *Jemeinigkeit* plays within Heidegger's formulation of being-towards-death. Dasein's ownmost being appears to reflect a certain prioritization or essentialization of Dasein's authenticity [*Eigentlichkeit*] that determines his analysis of death. The concern for my being as my understanding about death translates as a preoccupation with the preservation of my being in general. For Levinas the propensity towards self-preservation or *conatus* is the role and function of *Jemeinigkeit* in Heidegger's phenomenology.²⁹⁵ *Jemeinigkeit*, Dasein's mineness, is not the preservation of a human being in general but a certain type of being. It is what is proper or essential to being, the authentic. Although Heidegger's work in *Being and Time* is merely a preparatory analysis for the question of Being, Levinas argues in the lecture "Dying for..." that Heidegger's project has a presupposed value or an axiology in its emphasis on the authentic being of Dasein. It is evident in Heidegger that the authentic being of Dasein, its ownmost being, mediates all of its potential modes of being in the world. The persistence of Dasein's self-concern is even present or intensified in the awareness of its demise or annihilation. Not only is this type of preoccupation with the "I" or the "self" troublesome from the perspective

²⁹³ Levinas adds, "[...] to throw oneself into the water to save someone, without knowing how to swim, is to go toward the other totally; without holding anything back to oneself; to give oneself to the other totally; to respond to his unformulated demand, to the expression of the face[...];" See "The Philosopher and Death" in *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 129

²⁹⁴ Here I am referring to the following texts: *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other; God, Death and Time; Is it Righteous to Be?: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*.

²⁹⁵ *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 132.

of Levinas' own ethical project, but it also leads to the important question of sacrifice. The possibility of self-sacrifice introduces an alternative understanding of the subject, which necessitates that identity of a subject that does not start from an account of the *conatus*. Alternatively, what we can know or understand of death never starts with my own relation with death but my responsibility for the death of the other.

In the 1975 lectures "Death and Time" Levinas begins the conversation on death as a problem of the association with (1) *understanding* (or certainty) and (2) affectivity (*anxiety*) to death. These two features within the structure of the experience of Dasein's being-towards-death is the basis of Levinas' general critique of *Jemeinigkeit* as *conatus*. As already mentioned in Section I, the decisive feature of the being-towards of death is that it thrives on its anticipatory nature. The more I understand my own imminence when faced with the possibility of death, the more my awareness and disquietude of the threat of death grows. The more I become occupied with the continuity of my being, the more I am concerned with my ownmost being in general. The relation between my self-certainty and the anxiety of my death creates a self that is not only preoccupied with its own finitude but also preoccupied with its finitude in such a way that it prioritizes the perseverance of the "I" (the ego, one's own being) over any other relation outside my own immanence. For this reason, the self in the mode of anxious anticipation exists completely within its own limits and accord, which for Levinas signifies the *conatus*, as the tendency to self-persevere.²⁹⁶ Levinas contests Dasein's self-preoccupation with death by contesting the ways in which Dasein is certain of itself in death. The subject of death reflects the limits of knowledge or understanding in general in Levinas.²⁹⁷ What type of cognitive act could bring about the awareness of the inevitability of my own death? The certainty Heidegger ascribes

²⁹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 50.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 25. Levinas attributes this tendency or *conatus* to Dasein's being in view of death to the whole of Dasein's being as it is treated in *Being and Time*. According to Levinas the seductive characteristic of Heidegger's analysis is that it conceives that "*Dasein* is a being for whom, in his being, his own being is at stake."

to my relation *towards* my own death (the anxious anticipation of it) becomes problematic in so far as it assumes that the subject who knows is the same as the subject who dies. For Levinas there is a separation between *my relation to death* and *death as something that happens*. The distinction will not be reduced to or have meaning in a higher and lower articulation of the self, the inauthentic and authentic being towards death.²⁹⁸ Death in Levinas is an event (not a phenomenon), a happenstance where I cannot account for the loss of my being. The distinction between thinking of death as an event and not a phenomenon is against Heidegger's assertion that death must be understood existentially. Death cannot be understood since it "is the reversal of appearing...a movement opposed to phenomenology."²⁹⁹

Given the understanding that death is *my annihilation* or *my transition* into nothingness, it follows that death or being-towards-it entails that death has an intelligible structure that is accessible to me; it is within my power of comprehension.³⁰⁰ However, the power to make the impossible intelligible or certain is not to say that death gives meaning that I can find intelligible. Rather, it is to say that death already has a presupposed meaning or measure inscribed in my very existence. Thus, it can be said that Heidegger attempts to show that Dasein is at its end in its beginning; it is always being towards its end even in birth.³⁰¹ Being certain, following from this reflection on Heidegger, means nothing more than Dasein being transparent to itself. Levinas categorizes this philosophical move in Heidegger as reflecting the coincidence of the total and the proper.³⁰² More specifically, this is the coincidence between what is proper to Dasein (its *esse*, properly its own, *Eigentlichkeit*, or authenticity) and the end or purpose of the structures of its being: "Death is a form of being that Dasein assumes from the moment it is."³⁰³ And, as already

²⁹⁸Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 42-3.

²⁹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 50.

³⁰⁰Ibid, 44, 50.

³⁰¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 235-237; 239.

³⁰² Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 41.

³⁰³ Ibid, 40.

established earlier in the analysis, Dasein's proper being is being its own being. Levinas elaborates:

[...] its immanence is itself a privilege, and this, in the manner by which I am capable of this immanence: it is to be capable of a possibility [*pouvoir une possibilité*] marked by its untransferable, exclusive, and unsurpassable character. The relationship to death, as possibility, is an exceptional to-[a], and exceptional towards-, privilege...now such a relationship is possible only through the structure of *Dasein*, which as to be its being, that is, which is on the basis of this out-ahead-of-itself. To-be-out-ahead-of-oneself is concrete in being-toward-death. In the same way, facticity and being close-to-things are contained in being-toward-death. In its ipseity, implicit in mineness[...].³⁰⁴

This theoretical coincidence of the “to be” and “to die” arises in Heidegger's ontology because the analytic of Dasein (for Levinas) is not preparatory analysis but already “a step within ontology itself.”³⁰⁵ The question of being, the ways I take up my being (as my own) and the extreme possibilities of being are one and the same: all are intelligible to me. Or, considering it from a different angle, the power of my being, as a power to comprehend the end of my being, and the power of death, as annihilation or nothingness, are one and the same. Moreover, Dasein's power to be self-enclosed (exist in its ownmost being) as the capacity to be transparent to itself cannot suffice to be the foundation for understanding death. Rather, it appears on Levinas' argument that death has the status of an event and, even more so, reflects that which cannot be subsumed into a system of values that places my death above everyone else. Levinas' own conception of death in many respects arises from the lapse between the meaning of my death and the occurrence of death. Death brings us back to the very problem of identity, as discussed in the 1970s by Levinas.

According to *Totality and Infinity* identity, particularly the uniqueness of the “me” [*moi*], surfaces in my responsibility to the other.³⁰⁶ The other individuates me in my responsibility. Instead of death (or dying) being an experience that individuates me and severs my relation to

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 45.

³⁰⁵ Ibid, 26.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 20. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 215-216.

others, my relation to death in Levinas is primarily an ethical relation. My relationship with death arises outside of knowledge. The possibility of my death, my relation to it, comes to bear not because *I will die* but rather because another always dies before me. The death of the other as my relation to death is predicated on three essential points of experience: (1) in my role as the survivor in the death of the other; (2) the affective relation to death through the death of the other; and (3) the possibility of sacrifice as the complete rupture between my being-towards-death and my responsibility for the other. All three dimensions in Levinas' analysis of death are intricately tied to his larger critiques of the notion of *conatus* and Dasein's *Jemeinigkeit*. In addition to this critique, Levinas' treatment of the question of death points back to a specific problem within phenomenology: that of intentionality or intentional consciousness.³⁰⁷ The problem of prioritization of Dasein's mineness [*Jemeinigkeit*] and its relation to the concept of *conatus* is that it presupposes a notion of the self that is able to impose, intend, or direct itself in all aspects of existence. It is posited as a totality of being's *essence*. The certainty of my inner-most-being (as Heidegger describes it) necessitates that I can simultaneously be transparent to myself and be maintained as self in the preoccupation of my own death because *I am able to grasp* or *understand* "my death."

Death (as it functions in Heidegger) is an event that is graspable because the constitution of my being is continuous or coincides with it. Here Dasein's intentionality reflects a *protention*, anticipation towards an end. In the specific case of Dasein's anticipation it is a protention of its annihilation. The element of threat in Dasein's protention towards its own demise (the affective and cognitive representation of the not-yet) unfolds as the power of its immanence. Levinas adds,

[...] to be for the end is a not-yet; but this not-yet toward which being-there is referred in welcoming it as imminence [...] Heidegger here speaks of a power [*je peux un pouvoir*

³⁰⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21.

imminent]. Now, death is a possibility of which Dasein must itself take charge, and which is transferable. I here have a power that is my own, proper to me.³⁰⁸

Levinas will say later, in a 1982 interview, that there is a foresight or type of protention in my relation to the death of the other since it is the original foresight [*Vor-Sicht*] of the possible death of the other, namely that another can die. This foresight is the beginning of my recognition of the other; the meaning “resounds in the ‘thou shall not kill’” precept.³⁰⁹ Likewise, in his earlier lectures on death (1976), Levinas’ revision to this scheme of death reverses the understanding of the capacity to project (pro-tend) in death, since it challenges the ways in which Dasein’s *esse* is “always already compelled” to be-towards its end in its anxious-anticipation. Levinas effaces these Heideggerian positions on death by questioning if anxiety is the emotion proper to death.³¹⁰ If death is not a transition to nothingness or represents annihilation, then the self cannot anticipate its death in anxiety. For Levinas, although I cannot anticipate or have a relation to my own demise, I come closer to the death of the other in disquietude, which for Levinas is “affectivity without intentionality.” In these lectures the critique of Heidegger’s account of anxiety before death is predicated on the notion that anxiety, the true affectivity of sense, is the emotion par excellence.³¹¹ Disquietude is not an emotion that expresses the totality of my existence but is rather an interrogation of the self.³¹² The affection of self-interrogation or disquietude also does not mark a self-closure (as in anxiety); therefore it cannot dissolve all relations to others. Rather, my disquietude before death is an opening towards (like *a movement within*) the unknown, the infinite. Every death that occurs before the subject amounts to what Levinas calls an *éclatement*, “the shattering of being.”³¹³ Here, my opening to the infinite is an

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 44.

³⁰⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 138.

³¹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 47

³¹¹ This critique of anxiety is peculiar to Levinas’ treatment of death in the lecture in *God, Death, and Time*.

³¹² Ibid, 17.

³¹³ Ibid, 20-21.

opening to the death of the neighbor in responsibility. The responsibility for the other in death is something different that is spoken about in earlier works such as *Time and the Other* and *Totality and Infinity* (where my freedom is called into question), because I am responsible for the other as a survivor of his or her death. My death is my part in the death of the other, who has died *before* me.

Levinas approaches death not from the ontic-ontological question of the possibility of me dying but from the point of view of survival: how can I *survive* the other's death?³¹⁴ The death of the other marks my encounter and preoccupation with death not as a possibility but as a concrete relation predicated upon difference. Being a survivor is the acknowledgment that I take part in the death of the other. I survive the death of the other as a guilty one. The substitution of the other in sacrifice also marks a radical culmination of my relation to the other in death. Here, the guilt denotes a specific structural component to the identity of the "I." The guilty "I" persists accused as a survivor. Levinas elaborates: "[...] my death is my part in the death of the other, and in my death I die the death that is my fault. The death of the other is not only a moment of the mineness of my ontological function."³¹⁵

Guilt and self-sacrifice are possibilities of being with the other in death because of a specific structure of time, the relation of the finite with the infinite. My relation with time in death diverges from understanding *time* as bound to consciousness from which I am always propelled towards my own end. Death always involves a peculiar relation with time, which disrupts and exceeds any meaning the "I" (*moi*) can assign to death. Unlike Heidegger who thinks of Dasein's temporality in view of death, Levinas brings to bear a conception of time (duration)

³¹⁴Ibid.

³¹⁵ Ibid, 39. Also see Robert Bernasconi's "To What Question is Substitution the Answer?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, (ed.) Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 234-251.

that is absent of the death of the “I.” Time for Levinas is a relation of difference.³¹⁶ The absence of me or the “I” in time reflects a difference within my own temporal-duration or what Levinas calls the “the-other-within-the-same” or the “infinite-in-the-finite.”³¹⁷ The subject can endure time because it is an affective relation, primary disquietude. The duration of my life should be seen as nothing more than the relation to the infinite. The endurance of that duration (which cannot be conceived in the images of flux and flow of time following from Husserl and Bergson) is a disquietude from which the subject or the “I” only *receives* the force or blow of time.³¹⁸ The reception of time is not the same as “taking upon oneself” in time or a receiving of time. Rather, my relation with time is to “endure that which still remains outside in its transcendence, that which is not a *that* [*ce*], a term, or something awaited.”³¹⁹ It is to “receive without receiving.” Moreover, as already mentioned above, the disquietude that the “I” endures (in its relation to time or the infinite) is the responsibility towards the other in the unknown. The sacrifice for the other (giving up the “I” to the infinite) is the apex of my responsibility towards the other, the possibility of the existence of the infinite in the finite.

Conclusion: The Persistent Problem of the Conatus Essendi, Essence, and Intentional Consciousness

Levinas’ treatment of death does not resolve the problem of the *conatus essendi*, but his analysis does highlight certain key categories of the *conatus essendi* in Heidegger, namely (1) that the *conatus essendi* involves a temporal determination or medium that is predicated on a relation towards the future in the form of an anticipation; (2) that *conatus essendi* is a form or mode of a self-preoccupation and self-interestedness of the ego in its relation to its finitude or mortality that does not merely preclude a brute animal survival as we saw in the *conatus* or the struggle [*lutte*] against

³¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 21.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21, 35, 39, 116.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 115-6.

being but is an active engagement with one's own existence in terms of its identifications with itself or selfhood; and finally (3) that the ego's relation of its death is also not a momentary affliction or a reflection but the rectitude of an intentional consciousness, a conscience. There is a principled aptitude of Dasein's *esse* in its authenticity or what it is most proper. This is evident for Levinas because of Dasein's relation to its death as its end in the form of a *telos* or as freedom. The final result of Dasein preoccupation with itself in its authentic mode of being is the exclusion of sacrifice as he understands it. Levinas utilizes the discussion of sacrifice in the analysis of death in Heidegger not as a polemical ploy. Rather, sacrifice and guilt, as we saw in the experience of guilt of the survivor, reflect a separation between being's act (its existing) and its identification with itself. In Levinas' reflections on death the relation of identity and being is also severed. In death nothing returns back to being or thought. The ontology of death places nothing above the *esse*, but the experience of death in sacrifice offers the height of the Other, which is suspension or a rupture of the persistence of the *esse* of being.³²⁰ Levinas' reading of authentic-being-towards-death concludes that there is no ethics of alterity in Heidegger but that his project does reflect an ethical awareness of the other as other. This was brought out in his analysis of Martin Buber in spite of the places where Levinas' interpretation of Heidegger's ontology presents it as being ethically void. In the case of Levinas' engagement with Buber and Heidegger the concluding reflections (in view of Levinas' overall critique) would be that there is an ethics in Heidegger: it is just not the correct one.

However, although Dasein is complete in its ownmost, non-relational mode of being, it still remains (as long as it can posit a relation with itself) incomplete in its being-there in the world, where there is always a lag or debt in its being. The ambiguity of Dasein's existence even

³²⁰ See Levinas' discussion of death in Bloch, "Question and Answer," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 98.

in view of its conditioned meaning or axiology still approximates transcendence even if it is transcendence in immanence. In the most generous Levinasian reading of *Being and Time*, Heidegger's ontology can only offer a finite transcendence and not the "substitution" that is conveyed in sacrifice. The potential displacement of persistence of meaning of being as primarily self-interested in Dasein's experience of entanglement of the everyday and being-with others in death lessens the severe hold of the indictment of the *conatus*, but it also reveals a more essential structure of the problem of the *conatus essendi* in general. The persistence of the *essendi* cannot have a partial bearing upon a being's existence even if the ways in which the *esse* does have force is proper to being itself. The uniqueness of Levinas' demonstration of the *esse* of being (as it is expressed in Dasein's authenticity) is that it is not suspended or obscured in the analysis of the everyday but demonstrates a clear line of its determination in Dasein's entanglement, in its averageness.

The persistence of Dasein in its authenticity, especially in the analysis of Dasein's confrontation of the possibility of not being in *Angst*, at first glance echoes something not captured by the *conatus* framework, specifically the descriptions of stillness in existential discourse or reticence.³²¹ Furthermore, as discussed in sections 3.2-3.3, the connection between Heidegger's understanding of the call of conscience as calling Dasein out of its averageness and Levinas' argument against the conscience of the *conatus essendi* need not be developed here.³²² Heidegger does not bear the full brunt of Levinas' critique of the notion of the *conatus* or its mode in the *essendi*. Outside and above Heidegger stands Spinoza, who thinks of death the least.³²³ The accomplishment of Spinoza through a Levinasian lens is that his metaphysics surpasses the

³²¹ This is because the term evokes the sentiment of Dasein's passiveness.

³²² For a robust account of Levinas and Heidegger, particularly a Levinasian reading of the call of conscience in *Being and Time* see Michael J. *The Call of Conscience: Heidegger and Levinas, Rhetoric and the Euthanasia Debate*. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001). Also, see Françoise Dastur's "The Call of Conscience the Most Intimate Alterity," in *Heidegger and Practical Philosophy*, ed. Raffoul, François, and David Pettigrew. *Heidegger and Practical Philosophy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 87-96.

³²³ See Spinoza's *Ethics*, Proposition 67 of Book IV.

question of death. This is because his ontology encompasses life and death outside the temporal flow and flux of time or even outside an entity's orientation towards its end, but strictly in terms of the "here and now" of the existence of an entity. Spinoza's system not only proceeds from the proposition that existence and *essence* are one in the same, but also that there is a necessity of existence in general where a rupture in being's *esse*, its persistence, is unthinkable, and all forms of privation are reconciled as fictive or confused assertions. It is existence that Levinas will describe as the "impenitent perseverance of being."³²⁴ For this reason and many others, Spinoza bears the weight of the problem of ontology and the *conatus* in Levinas.

Even though Levinas does not take on Spinoza's ontology to the same degree that he takes on with Heidegger, he remains in the background of the analyses made against the *conatus*. The argument against the specific iteration of the *conatus* in Spinoza's ontology, from a Levinasian point of view, is its accompanied moral aptitude or rectitude. The problem is not merely immanence or ontological structures of being but, more significantly, its equation of being's *esse* and identity to the rectitude of being. Here, Spinoza's project will secure this affirmation of being, identity, and ethics in the equation of *essence* with power or force within the notion of the *conatus essendi*. This signifies the significance of Spinoza's iteration of the *conatus*. Being's *esse* is not determined by its preoccupation with its being proper, its ownmost being, but is inscribed within the total force or power (the totality of) being itself. Being-towards-death is an expression of the identity of the ego that individuates the ego by the exclusion of any exteriority, i.e. that of the persistence of other entities. Dasein is incomplete in its solitude before death. There is "imminent power" [*je peux un pouvoir imminent*] that Dasein holds over the happenstance of death in its being-there in the world and in the face of death itself. As Levinas explains, projection [*se-protend*], the power of projection, is Dasein's being "towards the imminence of its

³²⁴ See Preface to the Second Edition in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), ix.

innermost possibility.”³²⁵ The power is only a mode, the mode that concerns its own imminence, “to which imminence concerns *Dasein* is the possibility—or eventuality—of no longer being there.”³²⁶ As we will see in Spinoza, this power over existence is also “nontransferable,” but it is not experienced in solitude or as a mode of being in its temporality. Although in Spinoza each entity is a mode of Nature or Substance, its power of being (over its existence) is not proper to the individual but reflects its concurrence in and (in many respects conformity to) Nature. The power of being in Spinoza is pervasive, total, and present amongst all entities. But this equality of power does not entail an inherent harmony or cooperation between beings. To be exact, in reference to the language of the struggle of being in Levinas, Spinoza’s ontology and political thought would determine that being is a struggle for being [*lutte pour être*] but also against other beings [*contre les autres*]. Moreover, in view of Levinas’ interpretation of the *conatus*, the central problem in Spinoza’s scheme is the impossibility of dissipating the force of being’s *esse*.³²⁷ In the following chapter I will show that Spinoza is the central figure in Levinas’ indictment against the *conatus* and that Levinas’ own resolution of the *conatus* is intricately connected to Proposition 25 of Book IV of the *Ethics*. In his treatment of the *conatus existendi*, Levinas demonstrates that there is a *conatus* of the ego but that its persistence is not to postulate, as Spinoza’s ontology does, that the *conatus* of each entity cannot act against its own existence, nor is it able to compromise its own principle of individuation by endeavoring “to preserve his own being for the sake of another thing.”³²⁸

³²⁵ See lecture, “Being-Towards-Death as the Origin of Time,” in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 44.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 44-45

³²⁷ We already saw Levinas’ attempt to qualify the dissipation of being’s *esse* in the concrete structure of guilt and sacrifice. In the following Chapter I will attend to its formal structure in the *conatus existendi*, which in turn accounts for how sacrifice, guilt and the responsibility for the other is possible.

³²⁸ See, Spinoza’s *Ethics* Proposition 25 of Book IV. As mentioned in Chapter One, this Proposition is clearly taken in respect to Descartes’s First Law of Motion and in respect to Spinoza’s own view of virtue. Virtue and power are equated here.

Chapter IV
Interrupting Spinoza's *Conatus Essendi*:
Levinas' Revival of the *Conatus Existendi* in *Otherwise Than Being*

4.0 Introduction

In many respects Levinas' polemics against Spinoza are in line with his predecessor Edmund Husserl's reflections on the early modern thinker in *The Crisis of European Sciences*, specifically his indictment of the ontology of Spinoza's *Ethics* as positing "the first universal ontology."³²⁹ For Husserl Spinoza's system represented something forceful in the history of philosophy. The *Ethics* put forth a new sense of rationalism that argued, "not only nature but the totality of being as such must be a coherent rational system. That was taken for granted in advance."³³⁰ Levinas was also preoccupied with the totalizing character of Spinoza's thinking and its devotion to a rationalism that posits beings but also Being, God, or Absolute Substance within a rational system. God in this sense is not conceived as a logical limit in thinking or as maintaining a radical alterity or separation from being but remains something apprehended in a system for the sake of a system, the continuity or coherence in thought. At least for Husserl, the danger of collapsing all of conceivable reality under a "rational totality" does not represent metaphysics but a triumph of a "physicalist" or "naturalist" rationalism in modern thought, which marks the convergence of mathematics and natural science.³³¹ However, in Levinas the priority of reason and the exclusion of transcendence in the Platonic sense serves as a foundation or a starting point to thinking of the significant distinctions between Spinoza and Levinas, and especially Levinas' charges against Spinoza's notion of the *conatus essendi*.

³²⁹ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans David Carr. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 64-65

³³⁰ Ibid, 64-65, 83.

³³¹ Ibid.

Levinas is also concerned with the predominance of scientism in modern and contemporary philosophical thought. Although it is not treated systematically, we already saw his brief analysis of the notion of struggle in *Existence and Existents* and its reference to the biological sciences.³³² Levinas also makes brief comments against a materialist metaphysics that he states posits existence or being analogous to an account of the “interiority of pure being before or without ethics.”³³³ Here, it is unclear what figure or school of thought Levinas is attending to, but his reading conceives modern philosophical discourse as standing in opposition to an ethics, even when ethics or the effort to establish thereof is the goal of the discourse. Overall, Levinas’ ethics recognizes an exclusion of the ethical in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and as I will also argue, reflects the exclusion of ethics from philosophical discourse and consequently political thought. Although the exclusion of ethics is an indictment against the history of philosophy, it finds its most problematic and potent form of opposition in Spinoza for Levinas. Specifically, it is the formation of the *conatus* and essence in Spinoza’s “universal ontology” that is the most potent expression of the *conatus*. In Levinas Spinoza is a philosopher of perdurance.³³⁴ Therefore, Spinoza’s treatment of the *conatus* concerns the continuity of identity not in terms of “bare life” as discussed in *Existence and Existents* or a biological persistence but in view of participation in the divine Substance. Spinoza even bypasses the problems found in creation theorists such as Malebranche and Descartes, because the relation between Being and beings is not one of dependency. In Spinoza there is no relation between God and existence or existents but only an affirmation. The affirmation of God’s essence in/as existence does not amount to a neutral sharing in God’s power or even equality amongst all existing things in view of their modal existence. Rather, the

³³² Levinas gives scattered accounts of modern sciences; the most notable can be seen in the interviews and short essays found in *Entre.Nous* and *Of God Who Comes to Mind*.

³³³ See the interview titled “Dialogue on Thinking-of-the-Other,” in *Entre.Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 202.

³³⁴ See comment in *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 301.

convergence of *essence* and *existence* established by Spinoza in Part I, Proposition I places being's *esse*, the act of being, higher and more authoritative than any that can be secured in Heideggerian ontology. As Levinas acknowledges, Spinoza is the philosopher who "thinks of nothing less than of death" because, as Wellberg and Hamacher point out, "he thinks of the immortal life in the divine totality when he truly thinks."³³⁵ This statement should be linked to Spinoza's account of the "intellectual love of God" in Book V of the *Ethics*. It could be said that for Levinas the *conatus* in Spinoza does not just reflect the mode or way of life of a being's existence or even the ways in which it identifies with itself, viz. an intentional consciousness. More prudently, it is what individuates an entity in existence, not just in terms of a singularity (a being proper, or ownmost being) but in part or share in Divine *essence*. And, as already mentioned, God's power (omnipotence) is indistinguishable from its *essence*. Therefore, the persistence of a being in its existence is persistence of *essence* as or conjoined with power. Here, identity is identified as a power or a force in being as well as a totality. Totality, identity, and power are interchangeable conceptions in Spinoza's system according to a Levinasian reading. But, in terms of Spinoza's larger body of work, the power in existence is the foundation for natural right in his *Political Treatise*. This connection is implicitly qualified in Spinoza in the connection between the *conatus* and the "right to be." This element in Spinoza, the connection between the power to-be and natural right will be decisively problematic for Levinas because it will not only legitimize a certain exercise of power but also an exclusion of an ethical relation to the other, namely the possibility of sacrifice. The power and right of the *conatus essendi* individuates the ego but also excludes it from existing or striving for another. This is most evident in Proposition 25 of Book IV of Spinoza's *Ethics*, which states that no entity "endeavors to

³³⁵ See, Note 8 in "On Death in the Thought of Ernst Bloch" in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 193.

preserve his being for the sake of some other thing.”³³⁶ In view of this, I will argue in the present analysis that it is not Proposition 6 and 7 of Book III of Spinoza’s *Ethics* that Levinas deems the most problematic principle in Spinoza’s ethics but rather Proposition 25. As I will argue below, Levinas’ use of the term *conatus existendi* in *Otherwise Than Being* has a direct bearing on this dimension of Spinoza’s notion of the *conatus essendi*.³³⁷

Striving or perseverance in Spinoza’s *Ethics* operates as the principle of individuation since it accounts for the ways in which each entity is distinctive and absolutely self-possessed and also the way that its act of being (*esse*), its striving or the power of its *conatus*, is non-interchangeable and cannot be co-determined.³³⁸ In addition, the inability to strive “for the sake of another thing” also determines that a being does not have or hold power to counteract the persistence of its own being, the force of the *conatus*. In Spinoza’s schema this would be an internal contradiction: (a) an individual cannot both (simultaneously) strive against and for its own being and (b) even more so strive for another being.³³⁹ However, the possibility of co-persistence in Proposition 25 is disqualified by Spinoza’s notion of the force of persistence (power) of bodies in Part II and notion of Substance in Part I, namely the notion that the force of the *conatus* is indivisible and will resist external and (consequently internal) alteration.³⁴⁰ Moving from the physics to the ethics, it is Spinoza’s notion of virtue that establishes suicide and co-persistence as a weakness or a diminishment of human power in so far as it would be qualified as the neglect

³³⁶ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* in *Collected Works*, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), Proposition 26 of Book IV. My analysis will argue against the reading of Hent de Vries and Edith Wyschogrod, who argue that Levinas’ contention towards Spinoza can be placed upon the qualification of the power of the *conatus* in Proposition 6 and 7.

³³⁷ Although I will focus on Book VI, it must be noted that Spinoza’s ethics is a system, and each proposition has a bearing on the other. Proposition 25 of Book IV follows from the P6 and P7 of Book III:(1) “everyone endeavors to preserve his own being,” which is (2) “defined solely by the essence of the thing itself.” Although continuous with the two previous assertions, it is a step or point further in Spinoza’s account of the *conatus* since it establishes the ways or modes in which two or more entities can exist in view of their power of striving.

³³⁸ This observation can also be seen in Spinoza’s physics in Book II, where he talks about the form or entelechy of complex bodies. See Book II of *Ethics*.

³³⁹ *Ibid.* Spinoza’s treatment of suicide is directly treated in Cor. of P 22 in Book IV, reads, “[...] nobody, I repeat, refuses food or kills himself from the necessity of his own nature, but from the constraint of external cause.”

³⁴⁰ A *conatus* cannot act or be for another *conatus*, “for if a man were to endeavor to preserve his own being for the sake of another thing, then that thing would be the primary basis of his virtue (as is self-evident), which is absurd (by the aforementioned corollary).”

or a desertion of a being's striving.³⁴¹ Virtue in Spinoza is a power that follows from the *essence* of each thing. The more an entity is able to strive, the more it is able to preserve its own being; its act of preservation is the "primary and sole basis of virtue."³⁴² Therefore, suicide and co-preservation of the *conatus* would be an act against each entity's nature; but these acts (especially suicide) represent human weakness, a negation, a "weak spirit," and a privation of knowledge.³⁴³ There are no voluntary or conscious conditions from which an entity can act against its own existence. By necessity, in Spinoza, you cannot choose not to strive for yourself.³⁴⁴

Although the arguments against suicide and co-persistence are not presented as the most salient features of Spinoza's particular definition of the *conatus*, nor are they prominent in the general discussion of the *conatus* in Book IV, I will argue that they can be conceived to be central to Levinas' line of argument.³⁴⁵ Specifically, it is the possibility of acting and being or existing for another that is essential to the role of substitution and sacrifice in Levinas' work. We already saw this question being answered in his critique of Heidegger's notion of being-towards-death. For Levinas there is no return to the Greeks or Pre-Socratics in order to retrieve a truer understanding of the human ethics or morality that does not start from the *conatus essendi*. Rather, Levinas sought to present "an alternative anthropology, which does not start with the *conatus essendi* but with my unrelinquishable obligation, my absolute responsibility."³⁴⁶ I will continue to argue that this does not reflect a moral sentiment in Levinas but a metaphysical assertion. It denotes the structure of being-for-the-other, the *conatus existendi*. As it is presented in Chapter Two of *Otherwise Than Being*, the *existendi* of the *conatus* refers to a passive endurance in existing—"where

³⁴¹ Ibid, P20 of Book IV.

³⁴² Ibid, Cor. P22 of Book IV.

³⁴³ Ibid, P18 of Book IV.

³⁴⁴ This also follows from Spinoza's geometric order of things. See argument presented in Cor. of P18, Book IV. The only exception Spinoza gives to the case of suicide is that one caused by external political conditions. Spinoza gives the example of Seneca, who "committed suicide under political pressure rather than public disgrace"; see note 4 of Book IV. However, this example of suicide is still a result of extreme external conditions.

³⁴⁵ However, it can be asked if it was the ways in which German Idealists adopted Spinoza's ontology colors Levinas's reading of Spinoza's *Ethics*, which will be distinct from his reading of Spinoza's *Political-Theological Treatise*.

³⁴⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 52-3.

its effort is an undergoing.”³⁴⁷ The *existendi* is the persistence of existence itself instead of persistence or endurance *in* existence (or existing) as we saw in both the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi*. The *conatus existendi* is an exposure of being where the subject does not negate its existence but is brought forth by the force of the *conatus*. This force to-be³⁴⁸ of the *conatus*, as the present analysis will seek to establish, necessitates its obedience to the alterity of existence, the infinite in the finite, to the Other—its “being for another.”³⁴⁹ The force of the *existendi* is not brought about by an active or intentional condition of being but something, as we will see, that comes about in a subject in the weakness of pain and hunger or in the neglect of living in the modes of lassitude, as a failing and a deficiency.

The term *conatus existendi* is not mentioned in Levinas’ work outside of *Otherwise Than Being* but should also be conceived as exhibiting a counter presentation to the general use and meaning of the *conatus* and *conatus essendi*. In the history of philosophy, the term *conatus existendi* is treated briefly by Baruch Spinoza at the end of Part III of the *Ethics* (1674) and in two minor works by Gottfried Leibniz, *Notationes Generales* (1683-85) and “On the Radical Origination of Things” (1697). In the *Ethics* the term is used rather ambiguously to account for *vis existendi* (force of existence) or the *potentia agendi* (power to acting) of the body, which has the potential to decrease or increase given the mind’s degree of affirmation of the body. In Propositions 6-8 in Part III of the *Ethics*, the *conatus essendi* in Spinoza is a power of being to-exist, in which an individual thing exists, and the “essence” of a being. But here, the *conatus* (force of existing) is treated in the ways that relate to the mind alone, which Spinoza calls the *Will*. And the *conatus* of the mind and body together is referred to as *Appetite*. The term *vis existendi* (*conatus existendi*) refers to the given existence of the body, its power or force, but only in terms of its varying or mutable force to act. The

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

³⁴⁸ In *Existence and Existents* Levinas describes this as a “creative force” in the hypostatizes. See, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 20.

³⁴⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 52-3.

passive state of the mind, where we catch sight of the power (*vis existendi*) of the body, is where the emotions or the Affects that affirm the reality of the body determine the mind to “think one thing rather than another.”³⁵⁰ The mind in this passive state (or affected state) has an idea of the body that is confused, inadequate, and also that “affirms of the body something that in fact involves more or less reality than was previously the case.”³⁵¹ The “more or less reality” that the mind affirms of the body by its affected state is the power, the *vis existendi*, of the existing body. Leibniz defines the *conatus existendi* as the *conatus* of existing or of actual existence, which is a passive sense of the *conatus*. For Leibniz, just as a body in motion demands (*exigit*) movement, every possible individual essence demands existence. The fulfillment of the urge to exist does not come from the individual power of the individual in Leibniz but is granted or decreed by God’s divine will. God grants existence to individuals based on their level of perfection, the perfection of their essence. This account of the *conatus*, in terms of its essential passive and receptive character, is a counter to the account of the *vis existendi* found in Spinoza’s *Ethics* or even the *conatus* in general, as seen in writers such as Hobbes. Both of these early modern philosophers attribute the *conatus* primarily not only to the self-interested inclination to preserve but to the ability to act in accordance with this inclination as a predominant mode of being. Leibniz, at least in these fragmented accounts, stipulates that the primary attribute of the *conatus* within an individual is essentially a passive force that is brought into fruition by a power outside of itself. Although Leibniz is not named by Levinas in this particular part of the text in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas’ use of the *conatus existendi* coincides with Leibniz’s earlier sense, to account for both a passive force to exist and its involuntary nature. In Levinas, however, the term is not an attribute of a Divine will in relation to essence. Rather, it accounts for the *force to exist* that is not voluntary and is necessitated by the

³⁵⁰ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* in *Collected Works*, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 319.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

passive form of the self. It comes from outside of the ego's effort expressed in the form of the *conatus* and *conatus essendi*, because its force does not reflect a centripetal force or movement of an "intentional consciousness, which coincides with itself, recovers, and rediscovers itself."³⁵² In contradistinction to this centripetal force, the force or effort of the *existendi* would reflect a retrograde movement, a centrifugal force, which is articulated in *Otherwise Than Being* as an "undergoing" of the ego as the possibility of pain and lassitude of the body or what Levinas describes as the "living human corporality."³⁵³ The *conatus existendi* is bounded to life or existence, as we saw in the notion of struggle [*lutte*] or *conatus* in Chapter II, and against the *essendi* of being. Here, Levinas will emphasize existence over *essence*. However, as will be discussed in depth, the necessity of existence is not being as an adherence or obedience to being, as is only attributed to the *conatus* and *conatus essendi*, but in the form of the being-for-another. The being-for-the-other points to being's excess, what "overflows the same," that comes to pass not in terms of human strength or activity but in the powerlessness of being.³⁵⁴

4.1 *The Argument*

This analysis is divided into three sections. The first section will be devoted to explaining Levinas' acute but scattered critique of Spinoza. There are two distinct dimensions to Levinas' critique: (1) It is directed towards Spinoza's interpretation of Scripture in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, and (2) it concerns his ontology and ethics proper. The former, although not the topic of the present analysis, indicts Spinoza with (a) prioritizing reason over the Scripture and the wisdom or truth from revelation. For Levinas this reflects an upholding of the philosophical over

³⁵² Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 48.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

the theological and, much more severely, a “theology without God.”³⁵⁵ (b) As a result, the prioritization of reason disenfranchises “Jewish intelligentsia.” This is mainly due to Levinas’ interpretation of Spinoza’s reading of the *New Testament*. There, at least for Levinas, the revelation of the *New Testament* underestimates the wisdom of Judaism. Despite its potency, Levinas’ reading of Spinoza in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* does not account for the thrust of Levinas’ continuous indictment of Spinoza on the subject of the *conatus*. This distinction is difficult to perceive in the general breadth of Levinas’ work because there is no systematic treatment of Spinoza’s ontology or what he calls Spinozan ethics. But there are direct engagements with the *Political-Theological Treatise*. However, with the exception of his early works, given the scope of the argument against the *conatus* and *conatus essendi* in Levinas’ body of work, the indictment against Spinoza on the matter of theology or ontology should not be seen as opposed or even continuous with each other. This is because it would subordinate his writing on Judaism to his philosophy or the reverse. Levinas’ argument against Spinoza’s ethics is indispensable to his larger critique of the *conatus* and its connection to Western metaphysics, because Spinoza’s system embodies the *conatus* not in its primal or base form as an animalistic tendency in the bare struggle for life but as the rationalized perseverance of the *conatus* in the form of the *essendi*. Here, the *conatus* (being’s *esse*) is accomplished as a “good conscience,” and ultimately as the right to be. In Chapter V, I will discuss the political outcome of the morality of the *conatus* in Levinas’ political thought, but in the present analysis the focus will be in qualifying the ways in which Spinoza’s treatment of the *conatus* reflects the extreme expression of the *conatus essendi*. And this is not due to the fact that Spinoza’s formal defense of the notion of natural right in the *Politico-Treatise* is partially derived from his notion of the *conatus* in the *Ethics*. Rather, it is due to what appears to be aligned with Levinas’ arguments against Heidegger, *essence*, and

³⁵⁵ See, Michael Juffe’s “Levinas Misreader of Spinoza,” in *Levinas Studies*, Volume II, (Chicago: Duquesne University Press, 2007).

intentional consciousness in Chapter III of this study, namely how these depictions of existence and the self eliminate the possibility of sacrifice. For this reason, as already noted above, Levinas' critique of Spinoza is grounded in which propositions P25 of Book IV and P6 and P7 of Book III. Furthermore, the inability to "strive to preserve [...] for the sake of anything else" will be challenged by Levinas' account of the *conatus existendi*.

The second section will again address the distinction between the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi* in Levinas' work. The link between both terms is the function of the *esse*. The *conatus* will be attributed to a general sense of the term, the *esse* or the act of being as struggle to-be. And the *conatus essendi* will be attributed to the persistence of being's *essence*, its identity or intelligibility and self-interestedness. Being's *esse* is the perseverance of *essence*. The problem or threat of the *conatus essendi* is the function of the *esse*. The *esse*, as we saw in the analysis of the *essence* of being in *Otherwise Than Being*, which, as we saw in Chapter III, Levinas describes as "the scenario of the unceasing effort of *esse* in view of this *esse* itself."³⁵⁶ Here, the *esse* forms and operates in a totality. The operation of the *esse* of the *essendi* or *essence* of the *conatus* is the site for intervention in Levinas. The *conatus existendi* will not only provide the counter anthropology of the *conatus* on a discursive level, but it will also provide a solution or resolution to the pending critique of the *conatus*. And, significantly the *conatus existendi* intersects with other usages of the term in the history of philosophy, namely in Spinoza and Leibniz. Leibniz's usage accounts for a *passive force to exist* and denotes its involuntary nature.

The final section will conclude the analysis by attending to Levinas' resolution of the *conatus* in the form of the *conatus existendi* on its own terms. The significance of Levinas' account of the *conatus existendi* is that it expresses responsibility not in the form of an election but an unexceptional demand or requisition. In the context of his larger discussion, how can

³⁵⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 172.

responsibility be both an election or an “irreplaceable singularity” and also something usual and unexceptional that comes to pass in the form of the *conatus existendi*? Levinas’ account of responsibility attempts to sustain or is sustained, in many respects, as something that designates a subject’s unique singularity and election. However, Levinas’ conception of the one-for-the-other the existence, a responsibility in existence, would surmount a notion of responsibility where nothing can be designated as unique. It is a responsibility that arises from the body, in the skin, in existence in general. However, the *conatus existendi* does not reconstitute the notion of responsibility in Levinas even if it amounted to an acknowledgment of the limitations of Levinas’ theoretical philosophy in relation to his theological and religious leanings.

4.2 *The Conatus Essendi, Perpetual War, and the Problem of Spinoza*

It is difficult to determine whether Levinas’ scattered but acute engagements with Spinoza stem from a deep-seated polemics, a real theological criticism, or an ontological critique. In many respects they are all three, but the present analysis seeks to prioritize, at least for the moment, the last, although I will seek to offer a brief account of the first two. As maintained throughout the analysis up to this point, Levinas’ critique of the *conatus* (especially the *conatus essendi*) has been tied to his general critique of Western metaphysics. It is the problem of being and identity that has driven Levinas’ engagement with the term and indictment of key figures in the history of philosophy for harboring the *conatus*, either as a hidden axiology or within the meaning or relationship between identity, essence, and existence in general. However, what remains peculiar in Levinas’ indictment of Spinoza on the subject of the *conatus* is that the *conatus* designates a force of being. This assertion in Spinoza is continuous though his ontology and political thought, determining existence or being both as a struggle for being [*lutte pour être*] but also against other being or beings [*contre les autres*] in the context of his political thought.

As already mentioned, there are two distinct dimensions to Levinas' critique of Spinoza that I would like to address here. The first is grounded in Spinoza's interpretation of Scripture in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. The second, which is the central interest of this analysis, concerns Spinoza's metaphysical project, his ontology and his ethics proper. In terms of Levinas' reading of Spinoza's theological writing, the issues, as Hent De Vries also mentions, are varied. The two main essays in which Levinas takes on Spinoza are "The Case of Spinoza" (1956) and "Have You Reread Baruch?" (1966)³⁵⁷ In both essays Levinas will place Spinoza at odds with Judaism and the Torah and argue against Spinoza's adoption of a "historical criticism of Scriptures."³⁵⁸ This reveals only part of Levinas' polemics against Spinoza, because it is grounded not in a mere opposition between the West, Christianity, and a "religious consciousness" and Judaism but a priority of reason and philosophy over the religious or theological and also consequently a priority of the historical over the hermeneutic. These claims are undeniable given the arguments brought to bear in *Theological-Political Treatise*. Is not the *Treatise* a systematic critique of Judaism?³⁵⁹ Spinoza's application of rational principles to debase not only the claim to a systematic or internal coherency of any Scriptural text, but also to criticize definitive notions of Judaism; specifically the notion of the "closeness" of the Israelites or the legitimacy of the absolute "obedience to the laws" of the Torah.³⁶⁰ Here, Spinoza formulates an anthropological argument to account for the development of Judaism and the ways in which the "Jewish people" were able to maintain Hebrew culture and ideas in the midst of anti-Semitism and dispersion

³⁵⁷ The "The Case of Spinoza" was originally published in (1956), *Trait d'Union*, No. 34-35, décembre 1955-janvier. And "Have You Reread Baruch" was originally published in (1966) *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, No. 7, automne.

³⁵⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essay on Judaism*, trans. Séan Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1997) 111. In addition, this is also in reference to the application of 'historical method to the Bible,' Ibid, 112. In the context of Spinoza's *Political-Theological Treatise* there is a plurality of sources in his historical method, which utilizes not only Scripture, but also natural history and "chroniclers." See, Spinoza's brief discussion on his methodology in the critique of the occurrence of miracles. Baruch Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise in Collected Works*, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), Chapter 6, 452-453.

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 467.

³⁶⁰ The forefront of Spinoza's inquiry into religious principles and ideas in Judaism is a critique of the status of the Israelites as being "chosen," and this status also being an eternal and absolute truth. Here, Spinoza will equate the Israelites "chosenness" or election not as a truth unto itself but merely an expression of "true virtue," of those who achieved true virtue. See full argument in Chapter Three in *Political-Theological Treatise*, Ibid, 423-425.

throughout the world.³⁶¹ Despite these arguments deriving from and developing within the principles of reason according to Spinoza,³⁶² the most divisive, at least in view of Levinas' own religious writings, is often Spinoza's claim to the historical contingency of the Torah. The laws of the Torah, according to Spinoza, were the "political constitution of the Hebrew State." They are therefore suited only for a particular time and conditions. Spinoza explains, "[...] it is, of course, true that if God had willed their [S]tate to be of longer duration, he would also have given them laws and ordinances of a different kind and would have established a different mode of government." Spinoza goes on to state that "[...] although the Hebrew state, might have lasted indefinitely, it is not possible to imitate it now, nor would it be advisable."³⁶³ In Levinas the laws of the Torah reflect more than just ordinances that are confined to its historical emergence, as he argues in "Have you Reread Baruch?." Rather, the Torah reflects something that is ungraspable by reason—obedience—since it is not a part of the "rational order."³⁶⁴ According to Levinas, in his engagement with Sylvian Zac, the obedience to the laws cannot be interpreted by a historical methodology because it pertains to sensibility; he elaborates: "[...] they are motives of an affective order, such as fear, hope, fidelity, respect, veneration and love."³⁶⁵ Moreover, for Levinas the blind spot in Spinoza's thought is not solely due to Spinoza's political and philosophical commitments but is partly due to Spinoza's ignorance of the Talmud.³⁶⁶ Levinas does acknowledge in *Beyond the Verse* that Spinoza "knew medieval Jewish Philosophy and certain Kabbalistic writings [...] Spinoza had no direct contact with the pre-medieval work of the Talmud [...]," but for Levinas this occurrence was largely due to the "[...] community itself in

³⁶¹ Ibid, 548-549.

³⁶² See, Spinoza's discussion on his "method of Scriptural interpretation," which is "the process of logical deduction that which is hidden is inferred and concluded from what is known, or given as known. This is exactly what our method requires. Although we grant that our method does not suffice to explain with certainty everything that is found in the Bible, this is the consequence not of the defectiveness of the method but of the fact that the path which it tells us is the true and the correct one has never been pursued nor trodden by men, and so with the passage of time has become exceedingly difficult and almost impassable," Ibid, 467.

³⁶³ Ibid, 548, 552. These statements can also be linked to Spinoza's brand of legal positivism or relativism as exposed in the *Political-Treatise*.

³⁶⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essay on Judaism*, trans. Séan Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1997), 114-118

³⁶⁵ Ibid, 114

³⁶⁶ Ibid, 116. Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: talmudic readings and lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994), 168.

which he was born, where the ideas, customs and preoccupations of Marranism were still very vivid memories, and interest in the Kabbalah and eschatological waiting were prevailing over the attraction that the advanced dialectic of the Talmud and rabbinical discussion had to exercise[...].”³⁶⁷ Spinoza neither treats the Talmud at all in the *Political-Theological Treatise* nor considers its modes of argumentation as a challenge, at least directly. The theological aspect of Levinas’ engagement with Spinoza cannot be treated in more depth here, but I will maintain throughout the remainder of the analysis that it cannot be equated to the critique of the *conatus essendi*. It should be clear from the account I have presented above, that the divergence in their treatments of Scripture has philosophical weight and goes beyond mere polemics.

The value in distinguishing Levinas’ theological and ontological critique of Spinoza becomes apparent in the analysis outlined in Hent De Vries’ “Levinas, Spinoza, and the Theological-Political Meaning of Scripture.”³⁶⁸ Here, De Vries wants to assess the theological critique of Spinoza as a point from which we can reassess or interject in “a careful reconsideration of [Levinas’] apparent all-out condemnation of [Spinoza’s] larger metaphysical project, as encapsulated in the *conatus essendi* [...]” as he continues to ask “what would it mean to read Spinoza—and, by implication or retroactively, perhaps, also Levinas—against the grain at this specific point?”³⁶⁹ This will evidently for De Vries call into question the perception of Spinoza being “the greatest antagonist of the Levinasian project.”³⁷⁰ De Vries correctly acknowledges that the overarching differences between both author’s projects are not inherently conflicting. Spinoza was not engaging Talmud (at least in the Levinasian sense of engagement) and had other sources at his disposal. For de Vries Spinoza is expressing a modern sentiment in

³⁶⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: talmudic readings and lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994), 168.

³⁶⁸ Hent De Vries, “Levinas, Spinoza, and the Theological-Political Meaning of Scripture” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. (New York: Fordham University, 2006).

³⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 234; Names of authors where inserted.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 247.

his remarks about Judaism and religion in general, which Levinas also acknowledges. The difficulty in giving serious consideration to de Vries' argumentation is that he overlooks Levinas' articulation of his own project. For Levinas, as he states in the Preface of the collection of early essays in *Entre Nous*, the ethical event or the possibility of being-for-the-other, which is central to his overall project, is, in Levinas's words, "[...] when human existence interrupts and goes beyond its effort to be—its Spinozan *conatus essendi*—there is a vocation of existing for-the-other stronger than the threat of death."³⁷¹ This is even more apparent in remarks made as part of his indictment of Spinoza's ontology. Levinas states:

My entire effort consists in separating myself, so to speak, from ontology, in which the meaning of the intelligible is attached to the event of being, because it would be in itself like presence, culminating in its repose and perseverance in itself, self-sufficient-a perfection that, in Spinoza's view, is its divinity. It is the human self, master and possessor of the world, all powerful in strength and knowledge, who would thus be divinized.³⁷²

It is not enough to say that Spinoza and Levinas are *doing something different*. It is necessary to distinguish an internal and external perspective on Levinas' reading of Spinoza. The argument against the *conatus essendi* and the ways in which it is connected to Spinoza's philosophical project in Levinas is, as we already seen in previous chapters, grounded in his critique of Western metaphysics and is a charge of being an axiology or moral conscience within decisive figures in Western thought. The *conatus essendi* is also, as we will see, not only a site for the critique or interjection in the Western canon for Levinas but a topic that his work attempts to resolve in the notion of the *conatus existendi*. However, what is at stake for de Vries is to establish that the difference between the ontological and the theological critique of Spinoza is more than "a difference in nuance."³⁷³ He does so by first arguing that despite the real and substantial distinctions between their project, methods, and interpretations, there is continuity between

³⁷¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), xii.

³⁷² Levinas, "On Jewish Philosophy," in *In the Time of Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 178.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

Levinas and Spinoza in recognition of Scripture, the “Word of God,” namely that it “signals exteriority” or in Spinoza “ethical interiority” because it expresses “polysemic meaning.”³⁷⁴ This multiplicity of meaning for de Vries goes beyond the question of revelation, the Bible, or the “rabbinical writing and the Kabbalah, and beyond the Talmud and its oral traditions.”³⁷⁵ And it is for this reason that de Vries connects Levinas to Spinoza (which is derived from Deleuze’s interpretation of expression found in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*) that reading of Scripture “presupposes expressionism,” meaning that there is an “open ended dialectic,” “a polysemy of meaning,” and “an infinite modalization of the Word.”³⁷⁶ It is not appropriate here to debate this aspect of de Vries’ interpretation of Levinas on this point, specifically in its comparison to Deleuze’s notion of expression. Rather, the significance is that de Vries’ attempts to conjoin both Spinoza and Levinas’ projects overlooks their decisive points of departure and conflict (at least from the Levinasian perspective), namely on the matter of politics. The political or social interactions of what Levinas describes in the Preface of *Totality and Infinity* as the “permanent possibility of war,” perpetual or total war, instills a “violence [that] does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility of action.”³⁷⁷ We already saw this type of assertion made in *On Escape* alongside the notion of the struggle [*lutte*] for and against being. The desire for self-sufficiency of the modern individual does not reflect an “individual that does not yet belong to himself, but an autonomous person, on the solid terrain

³⁷⁴ Hent De Vries, “Levinas, Spinoza, and the Theological-Political Meaning of Scripture” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. (New York: Fordham University, 2006), 241-243.

³⁷⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Subject: talmudic readings and lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994), 170-171.

³⁷⁶ Hent De Vries, “Levinas, Spinoza, and the Theological-Political Meaning of Scripture” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. (New York: Fordham University, 2006), 244.

³⁷⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 21.

he has conquered, feels liable to be mobilized—in every sense of the term.”³⁷⁸ However, it is not until *Otherwise Than Being* that Levinas makes the implicit connection between the *conatus* and *conatus essendi* and the state of war. Here, the “extreme synchronism of war” is being’s essence as it is “confirmed to be the conatus of beings.” War is conceptualized here in what Levinas will refer to as the dramatic form of egotism or the concrete that is the struggle between beings, the “each against all” and (more significantly) the synchronism of this clash or war between entities, its “calculation, mediation and politics.”³⁷⁹ Both of these dimensions of war in Levinas’ later works are not just a result or outcome of the notion of *conatus*, which states that the essence or essentiality of being is a struggle and perseverance. They are inherent to them. This is due to being’s interestedness (self-interestedness) or what is described as the persistence of being’s *essence* or the *esse*. The formula in Levinas is “essence qua persistence in essence, qua conatus and interest.”³⁸⁰ Therefore war is an inevitable state of the *conatus* of being.³⁸¹

De Vries acknowledges the differences between Levinas and Spinoza’s respective political projects but does not see their divergences on the notion of the *conatus* and its basis in Levinas’ critique of ontology. This is because de Vries attempts to follow this distinction through and from the standpoint of a theological argument instead of the political on its own account. Here, the problem of the political is the distinction in both writers’ supposed theological-political visions. And even in respect to his line of argumentation de Vries does not follow through on the true theological-political and philosophical implications of Spinoza’s project in relation to Levinas. Rather, he acknowledges Levinas’ critique of Zac’s analysis of Spinoza and also identifies the political conditions within Spinoza’s notion of reason. Spinoza, according to de Vries’ interpretation, will conceptualize Judaism as a “State Religion” and Christianity as the “religion

³⁷⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 52.

³⁷⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 4.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 5; as Levinas notes, this is not reduced to just word play.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.* It is precisely, as Levinas states, the “inevitable modalities of the fate woven by being in its interest.”

of the individual.” However, de Vries does not recognize that a Christian universalism (which Levinas and Zac perceived Spinoza to adopt) would enable the unapologetic exercise of reason that consumes the whole domain of the political. De Vries does not elaborate on this crucial point. Nor does he acknowledge the indispensable link between total war and the *conatus*, which is not a minor argument in Levinas but a reoccurring theme that directly implicates Spinoza as a central figure. The exclusion of this part of the discourse in de Vries is due to his original interpretation of the problem of the *conatus* for Levinas. For de Vries it is the articulation of striving in Book III, Proposition 7, where Spinoza equates the perseverance in being with the “actual essence of a thing” that is of a central problem for Levinas. The striving of being (its desire, *appetitus*) encompasses the existence of all things, animate and inanimate. For Levinas, according to de Vries, the

[...] *conatus* comes to express the totality, identity, indeed sameness that are supposedly involved in the very idea of being and its conceptual scheme, in its linguistic structures and language games, in its forms of life and pursuit of economic interest [...] surely there could be no difference greater than the one between the encompassing Spinozistic definition of desire as perseverance for all individual beings (indeed, of *esse* as *interesse*, as Levinas repeatedly says) and the specifically Levinasian idea of infinitizing desire as the enigma of *disinterestedness* revealing itself in human passivity (rather than in what Spinoza calls “active effects.”)³⁸²

Although de Vries’ brief account is compelling and highlights several points of Levinas’ general critique of the *conatus*, it does not account for the project of the critique. As discussed in previous chapters, Levinas spent a large portion of his writing attempting to account for the struggle of being. In *Existence and Existents* he places it in the event of the *hypostasis* out of the *il y a*, and in *On Escape* it was detrimental to the account of the actual desire or need to escape being. In *Existence and Existents* the conception of bare life as a struggle was inaugural to the “whole contemporary thought” and justified by the development of the biological sciences in the nineteenth century.³⁸³

³⁸² Hent De Vries, “Levinas, Spinoza, and the Theological-Political Meaning of Scripture” in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. (New York: Fordham University, 2006), 233-234.

³⁸³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 10.

All of these analyses attempted to acknowledge that there is a struggle or striving in existence, but it is only a mode and not the entirety of a being's existence.

In Levinas' engagement with Heidegger we saw that the notion of sacrifice was indispensable to dissipating the "anthropology of the *conatus*." And we also saw in Levinas's later works on intentionality, consciousness, and *essence* that the notion of the right-to-be is explicitly the claim of the *conatus*. This is the pending problem of the good conscience of being and the "morality founded upon the inalienable right of the *conatus*" in Levinas. It is the precise equation of the right-to-be with the struggle for life. Therefore, the problem of the *conatus* cannot merely lie in its affirmation as something essential to the thinking of being in general. For this reason I argue that it is not just Proposition 5-7 of Book III, as Hent de Vries and also Edith Wyschogrod argue, that are at odds with Levinas' project, but it is also Proposition 25 of Book IV, which states that no entity "endeavors to preserve his being for the sake of some other thing."³⁸⁴ The non-dependency or non-exchangeability of being poses a detrimental project to Levinas, especially in his late works, and, as I will continue to argue, establishes Spinoza (despite de Vries' analysis) as "the great antagonist of the Levinasian project." P24 of Book IV not only eliminates the possibility of sacrifice—in the Levinasian sense in view of substitution and in the literal sense—but it also is essential to the notion of right, specifically to how natural right is treated in Spinoza's *Political Treatise*. There the absolute individuation of the *conatus* procures the right for the individual. For Spinoza and other early modern thinkers such as Hobbes, the right to exist by one's own means that no entity can act towards its own destruction or its opposite. This condition was already affirmed in Spinoza's *Ethics* in the Scholium of P20 of Book IV. However, it is only in Spinoza's treatment of *conatus* in the *Political Treatise* that the self-preservation implies an indefinite power over all things in Nature that assist or aid in the preservation of existence.

³⁸⁴ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* in *Collected Works*, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), Proposition 26 of Book IV.

The power over all things is not just the right to resources but also (most significantly) the right to kill. The ability to kill reflects the equality amongst bodies in the state of Nature and follows from the original principles of the individuation of the *conatus*. Nevertheless, as Filippo del Lucchese argues, Spinoza uses Hobbesian categories, such as the state of Nature and natural right, but despite his initial usages he will eventually overturn them in his work.³⁸⁵ Spinoza sees this right as the ability to kill. This reveals both the equality and opposition amongst individuals within the state of Nature. And it is this inherent state of strife, the perpetual collision between bodies, that Spinoza argues diminishes an individual's right in general and the capacity to secure him- or herself.³⁸⁶ The true actualization of an individual's *conatus* is through its unification with another *conatus*: it reflects a binding of forces. It is important to note that the notion of force in Spinoza is multiple; it is simultaneously mental and physical, collective and individual. Levinas' work focuses on the physical aspect of force, specifically the individualized force that affirms itself as an identity. Therefore, from the Levinasian perspective, this sort of binding of the individual *conatus* for Spinoza does not eliminate the problem or the justification of war: it exacerbates it. Spinoza on his own terms acknowledges the ever-present possibility of war as constitutive of political life.³⁸⁷ But this aspect of Spinoza's political thought has been likened to his "political realism" instead of war mongering.³⁸⁸ However, the problem of war in Levinas is not its mere occurrence or probability, or even historical reflection on it. Levinas' critique of Western metaphysics is founded on the lived experience of being, which is conceptualized and articulated in Western thought. As we saw in Levinas' reading of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, being's self-possession and self-concern of Dasein's mineness is nothing but its self-relation and "cuts all my

³⁸⁵ Filippo Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation*. (London: Continuum, 2009), 118-119.

³⁸⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, trans. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 75. Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise in Collected Works*, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 686.

³⁸⁷ This can be traced to Spinoza's argument for the self-preservation of the commonwealth, which is bound to preserve its own interest that is based not upon or enforced by civil law but the right of war. See, Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise in Collected Works*, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 697-698.

³⁸⁸ Filippo Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza: Tumult and Indignation*. (London: Continuum, 2009), 118-119

ties with other men”;³⁸⁹ this self-relation for Levinas is tantamount to Heidegger’s account of authentic being-towards-death. Here, in relation to Spinoza we are presented with a more vicious presentation of the problem of the *conatus*. The uniqueness of Levinas’ reading of the iteration of the idea in Western thought is not just due to ontology’s inherent self-interestedness of being, “the self-sufficiency of the subject, its self-satisfaction” that is “secure because this is a subject who cannot be challenged from the outside.” Additionally, this formulation of being necessitates a persistence, a striving, a maintaining in being. The subject’s security requires perseverance, a struggle and an overcoming, which, as we saw in Levinas’ brief comments on the heroic struggle of the modern individual in *On Escape*, is not an inner struggle or conflict but one that “is turned toward the stranger.”³⁹⁰ From a Levinasian perspective, Spinoza’s account of the desire for peace in “leaving the state of nature” to a commonwealth does not amount to an “unconditional and universal” peace but a “peace of empires issued from war rest on war.”³⁹¹ This conception of the self or the “I,” which appears in Spinoza’s political writings, appears to have the ever-present possibility of war as a permanent quality or characteristic in such a way that it almost presupposes war as an a-priori.

The subject of war, sacrifice, and natural right (the right-to-be) marks a powerful intersection of Spinoza’s and Levinas’ projects. De Vries overlooks this part of the Levinas’ own argumentation even in its most basic formulation.³⁹² Spinoza’s emphasis on being’s perdurance is central to his metaphysical system, but it is also the point of incompatibility and incommutability with Levinas. The ceaseless effort of the *conatus* belongs to a being that cannot strive for the sake of another, is incapable of sacrifice, and also is (as Wyschogrod acknowledges) incapable of

³⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 51.

³⁹⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 50.

³⁹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 22.

³⁹² Also see Edith Wyschogrod “Ethics as First Philosophy: Levinas Reads Spinoza,” *The Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 202. Here Wyschogrod wants to connect both writers on the point of being’s perdurance; she argues that there is an “echo of Spinoza’s description of the way in which entities will their perdurance can be detected in Levinas account of being’s amphibology.”

suicide.³⁹³ Killing oneself can only result from an external cause or “a disordered imagination in that the individual who contemplates suicide cannot envisage the outcome of his or her action ...[it] cannot be a sane act.”³⁹⁴ The selflessness denoted by sacrifice is not the same or even similar to the destruction of the “I” in suicide. But both demonstrate the incapacity of self-effacement in Spinoza. Levinas’ utilization of the term *conatus existendi* in *Otherwise Than Being* impinges on this moment of Spinoza’s logic. The significance of his brief introduction of the *conatus* in the form of the *existendi* is that it establishes an effort and persistence in existence. But the force of this effort is not turned inward towards the ego or the “I.” Rather, the force is exterior; it is existence in the form of the one-for-the-other. As I will discuss in greater depth later, the effort of the *existendi* is directed towards the other as an “undergoing.” It is also an effort of non-synthesis.³⁹⁵ This view of the self in its passive form is distinct but not separate from the “I” created *ex nihilo*, as the active or creative act of the ego in the *hypostasis*. Instead, it is, as Levinas describes it, “a passive form of the self in “that it comes to pass” (*cela se passe*).”³⁹⁶ But the passive form of self is not an abandonment of the *conatus*, because it is an exposure to existence not in the form of death or annihilation (like the *conatus* and *conatus essendi*) but a lassitude, physical weakness, and mental weariness. It is an exposure signified in the efforts of the body in its passive form. For this reason, the meaning and function of the *conatus existendi* in Levinas is a revival of the term found briefly in Book III of Spinoza’s *Ethics* and Leibniz’s early works. By emphasizing lassitude, aging of the body, and the possibility of pain in what he describes as the “lived human corporality,” Levinas challenges the domains or categories from which the *conatus* is invested in the active power of being. However, it must be noted that Levinas’ stress on passivity is not the

³⁹³ Edith Wyschogrod, “Ethics as First Philosophy: Levinas Reads Spinoza,” *The Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 204-5.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 203. Also see Spinoza explanation in Scholium of P20 of Book IV of the *Ethics*.

³⁹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 54.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

reason why his metaphysical project is at odds with Spinoza's valorization of the "active affects" of the human being as de Vries has described. This is because there is no opposition between the passive and the active in Levinas. For this reason, I contend that there needs to be a more fruitful account of Levinas' notion of passivity and especially of how passivity is treated in *Otherwise Than Being* in the idea of substitution and the critique (and later revision) of the *conatus* scheme in Levinas' work. As we saw in previous chapters, the problem of a notion of being that affirms the *conatus* is not that it places value on being itself but that it reduces identity to effort and the acts (the *esse*) to the preservation of *essence*. These reductions are not only a consequence of thinking of being in terms of its *conatus* but something that is within the process of identification. This was seen in Levinas' analysis of *essence* in *Otherwise Than Being*, where the "the looker" or the one who perceives is identified and identifies itself as "one of the beings already known."³⁹⁷ We saw a similar assertion made in *On Escape* and *Existence and Existents* by Levinas. Despite the appearance of Levinas' late formulation of the *conatus existendi* it has continuity in Levinas' description of the upsurge of the ego out of the *hypostasis*. Both the *conatus existendi* and the *hypostasis* account for the active and passive dimensions of the ego, the *resistance* of the ego to its existence and its identification with itself.

4.2 *On Human Weakness and the Conatus*

Spinoza and, in many respects, Hobbes and Leibniz, are the figures in philosophy who put the concept at the forefront of their philosophical systems.³⁹⁸ However, the *conatus* is often expressed subtly throughout the history of philosophy, and through what Levinas would say are

³⁹⁷ Ibid, 27-28.

³⁹⁸ For Leibniz, Spinoza and Hobbes, the *conatus* also is the force or power of or behind action. However, Leibniz will diverge from these writers because he does not link the *conatus* to a body's ability to preserve itself. Rather, Leibniz uses the notion of *conatus* to illustrate the process or the unfolding of the acts and a body's efforts to complete a particular action. See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz "On Body and Force, Against the Cartesians," 250-251, "A Specimen of Dynamics," 130-131 in *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett Publications 1989). Furthermore, although *conatus* is extensively treated in his dynamics, *conatus* is not a decisive principle in his practical philosophy. This can be due to the fact that *conatus* is not a principle that accounts for human relations as we see in Hobbes and Spinoza.

apparently neutral categories of Western metaphysics, such as identity, being, and *essence*: existence is fundamentally a survival orientation, a struggle that calls for perseverance. *All of these terms are tautologies*. The thematization of being, as Levinas says in *Totality and Infinity*, always invokes a relation with time where “the being of the object is a perduration, a filling of the time which is empty and inconsolable against death as an end.” Here, even in these early remarks, Levinas wants to focus on existence (to exist) other “than that of the perduration of the totality,” which Levinas will again attribute to the “Spinozist tradition” where the going beyond death is “produced” in the “universality of thought.”³⁹⁹ However, it was not until his analysis of *essence* in *Otherwise Than Being* that one finds an explicit account of this interdependency in the equation of the being’s *esse* and *essence* with interestedness: “*Esse* is *interesse*; essence is interest.” Even more explicitly, an equation which the “act of being” (*esse*) and being’s *essence*, which he phrases in the late 1970s and early 1980s works “*essance*.” This coinage for him “designates the verbal sense ‘to be’ or ‘being’: we mean here the effectuation of being, *Sein* as opposed to the *Seiendes*.”⁴⁰⁰

But in a more concrete sense, “*essance*” in Levinas also denotes being or what Levinas calls the “gesture of being” or what others have translated in Levinas as “being’s move.” “*Essance*” denotes the ways knowledge or ontology have such a hold over how individuals or beings relate to and identify themselves and the world. For Levinas the “gesture of being,” its production or manifestation, is “carried out” by beings “inasmuch as they assert themselves as being, and to being, inasmuch as it asserts itself as being.”⁴⁰¹ A being’s adherence to existence is qualified as obligation to being itself, where existence is nothing but the task of confirming and verifying ontological truths to a point that the certainty of being (the fact of its givenness) or

³⁹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 301.

⁴⁰⁰ See Note 2 in “Initial Question” and Note 3 in the “Analysis of Dasein” in *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000). Also see Note 1 in “From the Carefree Deficiency to the New Meaning” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). In addition preliminary Note to *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), xlvi.

⁴⁰¹ Levinas, “Thinking of Being and the Other,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

being's presence is "an exposition to prehension [*la saisie*]." ⁴⁰² We already saw this assertion being made by Levinas in his analysis of *essence* in *Otherwise Than Being* and the notion of pure being in *On Escape*. ⁴⁰³ Here, however, Levinas is making a more general statement towards the Western philosophical tradition and its "tendency to ontologize [*ontologisme*]." ⁴⁰⁴ This reflects the tradition's inheritance of "Greek wisdom," according to which "there is an agreement between the intelligibility of the cosmos in which are posited both solid and graspable things, and the good practical sense of men having needs to satisfy.... [and which] makes all significance, all rationality, go back to being." ⁴⁰⁵ For this reason the *esse* of being in Levinas is ontology; it is the "comprehension of the *esse*." ⁴⁰⁶ Ontology, or being's *esse*, is being's persistence and interestedness, which, as we already saw in *Otherwise than Being*, is the positive affirmation of the *conatus* of being. ⁴⁰⁷ Moreover, Levinas' work not only concerns being's exposition or manifestation but also what it veils and covers over. If existence is more than perdurance of being's totality, then what is within existence or more concretely the subject (which is inevitably absorbed by this totality) points to something beyond the *conatus* or the struggle-to-be.

As discussed in the notion of struggle in *On Escape*, the axiology and emphasis of being's struggle and its *esse* are direct results of the notion of pure being. This is because it operates as the measure or the bar from which a being's existence is modeled. Everything would be measured for or against the absolutism of being. As Levinas argues, a being's "essence and properties can be imperfect" only in so far as the "very fact of pure being is placed beyond the distinction between

⁴⁰² Levinas, "The Bad Conscience and the Inexorable," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 172.

⁴⁰³ Levinas will qualify the gesture or the movement of being or expression of being

⁴⁰⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 51.

⁴⁰⁵ Levinas, "Thinking of Being and the Other," in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 111-112.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 113.

⁴⁰⁷ See argument in 3.2-3.3

perfect and imperfect.”⁴⁰⁸ As a result, there is always an inherent lack conceived in being. Western thought has habituated us to conceive of this lack as a deficiency. In view of this, human existence would inevitably be conceptualized to harbor an insufficiency from the start.⁴⁰⁹ Moreover, Levinas’ reading of human deficiency or lack (as it is articulated in Western thought) belongs alongside the discussion and the critique of the *conatus*. They are intertwined. Deficiency can be qualified as all those assigned degenerate qualities of the individual that stand in opposition to the true and essential qualities or character of an entity—its *essence*.⁴¹⁰ In Levinas these qualities are not only often utilized to account for moral degeneracy but are also connected to conditions for action. In the 1976 essay titled “From Carefree Deficiency to the New Meaning,” Levinas says that human deficiency has been that which Western thought has sought to overcome, and for this reason it always has emphasized an account of the Will, moral acts, and activity in general.⁴¹¹ It is not enough to posit a notion of the true or the essential of being in order to mask or suppress what is non-essential, degenerate, and deficient.

In Levinas a notion of the essential always corresponds to a specific *ethos*, acts and modes of being that are most proper to it. And it is for this reason, according to Levinas, that Greek philosophy emphasizes pure acts, functions, tasks and activities; as with the *ergon* in Aristotle’s *Ethics*.⁴¹² In Hegel the pure activity of being is Absolute thought, the coincidence with the reason and the will. The freedom of the will, the foundation of freedom itself, shows itself as that which can maintain human identity in its task of being. Every action and decision is not taken up but is already decided upon, reflected on, and mediated. In this light, violence and domination are

⁴⁰⁸ Levinas, “Thinking of Being and the Other,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 111-112.

⁴⁰⁹ In *On Escape*, the true lack or deficiency in being is the experience of pure being, which is both the experience of internal antagonisms and imprisonment in our inability to get out or escape our being. Insufficiency does not belong to being but in our powerlessness. This was noted in the experience of malaise. *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 66-68.

⁴¹⁰ This was also understood from the beginning of the analysis of the struggle to-be need or the effort to preserve the “I” in *On Escape*. The need or desire to preserve is always against an internal lack or a need that stands in the way or hampers its efforts. See, 2.2-2.4

⁴¹¹ Emmanuel Levinas, “From Carefree Deficiency to the New Meaning” in in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 43.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*

threats not purely in the Hobbesian sense of the fear of violent death, but because they threaten the individual with the “imminence of nothingness” that renders action void.

The individual finds its lack not only in everyday mundane existence—the physical, the economic, or the political—but where the human is most powerless. For this reason, Levinas writes, “[...] the deficiency of man begins, consequently, in the traumatism of the end, breaking the energy of the *essence*, in the ‘finitude of human essence.’”⁴¹³ The lack or deficiency in being in the interim would be signified by a lack of freedom, a state of non-freedom. In Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, for example, this is the task of being as the authentic and its distancing from the everyday inauthentic existence, which is a state of non-freedom where Dasein is not itself. Heidegger’s authentic *being-towards-death* is the event of freedom but also where Dasein is most freed from its inauthentic existence. Identity or essence shows itself in its identification with itself as the insistent effort “against all that would come to alter its sufficiency or its for-itself”;⁴¹⁴ this act of identification in Levinas is courage *tout court*, which denotes a self-interested being, the affirmation of the *conatus* of being.

Similar to the heroic individualism portrayed in eighteenth-century philosophy in *On Escape*, bourgeois identity is corralled by the individual’s supreme confidence and sufficiency in himself. The absolutism of the world from which the bourgeois imagines his own self-sufficiency is that of material objects. The sufficiency of being from which the identity of the “I” is modeled is predicated on the objects that it attempts to possess and intergrade into a system of capital. The bourgeois has an instinct for possession and integration. The inclination towards possession is not towards the satisfaction of needs or the experience of pleasure; it is possession for the sake of possession within the individual’s struggle for a tangible future. Therefore the struggle-to-be in

⁴¹³ Ibid.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

view of human deficiency is simplistic; it is a struggle towards a projected known and durable future, against the unknown world. The security of the future is the determination, the *arche*, and the *telos* of bourgeois philosophy. It gives meaning to the persistence of being. The fear of the world and the uncertainty of the future would at the outset expose the modern individual to be, at his core, insufficient and dependent. But this form of material persistence (actions to obtain material goods) is tied to the claim of self-sufficiency and individuality—they are one and the same. For this reason the bourgeois “demands guarantees in the present against the future, which he introduces unknowns into those solved problems from which he lives. What he possesses becomes capital, carrying interest or insurance against risk, and his future, thus tamed, is integrated in this way with his past.”⁴¹⁵ The tangibility of the world, the world of things, is the site in or platform on which these antagonisms take place. The battle to-be in this respect is the appropriation of things and how they can be integrated to preserve the equilibrium of the “I,” for the sake of the perdurance of the “I.” This dynamism was also discussed in *Existence and Existence*. There, Levinas attends again to the notion of struggle and its iteration in Western thought, not from the view of the internal insecurity of the “I” or ego but in view of its external connection to a world, a place and temporal relation. The same interrogation of being and identity reemerges, but Levinas questions both of those categories in view of the ego’s dependency in the moment or movement from which it positions or posits itself—its identification with itself.

The target here is not just Heidegger but early modern thinkers such as Malebranche and Descartes. In a positive sense, Descartes and Malebranche’s theories of creationism do conceptualize the emergence of the ego within the framework of ‘thrownness,’ a perceived world or a measurement of sufficiency. In both of these early modern thinkers there is a basic acknowledgement of the fragility of existence. The “I” as a created being originates from a

⁴¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 50.

dependency upon a Creator or Divine Will. Theories of continuous creation will still rely on the notion of the struggle in order to account for the relation between God and creation. However, the difference between both notions of struggle is that the prior acknowledges the insecurity in the existence of the ego while the later does not. This point is also due to the fact that existence at large (not just the singular creation of things) is being continuously created and requires a Divine will to sustain its being.

Although Levinas adopts a notion of creation in his depiction of the *hypostasis*, he will depart from and critique these particular modern thinkers because they still harbor a conception of existence that it is enrooted in Being, either as it accounts for the origins of the “I” or conditions the ways in can exist: the entity still struggles for-being. Given the scope of our present analysis, the notion of struggle in theories of creation also glosses over the question of human fragility and weakness similar to ways that modern individualism does. This is because human weakness on its own account can never be treated in these discourses, since the ego’s powerlessness is already measured by the perfect act of the Divine will. This is most evident in Descartes according to Levinas’ reading. Descartes’ *cogito* reflects a dependency on a Divine will for its existence. The *cogito* appears to be self-created because it alone is that which makes the “I” certain of its own existence—“I think therefore I am.”⁴¹⁶ But, according to Levinas’ reading, the role of the *cogito* in Descartes’ metaphysics is not certain, since it is always at risk of disappearing, “at risk at following into nothingness if God...would withdraw from it...the evidence of cogito is supported on the evidence for divine existence.”⁴¹⁷ The existence of the “I” is caught within a continuous struggle for its own existence, but not on its own terms or within the capacity of its own powers or actions. Furthermore, the most extreme articulation of this problem of human

⁴¹⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 80.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79-80. To see my full treatment on this subject reference 1.6

weakness in Levinas is within the context of the concept of the struggle-for-life at large. As was already discussed, the *conatus* or the struggle to preserve life never merely reflects the ability or capacity to satisfy the body's needs but to prolong life in general. The pursuit of the satisfaction of need and pleasures, as discussed in *On Escape*, would bring to bear the privation of the ego. As Levinas states, "it would indicate some weakness of our constitution, or the imitation of our being."⁴¹⁸ This is because the central objective of the struggle to live, which Levinas contends was originally supported by nineteenth-century biological sciences and has influenced contemporary philosophy, reverts back onto the concept of life itself. The concept of bare or naked existence does not reflect a self that has been given life "by a divine decree, or to have it by virtue of its very essence; its existence thus was taken to belong to it in a natural and quasi-imperceptible fashion."⁴¹⁹ Nor is this concept of existence as "life" ever self-reflected or self-determined, because the ego's identification is always directed and defined externally. The ego is directed externally not in terms of an exteriority but in view of the notion of naked life as an absolute or given, as discussed in *Existence and Existents*. The ultimate task of the individual is to care for its life, namely "its endurance and conversation" in existence. Naked and simple existence is always the objective. Human weakness is covered over because all life "is the struggle of an already existent being for the prolongation of its existence. It is not a continual birth, understood as a distinct operation by which an existent takes over its existence, apart from what it may do to conserve it."⁴²⁰ The struggle for life breaks from the traditional notions of being, but at the same time it goes beyond them, because it attempts to capture a pure and simple being and qualifies the pure acts that belong to life itself as a "very struggle for life."⁴²¹

⁴¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 58.

⁴¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 10.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*

The problems of human deficiency as it is articulated in the notion of the *conatus* and *conatus essendi* diverge. The *conatus essendi* is not a struggle for life or for terrestrial existence (in view of all that is eternal and immortal) but for the persistence of *essence* of being, its identity. We already saw this attributed to Heidegger's formulation of being (namely in his account of being-there and being-towards death), Husserl's notion of intentional consciousness and more concretely to Spinoza's ethics. The *conatus essendi* is the self-interested *ethos* it instills, as a good conscience, a freedom, and consequently the morality of the political right-to-be. As already discussed in the previous chapter, Levinas conceives of Heidegger's formulation of authentic being-towards-death as founded on a presupposed value or axiology that will account for both being's deficiency and perfection (or its ownmost being, authenticity).⁴²² However, according to Levinas' reading, both dimensions and modes of being (inauthentic and authentic) are conceptualized in such a way that priority is always given to the authentic, Dasein's being proper. This is most obvious for Levinas, although not for Heidegger himself, given the focus of the prior analysis, in Dasein's anxious-anticipation of death, where the highest value of being is its concern for the perseverance of its own being. Levinas believes this value of self-concern is pervasive throughout the primordial structure *Jemeinigkeit*, Dasein's mineness or selfhood, which is the *ontological constitution* of being-towards-death in Heidegger.⁴²³

Let us consider Dasein's inability to be itself, maintain its identification with itself, in the average everyday mode of being where Dasein is in the greatest distance from itself. Despite this seeming separation between the authentic and inauthentic, Dasein's average everydayness is the condition of possibility for being authentic for Heidegger. Dasein is disburdened of its identity in its averageness but is also the site where "it discloses to itself its own authentic Being [...] this

⁴²² Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 2000), 211-212.

⁴²³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans., J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 2008), par. 240.

discovery of the ‘world’ and this disclosure of Dasein are always accomplished as a clearing-away of concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which Dasein bars its own way.”⁴²⁴ As discussed in 3.3-3.4, there is a dialectical flow or decisive points of continuity between the inauthentic to the authentic, which preserves the *conatus* of being in all of Dasein’s various modes of being. In particular, the perverseness of the *conatus*, following Levinas’ reading of *Being and Time*, is inherent within the structure of Dasein’s mineness found in Section 9. The being-there that is indicated by Dasein’s mineness already necessitates a being that it has-to-be. Levinas interprets the “being-there” of Dasein as a manner of having to-be that determines a being that has an obligation to-be, to persist in its being in order to fulfill its being.⁴²⁵ Levinas elaborates:

[...] in Heidegger this reduction of humanity to the task of being goes to the point of a quite remarkable deduction of ipseity itself out of the essence of being. The essence of being or being-in-question is in question in the *being-there* as *having-to-be*, which is the being of man. *Man is*: this is equivalent to man *has* to be. The “property” indicated in the having [*avoir*] of the having-to-be [*de l’avoir-à-être*] measures all that which is irrecusable—irrecusable *to the point of dying*—in the strict obligation to be, included in the *to* of the *to be* [...] It is in this sense that Heidegger can say at the beginning of section 9 of *Sein und Zeit* that *being-there* is characterized by *Jemeinigkeit*, or ‘mineness’; it is because being there is essentially *Jemeinigkeit*, that the man who *has-to-be* [*a-à-être*] is I. And not the inverse!⁴²⁶

The having-to-be is an internal constraint on Dasein’s existence, which means that it can never refuse its being and go against the persistence of its life even until the point of death. Heidegger’s ontology is able to overcome death by inserting the necessity of being upon the event of death. Or, to put it into other words, the *conatus* of life shapes the qualifications of death but by doing so bypasses the ultimate event that would render its power powerless or at the least not totalizing. The indictment of Husserl and Brentano’s conception of representational intentional consciousness is similar. In the essay “The Bad Conscience and the Inexorable” Levinas asks,

⁴²⁴ Ibid, par. 128-129.

⁴²⁵ This dimension of Levinas’ ongoing critique of Heidegger can be found in the essay “From Carefree Deficiency to the New Meaning,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁴²⁶ Ibid, 46.

“[...] is intentional consciousness not, therefore, the detour according to which perseverance in being is practiced concretely? [...] an active hold upon the scene where the being of beings unfold, is assembled and manifested?”⁴²⁷ The perseverance of intentional consciousness dominates the articulation of being and the world, but it also covers over that which is recusable of consciousness itself, namely its non-intentional expression. The non-intentionality of being expresses itself as a break or the fragmenting of the unity of apprehension, which would in turn appear to be a failing of consciousness. For Levinas non-consciousness acts as a sort of falling off or covering over of consciousness, because non-intentional consciousness lies in the shadow of intentional consciousness. But this does not mean that it operates as a flip side of intentionality, as if “it is considered to be an obscure context of the thematized world that reflection, or intentional consciousness, will convert into clear and distinct *data* like those that present the perceived world itself.”⁴²⁸ Rather, the non-intentional is a pre-reflective consciousness instead of being non-reflective, but it is also something that cannot be categorized as prior to consciousness, because it is in its operation. The non-intentional is that which resists presence, the act of identification, and thought in general. It is a pure passivity or what Levinas describes as a “bad conscience.” The passivity of the non-intentional conscience is the “effacement of presence” or that which is without intentions or aims—a recoiling against any identification of the ego. However, this shadow of intentionality, that which is always against consciousness’s rectitude or conscience, cannot be conceived as passive psyche or juvenile spontaneous “spirit” but is an active fear of existing. This fear that is the undercurrent of all intentional aims should be conceived as opposed to the role of fear in Heidegger, since it not a fear for myself (as we saw) but the “fear for another.” Fear for the other expresses the inadequacy of my existence and acts as that which will

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

⁴²⁸ Ibid, 173.

always undermine the legitimacy of my right-to-be. It is, as Levinas states, that the “fear for all that my existing [...] despite its intentional and conscious innocence [...] can accomplish violence and murder [...] this is also a fear that comes from the face of the other [...] a fear and a responsibility for the death of the other man.”⁴²⁹ Furthermore, the fear that lurks behind my good conscience, my intentional acts, and aims divests me from myself and reveals the fragility of an existence that begins with the *conatus essendi*, where the meaning or value of my being can be reduced to the persistence of its intelligibility and of its complete and total comprehensiveness.

The moment of weariness and confusion in the abandonment of the “I” in its fear for the death of the other is valorized in Levinas’ late works, but its role in his work as a whole is complex and something that cannot be described as mere polemics. Rather, as I have attempted to demonstrate through the course of the present analysis, there is a discursive and theoretical link between, on the one hand, his larger critiques of the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi* and, on the other hand, the question of human finitude, where human finitude is articulated as human weakness and deficiency. As Levinas stated in *On Escape*, the often automatic reduction of human insufficiency to the “limitation of being” and its limitation articulated as a weaknesses in Western thought contributes to why we have not be able to fully grasp the meaning of human finitude.⁴³⁰ Levinas’ resolution of the *conatus essendi* in the form of the *existendi* in *Otherwise Than Being* attends to both the perceived weakness of being as experienced in pain, lassitude, and aging as well as an alternative notion of the *conatus*. On the one hand, Levinas’ use of the term will connect his work back to Spinoza’s *Ethics* and also Gottfried Leibniz’s early work. And on the other hand, although the term is mentioned only briefly, the *conatus existendi* will affirm the force or drive to-be, to exist, but the compulsion and the necessity to-be will not be attributed to the self-interest of the ego or

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 175. And as we saw in Levinas’ analysis of Heidegger in the lectures titled *God, Death, Time*, death is that which displaces the philosophical valorization of the question of being, where the death of the other is a question without response.

⁴³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 51.

the affirmation of identity but will take the form of being-for-the-other. And, as we will discuss in further depth in 4.4, the being-for-the-other in the form of the *conatus existendi* will present an alternative conception of responsibility in Levinas' own work. The "unexceptional requisition of responsibility" in the form of the *conatus existendi* is not continuous in some respects to the notion of responsibility that is conceived as exceptional and unique. The disparity does not just present us with a philosophical dilemma in Levinas but reveals a possible tension between the theological and philosophical in Levinas as well.

4.3 On the *Conatus Existendi*

The philosophical task of *Otherwise Than Being* is not disconnected from Levinas' larger body of work. There, and in other texts, the task for Levinas is not to think against sameness or identity but to think through it, namely its moments of discontinuity. His critique of the *conatus* is undertaken in the same manner. Levinas does not reject the notion of the *conatus* itself. There remains the basic acknowledgement of the real forces and effort of the will to persist self-interestedly and the constant possibility of the clashing of wills, namely the "each against all" in war.⁴³¹ Levinas' use of the term *conatus existendi* only shows up once in his analysis in *Otherwise Than Being* but is significant to his argument in general. There is a distinction between the role of alterity in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas will place the rupture of the totality in being in the face-to-face. Although the self encounters the otherness of being in enjoyment and experience of the elemental and in more concrete forms such as fraternity and fecundity, it is responsibility in the face-to-face encounter with the Other that is exemplary. In *Otherwise than Being*, by contrast, the exemplary experience in substitution goes further in the subject's responsibility for the other. In substitution I am not only responsible, but I

⁴³¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 4.

am responsible for the other's responsibility.⁴³² And it is for this reason, as already discussed in 3.3-5, that sacrifice is possible. Moreover, this use of the term will also bring the analysis closer to early modern thinkers such as Leibniz and Spinoza, who both use the term to denote something passive and vulnerable in the force of the *conatus*. Here, Levinas and Leibniz converge, at least conceptually, in their acknowledgement that there is a force to exist that is divested of any power, will, or effort of an entity, or, in Levinas' case, the subject. Their approximation on this point allows for an alternative lineage of thinking of the notion of the *conatus* in the history of philosophy and one that diverges from Spinoza's framework in many instances.

The *conatus existendi* does not concern substitution or the question of responsibility directly. The significance of the term is external and internal to the present text. Externally, the significance of the use of the *existendi* is connected to Levinas' larger critique of the *conatus* in his larger body of work. As discussed in previous chapters, the notion of the *conatus* has been central to both Levinas' early and later works and to his overall critique of Western metaphysics. Internally to *Otherwise Than Being*, the use of the *conatus* is unique because of his ongoing critique of the *conatus* (we saw this most directly in our previous analysis on essence in 3.2-3) as well as his conceptualization, as it were, of the "preconditions" to thinking of responsibility in the form of substitution. The *existendi* of the *conatus* is opposed to the *essendi*, because it is not an effort to persistence in an identity; it is rather a force or effort that denotes this passive form to-be or the self that is from its inception being-for-the-other. The difference between these two notions of force can be conceptualized in Levinas' brief description of the centripetal force or movement of an intentional consciousness (or *conatus essendi*), which coincides with itself, recovers, and

⁴³² My reading of substitution is largely influenced by Robert Bernasconi's "What is the question to which 'substitution' is the answer?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 234-251. This portion of the analysis will build from Bernasconi's claim that *Otherwise Than Being* presents a radicalized notion of responsibility that is not present in *Totality and Infinity* and that substitution itself is connected to the notion of sacrifice, the possibility or question of sacrifice. And finally, this analysis will acknowledge the distinction, which Bernasconi makes apparent, between the initial treatment of substitution in a lecture given in November of 1967 and its revision in *Otherwise than Being*.

rediscovers itself.”⁴³³ The force or effort of the *existendi* would reflect a retrograde movement, a centrifugal force, which is articulated in an “undergoing” of the ego in its exposure to pain and lassitude. Moreover, Levinas’ notion of substitution necessitates that the exposure to the other in responsibility is always present in the subject even before the face-to-face encounter with the other. The subject must already always be for-the-other in order to be able not only to take responsibility for the other but also responsibility for the other’s responsibility. The twofold or doubled responsibility for the other signifies an “I” or an ego that is both moving towards and away from being. But this internal division of the “I” is not the same as earlier reflections of struggle or the *conatus*, because the movements away and towards being mark the subjection of the subject (the “I” in the accusative form), which takes form as “corporeal life” or a “life despite life.”⁴³⁴

The lived life of the body is already towards the other. The body or sensibility interrupts the active and self-interested ego. The body’s resistance to the ego is due to the sensual nature of the body, its corporeality, which in Levinas expresses a passivity that should *not* be conceived primarily as receptivity, an inactive or non-intentional state, but as an exposure. The exposure of the body has two different meanings in Levinas: (1) the exposure of the body signifies the possibility of pain and pleasure and (2) the actual endurance and consequently a patience concretely experienced in the unfolding of pleasure and pain, it is what Levinas describes as the “painfulness of pain,” the “malady or malignity of illness [*mal*].” The latter sense of passive expresses a “frustrated will,” an inability to act or to be in accordance with one’s own interest. This is exemplified by the exposure of the body in aging, where the flesh degenerates through the passing of time [*se passe*], and what was exposed or lost in time can never be recovered. Because

⁴³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 48.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

the flesh is lived, it is temporal. In terms of its formal structure, the passivity or exposure of the body in Levinas loses time, in its senescence, in such a way that it cannot be recovered by the active ego, which, as we saw in the analysis of *essence*, “recalls through memory and reconstructs in historiography of the past that is bygone, or through its imagination and prevision that anticipates the future [...]”.⁴³⁵ The loss of time is nothing but the lapse of time within the temporal experience of *essence*, its lapse in the persistence of the *esse*. In view of its formal structure in Levinas, the exposure or passivity of the body entails that the ego, in its relation to itself, is always restricted in its embodied, lived experienced. This is not to say the body has an existence of its own account that is separate from the ego but rather that, as we saw in the analysis of escape in *On Escape*, the self is embodied, trapped, or stuck “in its skin.” But the experience of being trapped in one’s skin is existence-despite-oneself. The existence of the flesh (existence-despite-oneself) is in its primary form being-for-the-other in Levinas. The flesh or exposure of the skin in this sense has a life or existence of its own, but it is at the same time where the ego dwells and persists, but always to the point of failure. As discussed above, this is due to the inherent lack of the ego, its involuntary and non-intentional nature. We already saw this dynamic in Levinas’ account of the *hypostasis*, where the “I”s upsurge out of the *il y a* entails both an assertion of being or existence as well as a refusal to-be. The refusal to-be in the bodies aging and pain is in its “susceptibility to being hurt, a self uncovered, exposed and suffering in its skin”; it is vulnerability. Levinas elaborates:

[...] in the pure state, the very patience of corporality, the pain of labor and ageing, are adversity itself, the against oneself that is in the self. The good or bad pleasure of the will presupposes this patience and this adversity, and this primordial lassitude [...] the passivity proper to patience, more passive thus than any passivity that is correlative to the voluntary, signifies in the “passive” synthesis of its temporality.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁵ Ibid, 49-51.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

The ego is brought to bear by its passiveness or rather the passing of time [*se passé*], although at the same time it is as it were held hostage and disturbed by it. Thus, the identity of the ego, even in its primary formation or deformation, comes to pass by what is exterior to it. It is “despite itself from the outside.”⁴³⁷

At this point in the analysis, Levinas asserts that this passive coming to be of the self or the “I” in the body’s corporality is the *conatus existendi*. Overall, the *conatus existendi* accounts for an *existence* of the ego that is unattached to its identity, which is neither prior nor correlative to the ego’s act of self-identification. But in Levinas the passive form of self in the ego’s non-identification also necessitates persistence, an effort or force of the self even in its passive form. The *existendi* of the *conatus* is “the underside of the active ego”; it is what brings it to bear.⁴³⁸ The *conatus existendi* would account for how a being can persist in being, not for the sake of its own being but fundamentally in being-for-the-other in its existing-despite-oneself. The force of the *conatus* in this sense would be an undergoing of the subject in its existence, which Levinas describes as the passive aspect of the self “that comes to pass.”⁴³⁹ The exposure to death in the *conatus existendi* would not be assumed. Levinas elaborates:

The temporalization prior to the verb, or in a verb without a subject, or in the patience of a subject that lies as it were on the underside of the active ego is the patience in aging. It is not a position taken with regard to one’s death, but a lassitude, a passive exposure to being which is not assumed, an exposure to death—which is invisible, premature, always violent. Lassitude is that peculiar “being too much” which is also a failing but in a deficiency in which the *conatus* is not relaxed.⁴⁴⁰

However, in its lack or failure the exercise of the *conatus* is directed outwardly always towards “being for the other,” the “one for the other.”⁴⁴¹ The primordial responsibility or obligation of

⁴³⁷ Ibid, 54.

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid.

the other in the context of the *conatus*, as Levinas states, is a “[...] requisition signified as unexceptional in the form of the *conatus existendi*.”⁴⁴² The *conatus existendi* reflects an obligation and obedience in existing that arises in the inherent lack, as we saw in the early articulations of the *conatus*. The effort of the “passive form of the self in ‘that comes to pass’ (*cela se passé*)”⁴⁴³ is in the exposure of the body in its aging and pain, because in the senescence of the body there is still a process of unfolding and a persistence. Additionally, the failing or the deficiency of the subject in relation to this exposure is also by virtue of the surplus of its identification with itself. We can catch sight of this in the “overflowing of the same at rest” in enjoyment and lassitude. In lassitude and surplus the force *conatus* of the *existendi* is not at rest (relaxed) but necessitated towards the other in a service that is not voluntary.

It is unclear where to pinpoint the force of the *conatus existendi*. Is the force or effort in existing the force of the self as it is necessarily determined to-be-for-the-other in responsibility, as we saw in Levinas’ analysis of fatigue in the *hypostasis*? In that instance there is a refusal or revolt against being and identity that is where the self is. This revolt is not just against itself or its own adversary; it is the opening towards the face, the ethical. Is the necessity and obligation to-be-for-the other co-constitutive with the corporeality of the body as the passive *conatus* of the self from which the unexceptionable requisition of responsibility appears? Where does Levinas place the inversion of the *conatus* in responsibility? Does it happen at the level of the *conatus* in the bare and naked struggle for life or the *conatus essendi* in the persistence of identity? Does not the body dissipate the persistence of my identification with myself or in the basic struggle for life? Or does not the exposure of the body signify the satisfaction or a dissipation of the *conatus* (as opposed to the *conatus essendi*) in enjoying life and in the dwelling of the elemental?

⁴⁴² Ibid, 53.

⁴⁴³ Ibid.

Although the mechanics of Levinas' account of the *conatus* in the form of the *existendi* is not as robust or systematically treated as what we will see in early modern thinkers such as Spinoza and Leibniz, there are salient features we can abstract from the analysis in *Otherwise than Being*. Namely, (1) there is a persistence in existence that is unconcerned (a *dis-interested-esse*) and connected to an intentional ego; (2) that the power or effort of the *existendi* is experienced as an undergoing of the body and, as I believe, belongs to the body itself; and, (3) most significantly (given Levinas' brief induction), the actual force of the *conatus existendi* would be something external to the self but dormant within the self. The force or power of the *existendi* is described as an inspiration or stimulation that is beyond the active ego and something that individuates it in its obligation for-the-other. The *existendi* in Levinas would express both a power of resistance (against the active ego, against identification) and a propelling force in the being-for-the-other—towards non-being, what is exterior to it.

Levinas' peculiar use of this form of *conatus* is not taken up again at all in *Otherwise Than Being* or subsequently. But this brief introduction to it connects his work to the history of philosophy, namely to the ways it show up in Spinoza and Leibniz. As already mentioned above, the *conatus* in Spinoza states that an entity gains its individuation from its existence, its power to be.⁴⁴⁴ The tendency or power of a body, its striving, “to persist in its own being”⁴⁴⁵ is the *essence* of a particular thing.⁴⁴⁶ This is due to the fact that the *essence* of a particular (as the determinate mode) is reflected in the ways in which God is and acts. For Spinoza this means nothing more than God's own self-preservation (its inability to divide or destroy itself) and the way it “opposes

⁴⁴⁴ The power of bodies should be conceived to having a passive and active dimension. The passive power of bodies should be conceptualized in a body's persistence in motion or remaining in a state of rest. The passive power of a body is connected to the body in terms of its temporality, how it is able to act in time. The active power reflects an entities ability to preserve its life as a whole. The ways in which body's act in temporal space does not reflect its essence since it involves its finite time instead of indefinite time.

⁴⁴⁵ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* in *Collected Works*, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), Proposition 6-7 of Book II; Also see, J.A. Cover's “Spinoza's Extended Substance” in *New Rationalist Essays*, ed. Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), 105-133 for reflections on the relation between substance and extended substance.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid*, Proposition 7 of Book III; In terms of the human body, the mind, in Spinoza, cannot will the body in motion or rest, nor can the body determine the mind to think. However, the mind and body together in reference in this power to be reflects the appetite of the human being. The *conatus* of the mind alone is called the Will, Proposition 9 of Book III, 284.

everything which can annul its existence.”⁴⁴⁷ Each mode (which is a modification of an attribute) reflects this power and internal resistance to alteration in a finite and determined way. The body is conceived through extension, as extended substance, and the mind has a determined existence under the attribute of thought. Although the relation between mind and body is complex in Spinoza, it is not a relation of causality but one that reflects a unity. Specifically, the unity between mind and body entails that extended substance exists in so far as there is an idea of a body in the mind. However, in Spinoza, though there are ways in which the body and mind are unified, how they strive together is varied. The term *vis existendi*, the power of the existing body is mentioned at the end of Book III titled the “General Definition of Emotions.”⁴⁴⁸ The power (*vis existendi*) of the body is to account for the force of emotions or the affects in view of the passive state of the mind, when the emotions or the affects that affirms the reality of the body determine the mind to “think one thing rather than another.”⁴⁴⁹ The mind in this passive state (or affected state) has an idea of the body that is confused, inadequate, and also “affirms of the body something that in fact involves more or less reality than was previously the case.”⁴⁵⁰ In the isolation of the *conatus* of the mind and body (only conceptually), the *conatus* of the body is determined by its mutability or variability, where the force to act is “increased or diminished, assisted or checked.”⁴⁵¹ This could be understood in terms of pleasure and pain. We saw a similar attribute given by Levinas. The “more or less reality” that the mind affirms of the body by its affected state is the power, the *vis existendi*, of the existing body.

In contrast to Spinoza’s usage, Leibniz (a devoted reader of Spinoza) defines the *conatus existendi* as the *conatus* of existing or of actual existence of an entity, which is also a passive or given

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid, Proposition 6 of Book III, 283.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid, 319.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid. Also see Deleuze’s lectures on Spinoza, where he will define this power as variation.

sense of the *conatus*. Leibniz will also diverge from Spinoza here because he will conceptualize the passive form of the *conatus* positively in respect to the creation of world and the divine will of God. The only extensive use of the term is found on two occasions in the work of Leibniz, the *Notationes Generales* (1683-85) and “On the Radical Origination of Things” (1697). Both uses of the term signify the role of the Divine mind in the actualization of potential individual *essences*. In Leibniz the account of the *conatus existendi* develops out of the materialist conceptions of the *conatus* given in his earlier works. The *conatus* in general is an urge or a power of a body in motion, to either resist movement or stay in motion; it is a force of resistance and persistence. The *conatus existendi* accounts for the power or the urge as a demand [*exigentia*] and a natural pre-tension to exist, “essence in itself tends to exist.”⁴⁵² The urge to exist in every individual essence is first described in the *Notationes Generales* and acutely developed in “On the Radical Origination of Things.” The pretension to exist is inherent in an essence but does not become fulfilled or brought into fruition by the actual realization of an individual until God decrees it.⁴⁵³ God’s choice to grant existence to an individual essence is based upon the perfection of the essence and its harmonious compatibility with other existing essences. God’s choice in this sense is twofold; it determines the perfection of an essence and also to grant a possible an actual existence. The emphasis made in the *Notationes Generales* is that it is not by an individual’s own power that it comes into existence “but by the decree of God.” The urge to persist is inherent in the individual but its actualization comes from a power not of its own making. Despite the huge metaphysical and theoretical divergences between Leibniz and Levinas, Leibniz’s account illuminates Levinas’ usage.

Leibniz’s account not only diverges in many respects from Spinoza and Hobbes’ trajectory but also brings an alternative image of the self. This is evident even in Leibniz’s later

⁴⁵² G. Leibniz, “On the Radical Origination of Things,” *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. Leroy Loemker, 2nd ed. (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing, 1976), 487.

⁴⁵³ See, *Notationes Generales*, Section 131, Vol. IV in *Die philosophischen Schriften*. 7 vols, 1875–90, 551.

works, where he qualifies the active *conatus* not as the total or plenary power of a living being but as something that is partial to the actual existence of a being; or rather, it is just a particular state or moment in existence. As with the principle of the *conatus* in Spinoza, Leibniz believes that the force of the body cannot be conceptualized without metaphysics, namely not without a notion of substance. Leibniz utilizes the notion of *conatus* in his physics to account for all of the various ways a body can resist others and persist (continue) in a particular state. Aligned with Spinoza and Hobbes, the *conatus* also is the force or power behind action. Leibniz does not emphasize (at least in the text treated) a body's ability to preserve itself. Rather, Leibniz uses the notion of *conatus* to illustrate the process or the unfolding of the acts and a body's efforts to complete a particular action. Furthermore, although *conatus* is extensively treated in his dynamics, it is not a decisive principle in his practical philosophy. This may be due to the fact that *conatus* is not a principle that accounts for human relations or the substantive principle of action as we see in Spinoza. Nevertheless, while it is not treated in depth in this analysis, Leibniz does use the term to account for human actions, since human beings are acting substances. The derivative force (passive of the active) of the human body is its "appetition," which is connected to perception and deliberation, as the sufficient cause of action.⁴⁵⁴ As seen in Hobbes' account in the *Leviathan*, the *conatus* acts as the ignition of the will, which follows from the deliberation process, and comes out of the moment proceeding mental resolve.⁴⁵⁵ In these instances, unlike Hobbes and Spinoza, who initially conceive of the relation between individuals through perpetual antagonism or a disordered state, Leibniz conceptualizes the *conatus* of the will outside chaotic causal interactions. This is because Leibniz's articulation of action already operates within a notion of a pre-

⁴⁵⁴ "On Freedom and Possibility," in *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, (ed.) by Leroy Loemker (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969) 19-20, 537; also see Laurence Carlin's "Leibniz on Conatus, Causation, and Freedom," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, Issue. 85, 2004, 365-379.

⁴⁵⁵ Letter Leibniz to de Volder, *Ibid*, 181-182. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, trans. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 32-34.

established harmony where relations between beings are inter-substance-tive.⁴⁵⁶ The principle of harmony follows through in his articulation of the State and political life in his political writings. There, the goal or ideal of political life should not be security and the right to war but the institutionalization of charity, the well-being of the populace, and its relation to other states.⁴⁵⁷

What we can take from the juxtaposition of Spinoza, Leibniz, and Levinas together is that there is an alternative way to conceive of the *conatus* in terms of a body's passive existence, its will to-be conceptualized within the space of its weakness or vulnerability (as we saw in Levinas) or in its dependency on something exterior to power (as we saw in Leibniz) and, most importantly, an alternative way to conceive of *resistance*. Rethinking *resistance* as a resistance to identification and also something that which arises out of a being's passivity is already a departure from both Spinoza and Hobbes. Hobbes and Spinoza, despite their metaphysical divergences, both agree on the active notion of resistance, which is central to their understanding of the *conatus*. Influenced by Cartesian physics, Hobbes and Spinoza's notion of the *conatus* is the basic recognition that bodies (1) have the power to resist external modification and (2) persist in or preserve their existence. These two reflections are reaffirmed in their practical philosophy as the simple right to exist by one's own means. To the extent that no entity can act towards its own destruction or its opposite, the self-preservation implies an indefinite power over all things in Nature that assist or aid in the preservation of existence. The *existendi* also provides an alternative account of the power of existence through *resistance*, because this particular type of force is not reducible to or can be captured by an activity, intentionality, or an action of a body; it is merely that which "comes to pass." However, in the same vein Levinas will not want to attribute the *existendi* or the inclination to-be-for-the-other as something that is or can be converted to an

⁴⁵⁶ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, trans. E. M. Huggard, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), section 291

⁴⁵⁷ See "Portrait of a Prince," pp. 98-101; "Caesarinus Furstenerius," pp. 118-120; "Memoir for Enlightened Persons of Good Intentions," pp. 108-110 in *Leibniz's Political Writings*, trans. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

“inward need” or “a natural tendency.”⁴⁵⁸ In this sense Levinas separates this notion of responsibility, which for him is always primarily found “in the form of the *being* of this entity,” from any sort of biological or moral account.⁴⁵⁹ The significance of the Levinas’ engagement with the *conatus* is that, despite some readings of his work, he is not attempting to abandon or discount the tradition that follows from these early modern thinkers. Rather, Levinas asserts a different conception of the force or the urge to-be, which decenters us from conceptualizing the force of existence from an intentional consciousness, an *essence*, or the attempt to overcome human deficiency. And making this conceptual and substantial separation between being and existence connects Levinas to a different lineage within the history of Western thought.

But it is important to note, as we already saw in his engagement in *Existence and Existents* with Maine de Biran’s notion of effort, that a passive sense of *resistance* is the base or foundation of effort.⁴⁶⁰ There, Levinas’ account of *resistance* functions as a central principle of his account of the *hypostasis*. There is a struggle in the ego’s self-creation, but it is not tied centrally to an act of identification. The effort or struggle is both a resistance to effort and a persistence of effort at the same time. It was both what Levinas describes as a lurching forward and a falling back. The struggle of the ego’s effort-to-be is a creative force that propels the *self* into an ego but also harbors a resistance to this effort. In *Otherwise Than Being* Levinas describes this in the form of being-despite-oneself in being for-the-other. Here is his most radical revision to the term, because he will posit *resistance* as a revolt within the self that is constant. The revolt against being is also where subject is individuated and assigned as unique, irreplaceable where I am “me and not other,” viz. substitution.⁴⁶¹ Therefore, since resistance is-within-me and against-me and something that is attached to an effort, it cannot reach an opposition to matter or the material,

⁴⁵⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 53.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.* 54-55.

other bodies or even be seen in a socio-political opposition “between a man and a society” for Levinas.

4.4 Conclusion

As will be treated in the final chapter, the difficulty in Levinas’ principle of *resistance* and the *conatus existendi* is moving beyond its treatment in his theoretical philosophy towards his reflections on the political right-to-be, totalitarianism, and total war. The primary task would be to connect the reflections on the *existendi* and responsibility to larger assertions in the political dimension of his work. However, the difficulty in that movement is that the presence of the *existendi* complicates his larger claims on responsibility, especially as responsibility is predominantly understood as an election in Levinas’ larger body of work. If responsibility or being-for-the-other in the form of the *existendi* of the subject is considered primarily to be that which refuses an identity and reflects a dimension of life that exists despite an ego or self (*soi*) — which is seen primarily in the life of the body (its corporeality) in the passivity of aging, in patience, and in pleasure and pain—then how can we also conceptualize our responsibility that seems to be exceptional? The “unexceptionable requisition of responsibility” of the *conatus existendi* renders responsibility usual. How can a requisition of responsibility confer as unexceptional or ordinary but also as elected and a command? As discussed in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*, the uniqueness of responsibility comes from an order of God’s election and is bound to a command.⁴⁶² Both the unique and the usual forms of responsibility appear to be continuous in some respects with the notion of substitution and in others senses the impersonal and self-less responsibility in the form of the *existendi* seems to be opposed to the image of election.

⁴⁶² Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 176. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), xxviii.

The central claim of substitution and of responsibility in general in Levinas is that “I am responsible for the other” and the other’s responsibility.⁴⁶³ Responsibility is asymmetrical and non-reciprocal, and the ways in which I am responsible are irreplaceable. It is that which declares me “me and not other.” But the main difference is that Levinas’ account for responsibility as substitution reflects a departure from Heidegger’s ontology. Substitution could never resemble Heidegger’s Dasein-with or being authentically “bound together,” where each Dasein takes care for the other in such a way that Dasein “frees the Other for himself” in Levinas. There is no equality in responsibility but only a hierarchy of the Other (the height of the Face) which the subject adheres to in its responsibility. In guilt and sacrifice there is not a relation to *someone* in particular who determines a specific communal existence. Communal relations are not tied to responsibility because my responsibility arises in *my* solitude, in my separation from and lack of commonality with the other. And it is for this reason also that *my* responsibility is unique and in the same way something that unexceptionally comes to pass by virtue of *my* existence. In view of the *conatus existendi* my responsibility is as unexceptional as my skin and its corporeality, or what Levinas describes as the “patience of senescence.” Further, it is a requisition (something that is contracted) in the undergoing of the self in lassitude and the “I” in its accusative form where the effort to be is out of the necessity in my obedience to the other. Responsibility conceived on the side of election comes from the height of the Good or God that was appointed before my being, even in its primordial form. The election of my responsibility comes to pass not by virtue of my embodiment or being stuck in skin but something that is in a relation to the Good and me, which assigns me to another.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶³ See full discussion on substitution.

⁴⁶⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina G. Bergo, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 177.

The significance of Levinas' account of the *conatus existendi* is that it expresses responsibility not in the form of an election but because it arises from life or existence in general. However, the tension between these two different dimensions of responsibility remains. Even Levinas, to reflect on his own terminology, always places "or" between these two descriptions of responsibility; responsibility is either an "appeal or election." He acknowledges the even more severe distinction between, on the one hand, the revolt and resistance of the ego in its passivity, and, on the other hand, the inspiration of responsibility. Levinas admits that both of these terms or traits of responsibility "exclude one another," but "they are resolved" in the actual commitment for the other in responsibility.⁴⁶⁵ I contend that the *conatus existendi* in the final analysis reflects the limitations of Levinas' theological and religious leanings. The significance of the *conatus existendi* is its connection to Levinas' notion of *resistance*, which refers to the endurance of existence (existing) instead of endurance *in* existence (or existing or being) as we saw in the *conatus* and *conatus essendi*. The *existendi* of human existence is exposure to its own being where the subject is not for-its-own being but still persists. This acknowledgement of persistence or effort without a self-interested self will not only be valuable to deciphering his political reflections on the totalitarian state and total war. In Levinas politics or political life starts from the perspective of the self-interested individual and functions to resolve the competing interests of individuals within a communal life. At least in Levinas the *conatus existendi* should be conceived as a concept which is against this collective egotism of politics and possibly provides an alternative to the dominant modes of political thinking.

⁴⁶⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 52

Chapter V
Conclusion
The Persistent Political Problem of the *Conatus*:
Totality, Total Mobilization and Total War

In the previous chapter we arrived at Levinas' resolution of the critique of the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi* through the idea of the *conatus existendi* in *Otherwise Than Being*. But as we also saw, the resolution of the *existendi* has been essential to Levinas's earliest works, specifically *Existence and Existents* in the analysis of the *hypostasis*. The *conatus existendi* is that which denotes the endurance of existence (existing) instead of endurance in existence (or existing), as in the animal perseverance of the *conatus* or the perseverance of identity in the *conatus essendi*. The *existendi* of human existence is exposure to one's own being not in terms of its powers or activities in being but in its lassitude, fragility, and weakness. The significance of the reversal of the historical use and understanding of the *conatus* starts from Thomas Hobbes' and Spinoza's interpretation of Rene Descartes' First Law of Motion: specifically, that no entity can endeavor towards its own self-destruction. Here, we can see the exclusion of the question of self-sacrifice, which for Levinas is the exclusion of the ethical. Levinas reverses the determination of the *conatus* in the form of the *existendi*, changing the order from which we think of the end or the *telos* of the exertion of the body and mind. The notion of the *conatus* entails that all mental and physical effort that is directed toward prolongation of the existence of the individual is innately self-interested. Effort in this view is circular; it starts with the individual and returns to him, for his own sake. This for Levinas is a rational proposition where "existence is supreme law." The *conatus* cannot be contested by another rational system but by the divine law of commandment—"thou shall not kill."⁴⁶⁶ The present analysis has shown that Levinas' response to the notion of the *conatus* is

⁴⁶⁶ A quote of an interview of Levinas taken from Richard Bernstein "Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 265.

complex and multifaceted. But, as we have seen, the critique of the *conatus* is not solely steeped in the question of the ethical but also of metaphysics in general.

In view of the ethical dimension of Levinas' critique of the *conatus*, to think against the *conatus essendi* is to think "outside the idea of force" and towards an ethical imperative.⁴⁶⁷ In view of the metaphysical dimension of the critique, the concept of the *hypostasis* and the *existendi* redefined the way to think about force. The *conatus* in the form of the *existendi* articulates an idea of force within the body that (1) (in its inward expression) is a spontaneity that resists any intentional effort, endeavoring, or any act that be conceived through an active will; and (2) (in its outward expression) reflects a force that cannot be wielded against another. The *existendi* cannot become a force against another body in the form of violence or acts of subversion, because it is a force that the self undergoes. The subject is able to-be-for-the-other not in the form of a response (as we seen in the uniqueness of the election of responsibility) but as obedience "prior to any voluntary decision."⁴⁶⁸ In the same respect, the inward expression of the force of *existendi* lies in the exposure and vulnerability of the skin. In this respect, the skin has its own existence, but it is at the same time where the ego dwells. Left to its own accord, the ego's effort to-be and its endeavoring in being will persist uninterrupted, since for Levinas it is an "impenitent perseverance."⁴⁶⁹ But, as Levinas argues with his notion of subjectivity (especially in the discussion of the *existendi*), in *Otherwise Than Being* (1974), the ascendancy of the ego is always suspended or interrupted, not by the face-to-face encounter with the other as maintained in *Totality and Infinity* (1961) but in the lived life of the body, in its passivity and exposure. The aging of the body, its labor, and its exposure to pain and pleasure ruptures the ego's sovereignty by undermining all of its initiatives. However, this perspective of subjectivity does not just show up

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid

⁴⁶⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 54, 148-150.

⁴⁶⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), ix.

after 1970 but was already conceptualized in 1947 in *Existence and Existents* as the force of *resistance* in the *hypostasis*. Just as the *existendi* still denotes a force to-be, it is also a force of resistance that works against the totality of the ego's identification with itself, either in act or thought. Moreover, Levinas redefines the way force is traditionally understood so that force becomes a resistance in consciousness. The resistance to consciousness is an opposition to representation and the act of self-identification by the experience of embodiment, of being in the skin. This, as I will argue, makes the *existendi* indispensable to Levinas' political reflections. Specifically, I will argue in these concluding remarks that the double acknowledgement of persistence without a self-interested self provides an alternative path to recognizing various aspects of Levinas' political thought. The *conatus existendi* will both facilitate and complicate a discussion of the possibility of political resistance against the totality of political order, of the State, which itself expresses the axiology of the *conatus*. Specifically, Levinas' interrogation of politics throughout his work focuses on the problem of total war and mobilization.

In Chapter IV we connected Levinas' analysis of Spinoza to the problem war following from the notion of political right and the *conatus essendi*. The connection between the *conatus* and war is not just a result or outcome of the idea of *conatus*—that there is an inherent tendency in every living being to preserve its existence. Rather, the *conatus* equals war because it articulates being as this sole drive to-be. This is due to (1) the metaphysics of being (its inherent self-interestedness) and (2) the morality or ethics founded on the *conatus*. The latter will be the “good conscience” of freedom and the independence and sovereignty of the “I” as discussed in Chapters II and III, and the former follows the “expression of the being of beings” and the ontological categories from which we define them. War is simultaneously an inevitable state of the *conatus* of being, and war is justified by the idea of the *conatus*. This point is brought to bear in Levinas' vivid descriptions of the mobilization of the individual in the state of war in *Totality and*

Infinity and *On Escape*. There, the politics of war posits the “I” against another in such a way that the perseverance of the individual is almost secondary or obsolete in view of the survival and perseverance of the State, Nation, or a People. As already discussed in Chapter IV, the problem of war will be its annihilation of life and violence and, significantly, the ways in which war assembles individuals to act not only on behalf of the political order but also against himself or herself—what Levinas describes as “self-betrayal.”⁴⁷⁰

Furthermore, each chapter of the analysis pointed to a different dimension of Levinas’ critique of the *conatus*, either in the form of the *hypostasis* in *Existence and Existents*, or in the question of sacrifice in his interrogation of Heidegger’s ontology in *Being and Time*, or in its fullest expression in the conception of the *conatus essendi* in *Otherwise Than Being*. Each aspect develops from a notion of self or existence that at its core refuses self-identification; it is resistance to the to-be that is-within-me and essentially against-me. But the complexity of Levinas’ conception of resistance of the *existendi* is one and the same that we saw in his account of the *hypostasis*, because it is a passivity that is beyond the passive-active dichotomy in the Western tradition. This is due to the fact that it is a passivity that is attached to a non-intentional effort to-be. Since it is an effort that is in itself both has the character of something that, as Levinas describes, is a lurching forward and falling back. The struggle of the effort is a creative force that propels the ego into a *self* but also harbors a resistance to this effort. As already discussed in *Otherwise Than Being*, the passivity and resistance of the *existendi* is of the exposure of the body (senescence) in its aging and pain that denotes the “resistance to assemblage,” to a unity, to an immanence, and to the totality of being. Despite the use of the term itself, the *existendi* does not serve to account for any political resistance or liberation, nor was it ever directly tied to his critique of politics. Resistance, as Levinas notes in *Otherwise Than Being*, can never attain to an opposition to matter or other

⁴⁷⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 21.

material bodies or even appear in a socio-political opposition “between a man and a society.”⁴⁷¹ The task of these concluding remarks is to further connect the question of war to our prior reflections of the *conatus* in Levinas and discuss the significance of critique of the *conatus* within the question of war.

5.1 *On the Problem of War*

The philosophical question par excellence in Levinas is not “Why is there something rather than nothing?” but rather “Why does war exist rather than peace?” Peace cannot merely be the absence of war, and war cannot signify a suspension of peace. War and peace are not a duality. According to Levinas, war and peace become a “simple play of antithesis” once conceived under a political order or what Levinas describes in *Totality and Infinity* as the peace issued by empires.⁴⁷² The peace of empires always rests on war according to Levinas. But to a larger extent the question of war in Levinas has centered upon the ways in which we think of being or existence in general. Western metaphysics has been at the service of war and in its own logical foundation harbors the character of warfare. Here, the problem is not the occurrence of war itself but the *permanent possibility of war*. The critique of the *conatus* and the *conatus essendi* is at the center of this problem of the permanence of war. As we saw, Levinas contends that the concept of the right-to-be—the good conscience of the *conatus essendi*—is the right to self-preservation, namely the right to kill in conflict. And as discussed in Chapter IV, the right to war of the State or commonwealth is founded by the natural right of the *conatus* specifically in the political thought of Spinoza and Thomas Hobbes. There, Spinoza’s idea of the *conatus essendi* was the primary focus. Levinas’ brief and scattered engagement with Spinoza’s ontology catches

⁴⁷¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2010), 54-55.

⁴⁷² Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 22.

sights of the precise equation of the right-to-be with striving.⁴⁷³ In Chapter II we saw that in *On Escape* core notions of being in Western metaphysics, where the emphasis on pure being or being as presence reflects a pursuit of the sufficiency of the ego or the identity of the “I,” ultimately results in the struggle against the stranger [*l'étranger*] or the outsider. In all of these instances of Levinas’ critique of the *conatus*, the struggle for self-preservation would not directly amount to war but would hold war within itself as a possibility. The individual is always on the offensive. And in view of modern warfare the axiology of the *conatus* would render the individual always mobilized for war. Furthermore, the connection between the notion of being, the *conatus*, and the problem of perpetual war in Levinas provides a clearer connection between his comments on war in *Totality and Infinity* and other minor works treated in this analysis. There, the problem of war both in its manifestation in thought and the politics of war are of most concern to Levinas. And it is the propensity towards war on the theoretical and practical level in human affairs that gives the impression that ethics is impossible. As Levinas asks at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, are we not “duped by morality”?⁴⁷⁴

The problem of war is not defined by the actual violence of war—either in the battlefield, in the environment, or in the devastation of civilian territory—but by the ways in which we are conditioned for war and are consequently susceptible to mobilization. The era of the total wars seen in the twentieth century would be but the complete actualization of what appears to be a dynamic that has already been present in our self-identification. The struggle-to-be, the *conatus*, is almost held in potency; we are mobilized for war even in times of peace. This is most evident once one considers the connection to thought and being. The ways in which Levinas saw the iteration of the *conatus* in ontology has been treated in this analysis mainly in view of early and

⁴⁷³ It must be noted that this is not just a Levinasian reflection of Spinoza’s notion of the *conatus*. Spinoza on his own terms acknowledges the ever-present possibility of war and it is constitutive of political life. See Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise* in *Collected Works*, ed. Michael Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 697-698.

⁴⁷⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 21.

late modern philosophy and contemporary philosophy. As we saw in Bergson, the concept of life or pure and naked being is defined by its “struggle for the future.” The task of pure being is its endurance and conservation not of bodily life (and all its various articulations) but of the prolongation of existence proper, against its fatality. And the notion of the “heroic act” in Levinas’ descriptions of bourgeois philosophy, Rousseau, and the Romantics—as well as in the struggle to fulfill one’s own existence—could be hypothesized to be *towards* or *against* existence itself. Levinas will later say that the “modern intelligence is that which saw, in Auschwitz, the outcome [*aboutissement*] of law and obedience [is that] in totalitarianism, fascist and nonfascist, of the twentieth century.”⁴⁷⁵ This modern intelligence flows from the notion of the heroic act. However, the character of war and the struggle to-be has a more extensive place in the history of Western thought for Levinas. This was most clearly expressed in his reading of the Presocratics, especially of Parmenides and Heraclitus.⁴⁷⁶ Parmenides and Heraclitus signify the two major opposing dimensions of Western thought, the prior representing a claim to the inherent unity of all things or being and the latter the discontinuity or becoming of all things.

According to Levinas’ reading these two Greek thinkers are both philosophers of totality. The totality in the unity of being and thought in Parmenides will differ from Heraclitus in so far as the unanimity of thought in Parmenides will, as Silvia Benso points out, deny “all possible ties for proximity with the Other [...] in favor of mysticism of representation prescribing either a unity in the object [...] or unity in the subject [or the] conformation of the object to the subject.”⁴⁷⁷ Here, as Levinas’ mentioned in *Otherwise Than Being*, war is the drama or production that follows from being’s unity or *essence*. Heraclitus’ philosophy of flux, more unambiguously,

⁴⁷⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “From the Carefree Deficiency,” in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 47.

⁴⁷⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 21. Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6-7, 60-61.

⁴⁷⁷ Silvia Benso, “The Breathing of Air: Pre Socratic Echoes in Levinas” in *Levinas and the Ancients*, ed. Silvia Benso and Brian Schroeder (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2008), 10.

prescribes an ontology of war or legitimacy of constant strife. The other is not merely excluded according to a Heraclitian scheme but becomes an enemy combatant.⁴⁷⁸ The significance of Heraclitus' fragments is that they illustrate what is already obvious for Levinas even in his earliest works and what is shown throughout the present analysis of the *conatus*, which is that "being reveals itself as war to philosophical thought, that war does not only affect it as the most patent fact, but as the very patency, or the truth of the real."⁴⁷⁹ These remarks in the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* on the expression of pure being in war bring us back to the discussion in 1935 in *On Escape*. Pure being as the model for existence not only prescribes a relation between Being and being that results in a struggle to-be or against being, but, even more to the point, a struggle between beings. Pure being affirms the struggle in being and against beings.

It is important to recognize how the problem of the mobilization of war is distinct from the realities of warfare in Levinas. When Levinas speaks of the warlike character of Western metaphysics, he is not speaking of the experiences of warfare itself but an aptitude for war. The battles in war are always beyond (transcend) its deployments. In other words, the production of war—from the declaration of the enemy to the mobilization of citizens and resources—is distinct from the actual fighting in war. The combat between adversaries is distinct from the antagonisms of and the logical opposition "of the *one* and the *other*" found in the mobilization of war and the totality of politics. For Levinas, soldiers in the heat of the battle *refuse* "to belong to a totality, refuse community, refuse law; no frontier stops one being by another, nor defines them."⁴⁸⁰ An existent at war affirms itself as a self and outside of a whole. In war every man is truly for himself as a self. The relation between beings at war is determined by their singularity and isolation from another instead of a self-same relation of a totality. They are as Levinas describes "not in touch

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 21.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid, 222.

with one another,” but they maintain a relation to each other “since in war the adversaries seek out one another.”⁴⁸¹ And, even more so, the combat itself transcends the totality that produced it, since the concrete experience of fighting in war holds the possibility of an adversary preventing or thwarting the calculations, tactics, and strategies laid prior to the battle. Political life in this respect does not decide or determine war—“no logistics guarantees victory.”⁴⁸² And it is for this reason the warrior always runs a risk, according to Levinas; his existence and the battle itself lies at the limit “of a supreme confidence in oneself and a supreme risk.”⁴⁸³ This is also due to the nature of violence itself. Violence is indeterminate and cannot be yielded since it operates exterior to a totality. Nevertheless, the absence or exclusion of violence in favor of a totality does not usher in peace. The fear of a violent death is not the condition of peace in a commonwealth, as it is for Thomas Hobbes.⁴⁸⁴ Peace, as Levinas describes it in *Totality and Infinity*, can only be brought to bear by “beings capable of war.”⁴⁸⁵

The significance of this analysis in Levinas should not be confused with a sort of glorification of warfare or rationalization of violence. Rather, Levinas’ descriptions of war should make us ask further about the nature of mobilization. In the battlefield there is a relation to the other (alterity), and it is an experience that breaches the totality of politics. Most significantly in the battlefield, as Levinas explains in *Totality and Infinity*, the subject becomes a singular entity in its transcendence of totality. Levinas describes the soldier as identifying “itself not by its place in the whole, but by its self.”⁴⁸⁶ Even in the most violent state of being, transcendence is possible. These descriptions of war should be conceived to be a direct contrast to the mobilized individual who (as he describes in *On Escape*) does not even have the “power to slip by unaware [*passer à côté*]

⁴⁸¹ Ibid. 223.

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁴ It is important to see that Levinas’ descriptions of the state of war break from liberal political thought starting from Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. The state of war is the condition for peace for Levinas, and for Hobbes only the sovereign and the creation of common wealth can issue peace.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, 222.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

de soi].”⁴⁸⁷ The problem of mobilization is not violence in the strictest sense or even coercion but a total and blind obedience to being [*asservissement*] and, more specifically, to an identity in being. Whether it be obedience to a Nation, State, a specific identity, or even the political forms of fascist or nonfascist totalitarianism or democratic regimes, the individual is susceptible to be mobilized for the purposes of the political order. Levinas explains this state of mobilization from two different points of view. From the first point of view we caught sight of Levinas descriptions of the mobilized individual in *On Escape*. As discussed in Chapter II, the individual sacrifices himself to the universal order of politics, not as a result of an act of violence or coercion, but as an outcome of his individualism, his identity as an individual. The individual is autonomous and independent but does not possess himself. On the grounds from which individual’s own sovereignty is established, the sufficiency, independence, and domination of the “I” becomes that from which he gives himself over to politics. It is the final destination of his being and becoming. This for Levinas reflects what he describes as the “the poignant consciousness of a final reality” of pure being and of a temporal existence that has the “inexpressible flavor of the absolute.”⁴⁸⁸ The non-mobilized individual in the same respect is caught up in the mechanisms of political order, powerless escape, or hiding in the margins of life or society. In Levinas this reflects the “world-weariness” of contemporary politics, but it is also an experience of being trapped and being “held fast [*rivê*]” by the game of politics, which reflects the permanent quality of our presence.

The second treatment of the notion of mobilization is found in *Totality and Infinity*. There, Levinas begins the analysis with the reality that war and politics project upon beings. There, the descriptions are continuous with his descriptions ten years prior. War (as distinct from warfare) and politics instill the reality of pure being, of pure presence; it is the truth or “patency” of the

⁴⁸⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 52.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

real. War is an ontological event; it does not just happen (as a chance occurrence) but is produced and is “produced as the pure experience of pure being.”⁴⁸⁹ Levinas clarifies that “the ontological event that takes form in this black light is a casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity, a mobilization of absolutes, by an objective order from which there is not escape.”⁴⁹⁰ However, what is emphasized here in these descriptions, more than we saw in *On Escape*, is that war and politics (politics as war) harbors the element of self-betrayal. The obedience to being or politics is that which disavows us from who we are or more specifically of our substance, our commitments, and our ability to act, since it makes the individual carry “out actions that will destroy every possibility of action.”⁴⁹¹ Individuals are reduced to being bearers of force, which “command them unbeknown to themselves.”⁴⁹² The individual is alienated, without an identity, and does not possess or yield his own force. Rather, he holds force in a sort of potency or suspended state until he is ready to be called upon (called forth) by the State to yield it against the foreigner, the enemy (domestic or international), or the opposing political party. The *conatus* of an individual being no longer individuates the individual but accents the State or political order. At this level, the *conatus* does not operate as an axiology or hidden value within an ontology of freedom but is an active political principle that organizes the State itself and even more the interactions between States.⁴⁹³ This is why Levinas says in the *The Times of Nations*, in reference to the war of Gog and Magog in Rav Yosef’s writings, that the subservience to a political order evokes and entails that there is never just a war “but *the* war: total war.”⁴⁹⁴ However, the significant difference of Levinas’ account from twentieth-century political thinkers

⁴⁸⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2005), 21

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid.

⁴⁹² Ibid.

⁴⁹³ For further discussion on this point reference Robert Bernasconi’s discussion on perpetual war in “Perpetual Peace and the Invention of War” in *Philosophy and the Return of Violence*, ed. Nathan Eckstrand (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011). The notion of total war attributed that to the lineage of the political thinking of Kant, especially his notion of perpetual peace.

⁴⁹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 83.

such as Ernst Junger, Carl Schmitt, and, in many respects, Hannah Arendt, who all recognize the state of contemporary politics to be conditioned by the total mobilization of war, is that his depiction of political life is not conceptualized as a historical development: it is a permanent state of affairs.

It must be noted that Levinas does not advocate a wholesale rejection of politics, nor can he be considered a pacifist in a formal sense. There is no such thing as legitimate violence in Levinas, but there are necessary forms of violence. This is violence necessary for the establishment of Justice; there need to be courts, judges, and institutions in a State to administer it.⁴⁹⁵ All of these aspects of the political exist differently outside of the order of responsibility issued by the face and always run the risk of violence and suppression. Justice in this sense will always fall short on how much I can *be* for the other. However, Levinas also will distinguish between a legitimate and illegitimate State. A legitimate State is one that starts from the recognition of the ethical, of the face of the other, and what he describes as interpersonal asymmetrical relations.⁴⁹⁶ Although peace is not guaranteed in the legitimate form of the State, the State must always return to the original contract with the other. The function of the *conatus* of the State, its self-determination, is never legitimate on its own but is to be judged on how much it adheres to its ethical origins. For Levinas “politics, left to itself, has its own determinism”; therefore, it always needs to be counteracted and correspond to the ethical.⁴⁹⁷ Levinas maintains the insights in his understanding of the function of the law or legislation in a State. A true or excellent democratic State has a “ceaseless deep remorse of justice,” leaving the law unfinished and open for revision. Levinas elaborates: “[...] it attests to an ethical excellence and its origin in

⁴⁹⁵ See, (1983) “Philosophy, Justice, and Love” in *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 167.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid; Levinas will liken the illegitimate State to a State where interpersonal relations are impossible, which for Levinas is an original determinism of the State itself and without ethical recourse is a totalitarian State.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid, 206-7.

goodness, from which, however, it is distanced—always a bit less perhaps—by the necessary calculation imposed by a multiple sociality, calculations constantly starting over again.”⁴⁹⁸ Once a State forgets its origin and loses its gift of “inventing new forms of human coexistence,” it runs the risk of destroying itself or falling into ideologically determined political life.⁴⁹⁹ Moreover, in view of the analysis, the force of *resistance* of the *existendi* and the *hypostasis* may not be able to prescribe a political program or ideology. The rejection or refusal of a unity is already at play (as it were) at a subatomic level of the subject in the *conatus existendi* and in the ego’s birth in the *hypostasis*. *Resistance* is in the subject’s undergoing, and it lies within its physical and physiological makeup. And in an abstract sense, the subject does not need to take on an oppositional ideology but merely to uphold his or her own subjectivity (subjective experiences), especially in its being responsible for the other. Resistance starts with the subject in its being-for-the-other. The *existendi* is not just an undergoing but a contract or requisition of being-for-another; it is something that is demanded from the outside but unfolds within. That which draws up to another propels us to act in behalf on the other in our response to their needs, in sacrifice, and substitution.

The mechanics of Levinas’ account of the *conatus* in the form of the *existendi* is not as robust or systematically treated as in early modern thinkers such as Hobbes, Spinoza and Leibniz, but there are salient features we can abstract from the analysis in *Otherwise than Being*: namely, (1) that there is a persistence in existence that is unconcerned (a *dis-interested-esse*) and unconnected to an intentional ego; (2) that the power or effort of the *existendi* is experienced as an undergoing of the body and, as I believe, belongs to the body itself; and (3), most significantly, that the force of the *conatus existendi* would be something external to the self but dormant within the self. The force of the *existendi* is described as an inspiration or stimulation that is beyond the

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

active ego and something that individuates it in its obligation of being for-the-other. The *existendi* in Levinas would express both a power of resistance (against the active ego, against identification) and a propelling force in the being-for-the-other.

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VITA

Aminah Hasan studied political theory, law, and American history at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts (class of 2008). Although the majority of her undergraduate education was dedicated to the study of politics, her studies dramatically changed after her engagement with twentieth-century philosophers, such as Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and most significantly, Emmanuel Levinas in her final years by John Drabinski (Amherst College). And post undergraduate years by Brad Elliot Stone (Loyola Marymount University). Her engagement with Levinas' body of work sparked a passion for philosophy and theology. She received her Master's degree from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California (class of 2011). There, she was able to expand her knowledge of the history of philosophy and engage with numerous ancient, medieval, and modern thinkers who would later shape her approach to Western metaphysics. Her Master's thesis focused on the problem of divine foreknowledge in Avicenna's *Metaphysics of the Healing*. Her doctorate education at Pennsylvania State University allowed her to utilize her diverse philosophical background and return to questions of politics, ethics, and metaphysics in Levinas and modern philosophy under the guidance of Robert Bernasconi, Leonard Lawlor, and Emily Grosholz. Aminah is currently working on numerous publications that continue her present work on Levinas and other subjects in early modern thought.