

NOTHING REFUTED: LEVINAS AND BERGSON

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I. INTRODUCTION

Emmanuel Levinas' *Time and The Other* sees the emergence of an *il y a* ("there is") which testifies against the existence of a pure nothingness. Juxtaposed against Heidegger's notion of nothingness intimately tied to an I it becomes clear that Levinas, by positing *il y a*, does so in an attempt of refutation. In this essay another side to nothingness will be discussed which brings out the elements immanent in Levinas inspired by Henri Bergson.¹ In several passages throughout the text Levinas refers to Bergson, some times affirming and other times denying the methodology of his philosophy of time. By looking at the notions of *il y a*, *hypostasis* and time as relation in Levinas a comparative study will be made contrasting these concepts to a philosophy of time depending on the subject as seen in Bergson. What will emerge are points of similarity; especially seen in the methodology applied to imagine nothingness, other points diverting from each other will nevertheless become more prevalent. Most significantly the issue of time as either relying on the subject of a solitary self, guilty of solipsism, as in Bergson, or as time seeping out of a relation between a self and an other. These themes will be discussed with the aim to show that although Levinas is indebted to the theory of time developed by Bergson there nevertheless occurs a break between the two. That break seems to arise out of what Levinas might have regarded as a premature conclusion made by Bergson, disabling him from seeing the possibilities of time as relational.

¹ Robin Durie argues that although Levinas engaged with the phenomenology of Heidegger the philosophy of time by Bergson exerted just as much influence, if not more, on Levinas' conception of time. See more: Robin Durie, "Wandering Among Shadows: The Discordance Of Time in Levinas and Bergson," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48:4 (2010): 371-392.

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2. LEVINAS: *IL YA* AND I

A. *There Is Above Nothing*

The *il y a* is made manifest by the curiosity of imagining an existing without existents (a life without subjects). This curiosity leads Levinas to imagine all existing things destroyed and asks if there would not remain something rather than nothing.

The absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence.²

Following this description of the *il y a* it becomes evident what it might resemble. The images born out of it are more felt than perceived, such like the sensation of the silence after a falling tree, or the pause after the endnote played by a symphony. In other words the *il y a* resembles a suspension. Within that suspension nothing can move which is substantial, excluding the existents from existing. Yet precisely because of this suspension there remains a field of unknowing, what Levinas calls “anonymity”, which defines the *il y a*. No longer a place where existents move, the *il y a* remains filled with a “murmur of silence” giving it a sense of personality which a sterile existence would not have.³

What is one to make of this seemingly contradictive claim? How can something be anonymous and personal simultaneously, one seems to cancel out the other. The contradiction, however, resolves itself via the conception Levinas has of anonymity as determinate as opposed to the more common-place conception of anonymity as indeterminate within philosophy. In so doing the *il y a* can become a place which is determined in virtue of being “something” yet remain anonymous due to the fact that nothing is contained within it. In other words its suspension remains anonymous while determined through its nature of empty existing.

Recovering from the imagined example of *il y a* as destruction Levinas posits the same problem but with a concrete existence. That existence is insomnia. As *il y a* has

² Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and The Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 46.

³ *Ibid.*, 48.

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been described so far it resembles a never-ending state. A never-ending state literally speaking since the thought was to annihilate beings from existence. By bringing up insomnia the phenomenon of a never-ending can be made visceral. Through it the subject ceases to be itself because of its inability to rest. Levinas calls this the “vigilance without end.”⁴ Because it has no end beginning is lost as well. The insomnia takes over the subject and annihilates it without removing the suspension of itself. It also means that within it no time can exist. Having been taken over by insomnia temporality vanishes and a state of eternity has instead taken its place.

This goes to show that not only can we not think of nothingness in terms of a void, but rather as a something, we also have a physical example of how that suspension would actually be felt. Levinas’ use of insomnia not only strengthens his claim that nothingness cannot exist but it also puts the question of nothingness in direct connection to us as living beings. Even if philosophically speaking the problem of nothingness could engender a plurality of theories it does not make me as a living subject part of those possible theories. Speaking of nothingness and its absence is something we live through everyday, making our lives more or less endurable. The intuition Levinas thus has of positing a something rather than a nothing elucidates the very human struggle of how to deal with nothingness to come – death. Nevertheless, the mere positing of *il y a* does not explain, or take into consideration, our being part of existence. In other words our conscious lives.

B. *The I Is Conceived*

In the notion of *il y a* all we have so far is a presence, or what I have called a suspension of beings. The existing is held in a time-less manner because it is not filled with any existents (subjects). In the final paragraph on the *il y a* Levinas expresses the concern of how consciousness is robbed from its activity within the *il y a* but also practically in insomnia.⁵ It thus becomes clear that if an existent is not part of *il y a* it must break with existing by retrieving its consciousness. This move is characterized by Levinas as *hypostasis*.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 51.

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The mere fact of ‘waking up’ to an existing does not necessarily imply that the existent knows who or what it is. It has no identity yet, or rather, it does not know the relation in which it stands to the *il y a*, to a pure existing. Suspension being the characteristic of *il y a* could also be represented as a “field of forces” as Levinas calls it. *Hypostasis* is the very undulation seen within that field made by the existent trying to become fully conscious. Does this undulation present a time? No, all *hypostasis* does is bring the existent into existing, it is thus a beginning. But a beginning without temporality.⁶ Attuning it towards a birth of the I.

Yet this I which is supposed to be born out of *il y a* through *hypostasis* is not an I in the sense that ‘it is’. Denying the I substance, spirituality, even the belonging to any category of being and nothingness all he can assert of it is that it is “a mode of existing itself, that properly speaking it does not exist.”⁷ This notion put forward by Levinas leaves one rather puzzled. Emerging as an I, as an existent, is something that is ‘in-between’. It is neither fully awake, but neither is it any longer stuck in the state of insomnia. The *hypostasis* is a “present” but not in the temporal sense, just as the I is not a real existent.

Beyond this I lies the analysis Levinas makes of how it comes to fully apprehend itself. The undulation, or the rupture, of consciousness becomes the starting point for an investigation of the self made by the self in which it discovers its own body and the enchainment it has towards it. Due to its materiality of the body it cannot but be occupied with itself. Because of this self-occupation time cannot break through to the I since its own experience is eternal in its own vanity. Not until an encounter with the other, through love and erotics, can the I forget about its own worries.⁸ This, means Levinas, is the only true entrance given for time to have a real value. No longer occupied with itself, the I, or the existent, can step out to meet both Time and the Other. Levinas adds, as a final analysis, that due to the erotic nature of love the existents come into contact with their own fecundity and through it a responsibility emerges towards the Other in that the attention and responsibility reserved for the I turns into an attention and responsibility for the You.⁹

⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁷ Ibid., 53.

⁸ Ibid., 84-90.

⁹ Ibid., 90-94.

3. BERGSON: NOTHING WITHOUT TIME AND SYMPATHY

A. *Time Against Nothing*

I already mentioned that a similar process to what Levinas imagines nothingness to be takes place in Bergson. On the question of what nothingness would be Bergson uses the same example of a complete destruction of everything we know. The incentive to do so is, however, different from Levinas. Although Bergson sees that the problem of nothingness is a deeply philosophical problem he notes that it has very rarely been investigated thoroughly despite the fact that the very questioning of nothingness tends to be the starting point for any philosophical enquiry.¹⁰ Attention is turned towards why our want for a principle of nothingness so strongly exists. Considering that we do exist, why is it that time and time again questions regarding why something rather than nothing exist? It seems, for Bergson, to be the case that whenever we imagine something full we cannot but imagine it in a state in which it was first empty. Likewise the canvas onto which the painting is made, was primarily a blank nothingness. This mundane conception of nothingness permeates the way we think of nothing philosophically.

Bergson wants to dig further on the issue by searching for a possible mechanism of thought that lies beneath this kind of reasoning. The fact that when I say that I imagine nothing to exist seems to entail two kind of non-existences, an external and an internal. Either I imagine the outer world gone, or I imagine myself gone but I never seem able to imagine both gone at the same time.¹¹ Because of the tension between internal and external Bergson turns towards the possible annihilation of being, not as an image, but as an idea.¹² An idea thus considered seems potent enough to have the power of complete annihilation. In other words, it becomes a theory of destruction, much like the theory of Levinas.

Thus a line seems to be drawn between imagination and idea in Bergson, while in Levinas the imagination alone suffices for a possible destruction of existing. It does, however, seem to me that Bergson's idea is analogous to what Levinas' imagination,

¹⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell, (New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 275.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 278-279.

¹² *Ibid.*, 280.

at least in this particular case. Analogous due to the way Bergson imagines non-existence. By placing himself at the center of existence he remains transfixed within it, i.e. by actually imagining all the senses he has to shut down one by one he still cannot avoid the feeling of a self subsisting, hence everything is not annihilated.¹³ He, in other words puts himself at the center of that idea, much like Levinas puts all existents in direct relation to an annihilation of the existing. The outcome, however, differs. Levinas cannot imagine himself in the *il y a*, nor any other existents, while Bergson positions himself in the center making the I the guiding principle for a nothingness to not exist.

Nothingness as idea is nevertheless not the last claim Bergson makes about the nature of nothingness. Methodologically it seems that we do not merely think a non-existent, but that it rather relates to a suppression and substitution of something. In other words, if I think something I also imagine it to exist.¹⁴ Yet what are the conditions for us to imagine something in reality? Time and Space. This becomes the turning point for Bergson since, if thinking of nothingness is a suppression of that thought, raising the substitution of a something, which we posit as a no-thing, it then shows that what we are thinking of must also exist in reality. That reality is defined in Time and Space, hence nothingness must pertain to these categories too. But to do so would be absurd due to the contradiction involved of nothingness being placed within either. It thus becomes clear that Time acts as a presence which we cannot deny and hence reveals itself to the subject and refutes the notion of nothingness.

B. *Sympathy*

We have already seen that the Levinasian outlook on time involves another, but before that what was characterized as not being time was the beginning of the I in *hypostasis*. It is exactly at this point where the Bergsonian time begins, namely in the discovery of the I and as positing time within it. Or, more accurately a movement of sympathy with oneself which results in the discovery of time.

All experience and existence is for Bergson contained in the subject. Because of this there can be a development either towards a lower level of understanding where

¹³ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 285: Bergson relates this to the refutation of ontological arguments, put forward by Kant.

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pure necessity of pragmatic concepts prevail, or a higher level of understanding might occur if the subject manages to go beyond practicality into a dimension of fully experiencing its own life. That life is contained in consciousness where the time of the subject is revealed. The reason for positing the consciousness of the subject as the center of time is brought about when he says “[w]ith no other thing can we sympathize with intellectually, or if you like, spiritually.”¹⁵ What is to be discovered by the help of sympathy is the I experiencing its own time. The nature of that time becomes intricate for Bergson since we are hindered by our linguistic terms from speaking about it temporally and always end up in terms of space. It does however make clear that because of our solitude of being all we can judge time after is ourselves. Bergson does not give any concrete reason for this other than that “[t]he consciousness we have of our own person on its continual flowing, introduces us to the interior of a reality on whose model we must imagine others.” Where the continuous flowing here refers to the time of the subject.

It is precisely at this point that Levinas comes to a break with Bergson and his conception of time. As is clearly stated the Bergsonian view of time is modelled on a completely solipsistic view of the world.¹⁶ There is no space for anyone else, and time is not even given as a relation, but is individually plotted as an original schema for the discovery of plural durations. Also implied by the time of Bergson is the renewal of creation with, by and through the subject itself, it is in no need of otherness nor does it have to reflect on its own end. However, with regards to one’s own end (death) it remains ambiguous as to how Bergson really conceived this. In his explanation of duration/time he notes that we come to know it in virtue of growing old.¹⁷ Without time enveloping our existence we would not know that we were growing old, which we know we do. Does Levinas have anything to reply to that? I believe he does, since for Bergson the comment on growing old comes out of a point in existence which Levinas considers “hypostatized time”.¹⁸ In other words, the end which Bergson sees as growing old is for Levinas not enough since it makes an immediate existent out of hypostasis. Remembering that the hypostasis for Levinas

¹⁵ Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind: An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison, (New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 136.

¹⁶ Levinas, *Time*, 64-66: A discussion on reason, knowledge and solipsism.

¹⁷ Bergson, *Creative Mind*, 159.

¹⁸ Levinas, *Time*, 59.

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was only attenuation towards the beginning of the I, in Bergson this attenuation becomes actual time.

4. CONCLUSION

Does the trap Levinas wants to avoid in Heidegger resurface in Bergson? Yes and no. What should be made clear by now is that the radical claim Levinas makes in regarding time as possible only through a relation with the Other has to rule out any form of solipsism. In the case of Heidegger, this appears, i.e. that the subject is alone in facing nothingness. While for Bergson, whom we have discussed, solipsism occurs mainly due to the sympathy one holds in regard to the I. By gripping at the rails of our own intellect Bergson simply cannot give in to any relational status with an other-ness due to the ambiguity that would involve. For, indeed, ambiguity is crawling on the pages of Levinas' texts. Ambiguity in the sense of a mystery which we have to leave be. It is also on the point of mystery which I would want to end this discussion.

From what has been said about Levinas' conception of the *il y a*, *hypostasis*, the I and finally the relation with the Other whence Time can enter, a thread can be traced, that thread has to do with the idea of time as community. The sheer refusal of positing time in the self-occupation of the I, a suggestion intuitively plausible, seems to point towards a conception, not only of philosophy, but of life, which is lifted on the wings of communality and together-ness. This together-ness is different from a mundane use of it, and does not denote a coming together of people, both familiar and unfamiliar, but of a together-ness which starkly emphasizes the un-knowable element of each and every one of us: the mystery of the Other.¹⁹ The act of assuming to know someone would dissolve that mystery and acts, for Levinas, as a possessive power devoid of relating.²⁰

Of the very same reason, that of power annihilating mystery, it seems to have been impossible for Levinas to reconcile the idea of personhood being the originator of time. As in Bergson we saw this personhood take hold resulting in a world in which the I operates as a governor of forces. Those forces being primarily felt through the flowing of one's own person.

¹⁹ Ibid., 86.

²⁰ Ibid., 82-83.

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Through this analysis my aim has been to show that the elements employed by Bergson have not been wasted time according to Levinas. What Levinas seem to be lacking in Bergson is only the premature end of his investigations, disabling him from moving beyond the person into a wider contextual field of Otherness.

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