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**Heidegger, Levinas: Being a Face in the Real world.**

**Introduction**

 The universe is full of beings. Throughout the history of philosophy and of human thought many have sought ways to articulate this multiplicity and unity of being. The result, in western philosophy at least, was the birth of Metaphysics in general, and Ontology in particular. In the past, the discourse on being became very abstract such that it had no resemblance to being as encountered every day. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), set out to re-orient being towards the lived experience. He called his being Da-sein, which literally means “being there”. Heidegger emphasized that being as expressed in Da-sein lacked authenticity and was plagued with anxiety. To correct the defective Da-sein, Heidegger proposed taking Da-sein back to its origin.

 Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), too set out to bridge the gap between the being of ontology and the being of the lived experience. Levinas went further than Heidegger by en-fleshing Da-sein. In the end Levinas developed a philosophy of the Face. The Face for him was where beings met. To be in the world then was to be a Face in interaction. This interaction is sufficient-reason for the self-expression of the Face on both sides of the encounter. With this encounter, the Face has a choice, either to withdraw or to stand ground and throw itself out there.

 In this, paper I will interpretatively juxtapose Heidegger’s Da-sein and Levinas’ Face. I will affirm the work of these two philosophers and draw my own inferences from their conclusions. The specific inferences that I will draw are:

 (a) To be is to be in contradiction.

 (b) There is a cosmic sympathy among beings.

 (c) Everyday being is infinite and Transcendent.

 I am aware that there was an active dialogue between Heidegger and Levinas, with the latter taking exception to the political implications of the former’s philosophy. In this paper, I will stick to elements of their thoughts from which I to draw specific conclusions.

**1. Da-sein**

 Martin Heidegger declared that being is the most universal and emptiest concept that resists every attempt at definition.[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore, the only intelligible way to discuss being was being as Da-sein. Da-sein, though spoken of in the singular, discloses itself as plurality of entanglement in the being of its everydayness.[[2]](#footnote-2) Heidegger maintained that traditional Metaphysics is nonsense and that in studying being we must both start and remain in the context of everyday human life. Heidegger objects to traditional Metaphysics because it distracts from what is truly important i.e. the way reality reveals itself to us.[[3]](#footnote-3) Heidegger set out to recapture the sense of awe which being brings. We are awed when we contemplate the fact that there is *something* and not *nothing*. The question of why there is something rather than nothing is not meant to solicit an answer, but is meant to solicit an openness to being.[[4]](#footnote-4) Da-sein is the locus through which phenomena disclose themselves to us.[[5]](#footnote-5) Da-sein is also the horizon within which something like being in general becomes intelligible. In his analysis of Da-sein, Heidegger focuses solely on what discloses itself to us in experience. Heidegger avoids going beyond the everyday experience of Da-sein, denying that there is anything which stands behind Da-sein.[[6]](#footnote-6)With this declaration, Heidegger rejects the Cartesian ‘I’ which, according to him, is treated as an entity preceding experience.[[7]](#footnote-7) Da-sein, according to Heidegger, is firmly embedded in the world. In other words, Da-sein’s only essence is existence.

**(a) Da-sein, Anxiety and Desire**

 Throughout his work, Heidegger discusses anxiety as the condition of the initial manifestation of Da-sein. Anxiety comes from the fact Da-sein is an authentic potentiality for being a self. The problem is that instead of becoming a self, Da-sein has always fallen away from itself and fallen prey to the world. Falling prey to the world means Da-sein is absorbed in being-with-one-another as it is guided by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is what was identified above as entanglement. In other words, because Da-sein finds itself entangled is the beginning of its anxiety because it finds itself in an inauthentic environment as it were. In this way, anxiety and authenticity are related.[[9]](#footnote-9) Anxiety, for Heidegger, is experienced when the self confronts itself. For him the experience of anxiety reveals that becoming oneself means to be essentially related to oneself as an impossibility. To exist authentically then would be to relate to oneself as a sheer being-possible.[[10]](#footnote-10) Therefore freedom points towards a kind of completion of existence, a being whole, or unity with oneself. [[11]](#footnote-11) The anxious self finds itself caught between two points “…an inescapable finitude or radical unfreedom in which the self’s ability to be itself comes to or is at an end.[[12]](#footnote-12) The self is faced with unfreedom at two crucial points, first, behind where the self is subject to a moment of genetic limitation. This is the given of Da-sein’s being which Heidegger calls Da-sein’s *thrown facticity*. Second, *ahead* which is the point of the possibility of death.[[13]](#footnote-13) In this way, Heidegger conceives of existence as emerging out of and moving towards nothing because of the two crucial points of limitation and death.[[14]](#footnote-14) Anxiety then is a self-realizing that it is caught in between two nothingnesses.[[15]](#footnote-15) The self so caught in between two nothingnesses experiences a profound unfreedom.[[16]](#footnote-16) In *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests that anxiety discloses that Da-sein’s possibility is impossibility and that Da-sein would be free if it is delivered-over to itself precisely as nothing to be.[[17]](#footnote-17) In other words, Da-sein would become free with a realization that it is capable of bearing its nothingness and that it is able to stand-under the burden of its *ownmost* impossibility.[[18]](#footnote-18) The failure to be free then comes from the self’s inability to look out of itself, instead it retreats to the familiar, positing itself as the ground of existence. As mentioned earlier, the self is caught between its original ex-nihilo and a self-created telos. Unfortunately, this telos is interrupted by death.[[19]](#footnote-19) The impossibility and the possibility co-exist. Heidegger’s Da-sein is therefore caught between nothing and everything. I think this extreme dichotomy is mitigated in Levinas’ Face which is Da-sein humanized. In Heidegger’s Da-sein, it seems to me, there is no room for human qualities like love or sympathy because we do not find a break in the circle of the Da-sein’s relation to itself. For this reason he ignores love or desire in the structure of Da-sein.[[20]](#footnote-20) In addition, Heidegger rejects the language of desire because “… he believes it to be irremediably objectifying—in other words, inescapably linked to the philosophy of substance and the logic of perfection”*.*[[21]](#footnote-21)Put in other words, there is no space into which Da-sein could grow. The very being of Da-sein is “not yet” and nothing more. It is precisely the nothing that calls forth Da-sein to authenticity in the phenomenon of conscience. [[22]](#footnote-22)

 The inability of Heidegger to open up Da-sein to some form of desire makes him sound like his predecessors whose ontology was based on the concept of being as such, a being that retreats into something (they would be uncomfortable calling being a *thing*) unrecognizable. Inauthenticity or anxiety could be the first condition of the self but I believe this does not necessarily leave the self with the extreme choices of nothing and infinite possibilities. It is precisely by putting the Face on Da-sein as a self that the self can take tentative steps to reach out to other “selves” that occupy the entanglement of existence. In other words, I am saying that Da-sein as a self can become more concrete and Levinas, in my opinion tries to do that. I think a bit of self-love (or desire) holds the self together, the opposite being an ontological annihilation or suicide.

**(b) From Anxiety to Care**

 Although Heidegger denies desire to Da-sein, Da-sein, in its primordial manifestation, manifests itself as care. This manifestation occurs simultaneously with the disclosure of anxiety. In fact “As soon Da-sein expresses anything about itself, it has already interpreted itself as care.”[[23]](#footnote-23) This care is self-directed but it is the same care that unfolds Da-sein to meet the other. The meeting of the other is the meeting of the transcendence according to Levinas. Transcendence is when the Face meets the other, while Heidegger calls this falling prey:

 As factical being-in-the-world, Da-sein, falling prey, has already fallen away from itself; and it has not fallen prey to some being which it first runs into in the course of its being, or perhaps does not, but it has fallen prey to the world which itself belongs to its being. [[24]](#footnote-24)

Heidegger wrote that Da-sein’s only fullness or perfection is death.[[25]](#footnote-25) Death in this context is the nothing which Da-sein experiences when faced with its own impossibility.[[26]](#footnote-26) But is it possible to respond to nothing? I would suggest that Heidegger’s ‘nothing’ is the Levinas’ other, the other that presents the transcendent dimension of reality.

According to Heidegger, for Da-sein to attain authenticity it needs to go back to the world in the right way i.e. doing what makes sense to do in its culture and in the current situation.[[27]](#footnote-27) Authenticity, for Heidegger then, is Da-sein going back to the source of its anxiety and realigning itself with the given. Authenticity requires Da-sein to be a thrown without resisting by conjuring up desires and wants which are not a given. Da-sein would have to own what it really is rather than covering up or disowning itself as it does in every age.[[28]](#footnote-28) For Heidegger then, authenticity is a return of Da-sein to the world unencumbered by desire. It is my argument that actually it is the desire that makes beings authentic because it allows them to acknowledge the other and the other’s constitute co-being with the self. This, I think, also opens up an avenue to the divine as the absolute other.

**2. The Face**

 In his philosophical project, Emmanuel Levinas proposes to move away from the priority of ideas which tend to cut away from experience, especially the experience of the concrete. Although Heidegger does not equate Da-sein to the corporal daily person, he too was critiquing the old metaphysics which had alienated being. Levinas centers his entire philosophy on the human Face. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas describes human relationships in great depth and complexity. The individual for Levinas is prior in status and dignity to being in general. Ethics, often thought of as a branch of philosophy, is for him philosophy itself.[[29]](#footnote-29) Through the history of philosophy, many have sought to ground ethics. Some focused on the will of the god(s) (it is right because the gods command it…), others on the universality of reason, others on the pleasure/pain principle etc. Levinas, on the other hand, formulated his ethic on the epiphany of the other person. For him, the Face of the other sanctions the moral law even before reason comes into the picture. The presence of this other brings out the ethical obligation, though I will term this sympathy which, I suggest, is prior to the ethical.[[30]](#footnote-30)

 To ground ethics, Levinas had to go to the beginning to find a firm foundation. To begin with, ethics cannot be based on ideas because that would deny the otherness of the other. Reducing the other to my sphere of ideas cuts off contact with the other. If contact with the other cannot be found through ideas, then we have to establish the contact through other means. Thus Levinas looks not to reason, but to sensibility, to find the real other person.[[31]](#footnote-31) From a look into the Face of the other we become aware of basic human responsibility and meaning. Levinas is critical of a society in which people are depersonalized, in which they move around side by side rather than meet Face to Face.[[32]](#footnote-32) It is necessary, therefore, to separate the individual from the other.

 In the Face to Face encounter, the individual perceives an extension in the other. This extension is conceived of as infinity and this infinity has its source in the other because the individual cannot produce the idea of infinity in the self. Therefore, there is always a need for the other for extension to be perceived. The idea of infinity reveals transcendence. In this way, the other can never be encompassed in a totality because infinity does not permit itself to be integrated. It is not the insufficiency of the individual that prevents totalization, but the infinity of the other.[[33]](#footnote-33) In other words, in meeting the other one is encountering transcendence because the other, even though so immediate, can never be exhaustively comprehended. This opens up a space for reverence of the other because the other is a mystery. The other is also more powerful in the sense that if the other were to be comprehended completely then there would be no other but the one. In metaphysics, there is a general principle that a being is in relation with what it cannot absorb. Levinas prefers to use the term comprehend, which etymologically has the sense of contain, cover, enclose etc. [[34]](#footnote-34) In the concrete, Levinas is asserting the importance of the other and the fact that because of the other’s presence we are able to have a formal ethical discourse.

 Though Levinas’ primary concern is ethics, he affirms the common experience of being as a given. I would go further to maintain that being or Heidegger’s Da-sein is more positive than just a given but a giftedness. In this way, I am prepared to go beyond Heidegger’s throwness because there is a mysterious quality to being, be it Da-sein or a Face. I say this because being seems to be more than just there by the way it “surges” into existence and the way it wants to maintain itself in being. The organization and composition of individual beings point to this quality. In addition, a thing, a giftedness, offers itself to me.

 Levinas nominated the Face as the point of intersection of the individual with the other because, as I mentioned above, the Face is unlimited. The content of reality then seems to be made of the interaction of the individual with the other. This will be important for the inference I will later draw concerning the radical inter-dependence of beings constituted in contradiction. In other words, the real, as had been maintained by Descartes is not a separation of the individual from the other, but rather the real consists of the simultaneous and spontaneous engagement of beings. That beings or Faces encounter each other is a given, what happens after this initial encounter is open ended. That a Face is, is a great freedom, that a Face can unfold is a greater freedom. Therefore, in contrast to the Da-sein which seems to be conceived in anxiety, the Face seems to have a positive space in front of it into which to unfold. To be clear, the Face has the choice to make negative choices. Levinas calls the Face to Face encounter an epiphany. In this epiphany, the individual does not negate the other, a negation which in the extreme becomes murder.[[35]](#footnote-35) Levinas invests a lot in the Face to Face encounter by asserting that this encounter establishes the ethical inviolability of the other.[[36]](#footnote-36) The other here refers to humans only. A question can be asked: Can we extend the ethical inviolability of which Levinas speaks to non-humans too? If yes, do we have ethical responsibility to all that we encounter then?

 While Heidegger’s Da-sein is limited by a fear of failing into oblivion on both sides of its existence, Levinas’ Face is positively infinite as I showed above. It is important to reiterate here that what determines the infinite nature of the Face is that when beings come Face to Face, they do not enter into each other but overflow as it were.This overflowing is distinguished from the image of liquid overflowing a vessel, because this overflowing presence is an actual position. And this position Levinas calls “opposition par excellence” which is a moral summon.[[37]](#footnote-37) It is only through opposition then, that a moral obligation arises. I prefer to call this opposition a contradiction. I believe this contradiction is the basis for the attraction between beings and gives them an obligation to maintain this contradiction without retreating into the primordial anxiety of the Da-sein. In the radical consideration of this thought then, either in metaphysics or ontology, it is presumptuous to isolate being or to think of being as a general principle.

 Levinas’ discussion of the Face is profound and complex. Important for my purposes is Levinas’ assertion that the Face resists possession and resists power.[[38]](#footnote-38) The power of which Levinas speaks of is the other’s transcendence which comes from beyond the categories of thought, from beyond the world, from the other side of being.[[39]](#footnote-39) For Levinas then, the Face opens the primordial discourse whose first act is obligation which no interiority can resist.[[40]](#footnote-40) In other words, the first act of the Face or Da-sein as-is-in-the-word is the acknowledgement of the other. Instead of the ethical or the rational, the first discourse, I suggest, is the Face going out of itself through sympathy for the other on whose existence it depends. This discourse is mutual and takes place on multiple levels.

**3. Possible Inferences**

 There are many inferences that can be drawn when one juxtaposes the basic outline of the philosophies of Heidegger and Levinas. I have come up with the following three general inferences.

**(a) To Be is to Be in Contradiction**

 Heidegger was concerned that the concept of being was empty. For this reason he developed his own concept of being as Da-sein, which is being as is and not being as is abstracted. For him, Da-sein finds itself in the plurality of entanglement. In other words, Da-sein represents the multiplicity and temporality of being. From the beginning, Heidegger’s Da-sein seems to be caught in inauthenticity and anxiety. Da-sein as a nascent experiences itself fallen away from itself and fallen prey to the world. This is the cause of its anxiety. To get out of this anxious state, Da-sein must return to be alone. In this way, Da-sein can come to terms with being alone and learn to Face its impossibility before it could face the world. If Da-sein did this it would not experience itself as a suffocating entanglement. In retreating to be alone, Da-sein reconstitutes itself as an authentic being. Contrary to Heidegger, Levinas suggests that being (the Face being its expression) is authentically itself when it is in relation. In other words, the Face only becomes such when it is confronted by another Face. While Heidegger’s Da-sein suffers anxiety because of the entanglement it finds itself in, Levinas’ Face becomes animated because of the entanglement.

 From the foregoing, I propose that it is precisely in the presence of the other that beings exist. The encounter between beings is the *sine qua non* of existence itself. So instead of viewing reality as a series of beings i.e. A, B, C etc. we might have to view it as relations of these beings i.e. A---B---C etc. where ---- is the basic building block of existence.[[41]](#footnote-41) This way of seeing reality presupposes contradiction. Contradiction here is taken to mean that individual entities encountering each other enter into a dialogue of difference. The latin transaltion of the word contradiction, *contradictio* literally means speaking against. In this speaking against I see the arising of existence. Therefore, it is only in the c*ontradictio* that Da-sein or the Face are possible. Consequently, contradiction is not only a fundamental value at the basic level of existence but also at the more complex level of systems, human organization etc. In a way, I am trying to rehabilitate contradiction as a concept. If existence depends on contradiction, then we might have to not only tolerate contraction but embrace and promote it because it is through contradiction that the cosmos comes to be and that the cosmos is able to advance. I am aware here that I might be restating a rudimentary form of the historical dialectic. In any case, my contradiction is more voluntary and less determined. There would be other places to develop this idea.

(**b) Cosmic sympathy among Beings**

 Having proposed that existence is premised on contradictory inter-dependence, I am suggesting that there is an obvious affinity between beings in the cosmos which is premised on a primordial sympathy. As mentioned above, it is in the nature of *to be* to give of itself to the other. I believe that beings give of themselves in a more voluntarily way. The exchange between beings maintains them separate in a creativecommunication. The Face is unlimited and becomes real through simultaneous and spontaneous engagement. It is in this spontaneous giving of the Face, of the being to the other that sympathy happens. And unlike the anxiety ridden Da-sein, the being of Levinas, the one I am christening as the cosmic being has more possibilities to reach out and to identify with the multi-Faced cosmos. The feel for the other happens at the point of the encounter, but also extends to encounters which are not necessarily physical. In this way, the individual can have a far reaching (cosmic) sympathy. Cosmic sympathy therefore is nothing but beings in the universe having a positive affinity to each other. It is some kind of cosmic love fest! This has a practical implication of encouraging people to be good cosmic neighbors. The initial connectedness in which we find ourselves is a given but we can grow in affinity by reaching out. The affinity is strengthened by the realization that the individual cannot provide oneself with the condition wherein he/she/it could become adequate to himself/herself/itself. Therefore, life involves a displacement of the desperate and over confident autonomy of self by giving itself over to the sympathy of another.

 The idea of cosmic sympathy is not a novelty for it appears in the works of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677).[[42]](#footnote-42) It seems also that the concept predates him though it was used more in an occult way:

 Spinoza was also familiar with the traditional concept of cosmic “sympathy”. The term appears in his writings as a label used by others to describe those relations or influences in nature that had appeared to them “occult”, i.e. not fully intelligible. Thus he writes, “it can happen that we love or hate some things without any cause known to us, but only (as they say [ut aiunt]) from Sympathy or Antipathy [sympathia...et antipathia]”. [[43]](#footnote-43)

Given, Spinoza uses the concept of cosmic sympathy in his overall monistic philosophy where everything is connected.

**(c) The Infinity and the Transcendence of everyday Beings**

 Levinas finds infinite and the transcendence not by looking up towards the heavens but through a simple existential introspection. He asserted that the encounter between the individual and the other is not quantifiable or conceptualized. This is because the Face of the other remains infinitely transcendent and infinitely foreign. The given i.e. the Face to Face, is not reducible to assessable relations.[[44]](#footnote-44) In a way, Levinas is affirming that the other, though recognizable, will always have a part which is mysterious to me. From an experiential point of view, this means that there will always be surprises in all relations. While Levinas’ discussion of the Face is aimed at securing ethics, I think it accomplishes another mission. I propose that it also makes an argument for opening up a space for the spiritual and the space for religion. In addition, it argues against an over confidence in the equation of truth with the tangible. If the Face is infinitely transcendent, it is impossible, then, to exhaustively rule out that which is not yet evident to the Face. Each encounter, according to Levinas, contains a power which transcends categories of thought and come from the other side of being as it were. I will suggest here that cosmic sympathy which I proposed in the section above happens in part because there is always this transcendent room for the other to attach to even after the initial gifting.

 The foregoing has consequences in the real world. First, because beings are transcendent and infinite, they solicit a certain reverence and awe. By this I mean that they place on us not only an ethical obligation but also a contemplative responsibility. Through contemplation we can learn to look at all that is with an interest which looks for the best of all that is. In human relations for example, negative stereotypes would be very difficult to maintain because the other is never fully revealed to me and it seems a pity that I would preclude the opportunity to discover the hidden and ever unfolding part of the other person. Second, the transcendence of the everyday reality contracts the gap between the sacred and the profane. In a way, whatever comes in my view is both profane and sacred. Third, I think the transcendence of reality would invite experts in the study of otherworldly systems (religions) to leave room for the mysterious unknown. As it is now, religions and spiritually realities are analyzed until they fit the established qualitative as well as quantitative disciplines. Levinas invites us to be vigilante and to allow for mystery and for faith.

**Conclusion**

 Dissatisfied with the ontological treatment of being, Heidegger proposed Da-sein as a more realistic way being expresses itself in the everyday world. Likewise, Levinas saw that there was a gap between being and the lived experience. Therefore, he proposed the Face as a symbol of being. There is a progressive movement in the concretization of being from Heidegger to Levinas. My suggestion has been that being as incarnated is more broad and positive than Da-sein and that the Face can be expanded to include non-human beings. My belief is that we, human beings, by situating ourselves in the greater manifold of relations we can develop as human beings and at the same time establish spiritual relationships with all that is. I am using the term spiritual in the broader sense. In the end, I think even the anxiety which Da-sein experiences is lessened when we find our rightful place in the ever evolving cosmos.

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2. Ibid., 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michael Kellog, *Three questions we never stop asking* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010), 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Kellog, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Heidegger, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Travis O'Brian, “Faith and Authenticity: Kierkegaard and Heidegger on Existing in 'Closest Closeness' to the Nothing,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 20, no. 1 (January 2003): 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. O’Brian, 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
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22. O’Brian, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Heidegger, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Heidegger, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. O’Brian, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Dreyfus, Hubert and Rubin, Jane, “You can't get something for nothing: Kierkegaard and Heidegger on how not to overcome nihilism,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 30, no. 1-2 (March 1987): 51.  [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid.  [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
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31. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Levinas, 86-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Levinas, 79-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Levinas, 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid., 195-196. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Levinas, 197-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. It would be interesting to compare this concept with the Buddhist teaching of interdependent co-arising. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Cf. Karolina Hubner, “Spinoza's Parallelism Doctrine: on the Connectedness of Things” in *Sympathy* edited by E. Schliesser (Oxford University Press, forthcoming), 1-27.

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43. Ibid., 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
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