For Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics precedes philosophy. For our purposes here we may summarize his ethics under three headings which underscore what Levinas shares with some other thinkers and systems.

**Radicality.** Levinas’ is a radical other-oriented ethics *prima facie* ignoring any hierarchy of obligations. Responsibility for the neighbor knows no limits. Levinas presents this ethics as the heart of Torah. Christianity and Buddhism have affirmed analogous positions.

**Non-derivability.** The right thing to do cannot be derived from any cosmology or ontology – morality occupies its own sphere, as in Kant. It is not only Kant and his followers who have put forward an underivable ethics. Some contemporary neo-Aristotelians, for instance, have held, along with the empiricists, for the underivability of the ought from the is, and have accordingly insisted on the autonomy of ethical first principles: practical reason has its own laws.¹

**Asymmetry.** Levinas teaches that ethical responsibility goes from me to the neighbor and is not part of a symmetrical determination in which I could say that an equal responsibility weighs on both of us, or, insofar as I can ascribe responsibility to my neighbor, I find myself responsible for his responsibility. There is no evening up of the score. Yet the asymmetry of the ethical stance, or its incommensurability with a systematic overview is not new. Any ethic which enjoins putting the other first will run into paradoxes: A and B will hold the door for each other forever without either passing through.² Or, more mildly, take the classical Socratic (or Pauline) maxim that it is better to suffer evil than to do it. Note that there is no way we can interpret the moral rectitude of this rule as reducing to its utility for bringing about an objectively “better” state of affairs.

What is really different about Levinas’ ethics, and grounds its unity and uniqueness, is that ethics is rooted in non-intentional consciousness. In fact, ethics precedes philosophy and grounds it, just because non-intentional consciousness precedes intentional consciousness, and grounds it.

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The path from the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl to the work of Emmanuel Levinas passes through Heidegger, as Levinas makes clear time and time again. In the work of Edmund Husserl we find the triumph of objectivity, philosophy thought of as science seeking objective necessities. At the same time, in seeking ultimate foundations, phenomenology uncovers a surplus on the side of the noetic, it passes “from the object to the intention and from the intention to all that it carries with it as a horizon of intentions.” Thus the thinker looks for “the secret intentions of intentionality.”

We can then understand how, with impunity, Heidegger forsakes the transcendental reduction for “existential” analysis, which is all about uncovering these structures. For the Heidegger of Sein und Zeit, we are able to pick up the age-old philosophical quest for an understanding of being by exploring the Lebenswelt, the “existential a priori” (John Wild) that precedes the objectifying of the world by an equally abstract “subject.”

Levinas absorbed Husserl’s phenomenology in a Heideggerian manner. Though a thorough student of Husserl, it was the Heideggerian project that excited him. That is, what was important to Levinas was the way phenomenology laid bare the projections directing intentional acts, the hidden presuppositional orientations. Yet Heidegger’s Sein und Zeit, “full of brilliant analyses,” nevertheless represents, as Levinas came to see it, a totalizing perspective, which is ultimately a solipsistic perspective. The quest for being by uncovering the existentials of the being for whom (its) being is an issue leads to a reduction of the other to the Same.

Let us look at this a little more closely. For the Heidegger of Sein und Zeit, we approach the question of the nature/meaning of Being through Dasein’s pre-thematic ways of being. This could be taken to be merely a method whereby the human being, explored more subjectively than objectively, would be taken as the primary analogate in a more or less Aristotelian inquiry. But that would be to miss the radical nature of what is going on here. Right from the start being shows itself as inextricable from meaning which is inextricable from truth, which is inextricable from Dasein’s disclosure of being. Or put simply, being and Dasein arise together as the indivisible ground of whatever can be said or known of being. The philosophical task, which is, be it noted, no sort of humanism, is the description of this Lebenswelt, this milieu in which Dasein suffers being, prior to the abstraction of subject vs. object.

Now in this philosophical exploration of course it will be said, and was said by Heidegger, that there is no place for the question of the