As anyone who has tried to find their way through Levinas’s texts will remember, these texts are like a moving mine-field. What disconcerts the reader is not just that they proceed “with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach”, as Derrida remarked, and therefore would have less of a “treatise” than of a “work of art” in which each returning wave, as it recapitulates itself “also infinitely renews and enriches itself”¹. The problem is rather that although all of these waves look alike and are often described by Levinas with the same word, they are in fact very different. Overlooking these differences can be fatal; it will inevitably mean that one finds oneself caught up in the midst of the intrigue of what Levinas calls ‘the infinite’ at the very moment that one thinks one has finally found an exit. Derrida, as we shall see in our next chapter, was perhaps amongst the first to fall prey to this illusion. But he certainly wasn’t the last. Indeed, it would seem as if a whole generation of Levinas readers lost their nerve well before he did. These readers think that the plot – which is but another word for ‘intrigue’ – behind Levinas’s philosophy is unnecessarily complex and, in fact, willingly confused. They doubt that Levinas is justified in using the same word – “l’infini” – to refer to both God and the Good and they suspect him of smuggling in an “ethico-metaphysical” agenda into his “quasi-phenomenological descriptions of radical alterity”². They think that we can have these descriptions without the “non-human back up”³ which Levinas

2. S. CRITCHLEY, Very Little... Almost Nothing. Death, Philosophy, Literature, London/New York, Routledge, 1997, p. 81 (this quote is taken from a section significantly called ‘Holding Levinas’s hand to Blanchot’s fire’). The present chapter is part of an ongoing friendly dialogue between Simon Critchley and me (cf. ibid., p. 188 n48) which I hope will continue.
calls alternately ‘the Good’ or ‘God’ or ‘illeity’. To suggest, as Levinas does, that the “familiar event of obligation to the other” motivates or requires, as Jack Caputo puts it, “the deep structure of something ... other than the autrui”, “a ‘seal’ that God puts on the ethical relationship”, is according to these readers “to mystify, or remystify ethics, to conflate it with religion, to absorb religion into it, to supercharge the ethical relation with a metaphysics of infinity” (Caputo 31-2). In short, what these readers suggest is that one can and should ‘leave God (or the Good) out of it’, for it is precisely “this mystification of the ethical relationship” which has made it “vulnerable to easy dismissal” (Caputo 32). What’s more, these readers also suggest that in order to save “what continues to grip” them in Levinas – i.e. in the words of one of them: “the attention to the other, to the other’s claim on me and how that claim changes and challenges (one’s) self-conception” (Critchley 82) – one should seek support in a more “neutral transcendence” (ibid.). In fact, they think that Levinas himself in his more sober moments has been suggesting, albeit a bit begrudgingly, exactly such a move – for example in a famous passage of “God and Philosophy” which I will cite at length, since it goes to the heart of what will also be our problem here: “God is not simply ‘the first other’, the ‘other par excellence’, or the ‘absolutely other’, but other than the other, other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical bond with another and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the there is” (CPP 165-6).

Whatever reading one is going to give of this passage – and I will not abuse the reader’s attention by arguing with the readings of the readers mentioned before – it is clear that something very central is happening here. For the ‘there is’ which Levinas mentions at the end of this passage is yet another of these waves which move through his texts under the same name of ‘the infinite’. The ‘intrigue of the infinite’ could thus mean either of the following: the intrigue of God (der Unendliche), the intrigue of the Good One or the Good (der oder das Unendliche), or the intrigue of the ‘there is’, of that infamous il y a of which Levinas has always stressed the inhuman neutrality and anonymity, and which he opposed to the generosity of the Heideggerian ‘es gibt’. This il y a goes under many names in Levinas’s texts, but one of them is indeed ‘the infinite’ (clearly: das Unendliche). But

4. See the first paragraph of Levinas’s important 1978 preface to the second edition of De l’existence à la existant (not included in the English translation; no pagination in the French edition).