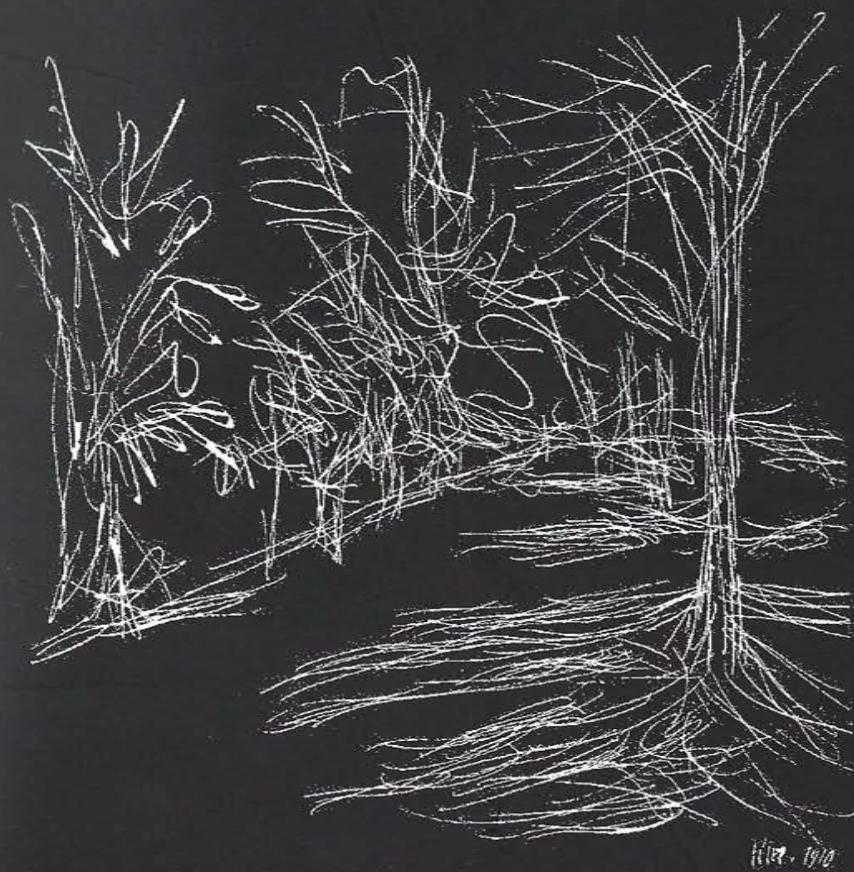


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Superior Empiricism



Lights in the Dark: The Radical Empiricism of

Emmanuel Levinas and William James

MEGAN CRAIG

In his "Letter on Humanism," Heidegger critiques metaphysics as the attempt to replace the clearing with a being.¹ If Heidegger's description is right, then Emmanuel Levinas is emphatically metaphysical. The metaphysical charge has been at the root of a variety of critiques that describe Levinas's ethics as impractical, idealistic, incoherent, theological and naïve. There is something misleading in these characterisations, since what ends up being metaphysical in Levinas is just the face of another human being, a face that is never static or clear but always particular, moving, and out of reach. "Face" is not a "solving name"² that offers a key to the universe. The face is the site of a crossroads in Levinas's philosophy. Neither phenomenon nor form, it falls between the cracks of traditional phenomenology and traditional metaphysics, landing somewhere ambiguously between the two in an intensely real, up close, and empirical half-ideality. The flashes of faces in a crowd – each one unique. This is not a neat picture. It is certainly not the pastoral picture conjured up by Heidegger's imagery: the plowed and sown fields and tree-lined clearings. One might say that Levinas's

1 Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," in Krell, D. F. (ed.) (1993), *Martin Heidegger: Basic Philosophical Writings*, San Francisco, HarperCollins, pp. 234 – 35.

2 James uses this phrase to describe the "primitive quest" of Metaphysics. He writes, "the world has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's *principle*, and to possess it is, after a fashion, to possess the universe itself. 'God,' 'Matter,' 'Reason,' 'the Absolute,' 'Energy' are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest." James, W. "What Pragmatism Means," included in Menand, L. (ed.) (1997), *Pragmatism: A Reader*, New York, Vintage Books, p. 97, hereafter *PR*.

metaphysics is just a return to the crowds, streets, and noise of a more urban landscape. Heidegger has a poetic counterpart in Wordsworth, walking in the meadow among the "dews, vapors, and the melody of birds, / And labourers going forth to till the fields."³ Levinas's poetic counterpart is more like Whitman, crossing Brooklyn ferry:

Flood-tide below me! I see you face to face!
Clouds of the west – sun there half an hour high – I see you
also face to face.

Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes,
how curious you are to me!
On the ferry-boats, the hundreds and hundred that cross,
returning home, are more curious to me than you suppose,
And you that shall cross from shore to shore years hence are
more to me, and more in my meditations, than you might
suppose.⁴

Envisioning Heidegger alongside Wordsworth and Levinas alongside Whitman helps differentiate their respective emphases. In some ways it is just a difference between landscapes and cityscapes, each with their own dignity. Yet it is also a difference between an account that prioritizes a setting (the world, nature, *Being*), and an account that prioritizes *characters (beings)* – the "crowds of men and women attired in their usual costumes."

The "face to face" that Levinas makes the crux of his philosophy is meant to repopulate the Heideggerian world. Yet the encounter Levinas describes is too situational and sensible to be metaphysical and too transcendently un-experiential to be physical. Human, yet out of reach, the face complicates traditional philosophical categories and makes Levinas's philosophy particularly difficult to situate. Although Levinas

3 Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book IV, lines 338–339, in De Selincourt, E. (ed.) (1970), *Wordsworth The Prelude or Growth of a Poets Mind*, New York, Oxford University Press, p. 62.

4 Whitman, W. *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, section I, in Wilbur, R. (ed.) (1959) *Whitman*, New York, Dell Publishing Co., The Laurel Poetry Series, p. 164.

criticises the language of “experience” for being the language of totality and opts for “metaphysics” in his description of ethics, the face belies a strange empiricism. To miss this is to let his philosophy hover without a ground. He does not have solid ground. There is no bedrock. Instead, it is the ground provided by another person, a weight and density that moves. Without the embodied touchstones provided by human beings, Levinas’s philosophy would be theology and his hope the distant hope of a world yet to come.

Faces are ideal and real without either of these terms canceling the other out or having the huge and dense meaning philosophy can give them. It is a weak ideality, a thick but traversable reality. Faces express something ideal here on earth. This mixture of ideality and reality, along with an urban sense of plurality, has roots in the philosophy of pure experience William James called “radical empiricism.” Underscoring the “pragmatic ethos”⁵ at work in Levinas opens new lines of work and criticism distinct from a heavily theological vein of French phenomenology, “Levinasian” readings of Levinas, or discussions that pit religious faith and mysticism against practical reason. There are many ways of reading Levinas or highlighting specific trains of his thought. Some readings make the ethics Levinas offers look sublime, beautiful, or angelic. Others make it look disastrous, impossible or masochistic. What if it is simply messy, unpredictable, and minimal? What if it is closer to the “pluralistic empiricism” William James described as “a turbid, muddled, gothic sort of affair without a sweeping outline and with little pictorial nobility”?⁶

My claim is that there is a “pragmatic ethos” in Levinas and a striking coincidence between Levinas’s phenomenology and William James’s “radical empiricism.”⁷ Reading Levinas in light of James defuses

5 This is a term Richard Bernstein uses in his paper “Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds.” In the paper he identifies “pragmatic ethos” with 5 interrelated themes: 1) anti-foundationalism, 2) a thorough-going fallibilism, 3) a de-centering of the subject, 4) contingency and chance and 5) plurality. One can find versions of all of these themes running through Levinas. Richard Bernstein, “Pragmatism, Pluralism and the Healing of Wounds,” in *PR*, pp. 387–389.

6 James, W. (1996), *A Pluralistic Universe*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, p. 45.

7 Derrida also compares Levinas’s thought with empiricism. In the final pages of “Violence and Metaphysics” he writes, “the true name of the renunciation of the

the mysticism often associated with Levinas’s ethics and allows for a deflationary reading that establishes distance from what Dominique Janicaud has called French phenomenology’s “theological turn.”⁸ I would like to unlink the chain Janicaud constructs making Levinas the site of a theological turn that shatters the promise of the phenomenological method and winds up as “Marionese givenness.”⁹ Levinas and James attend to ambiguity, resist the impulse to categorise particulars under sweeping universals, realise that new problems require new answers, and prioritise particularity over generality. Both of them could be read as either pragmatic pessimists or realistic optimists. Either way, they sketch a precarious, non-naïve hope that will necessarily look bleakly hopeless to staunch idealists and overly ideal to staunch realists.

My goal here is to outline a coincidence between Levinas and James through an examination of the opening chapter of Levinas’s first published book, *Existence and Existents*. I open with an argument for why reading *Existence and Existents* sets the stage for any reading of Levinas. In section 2, I situate Henri Bergson as the pivot between Levinas and James and explore Bergson’s promising, but ultimately illusory conception of time and escape that defines Levinas’s point of departure. In section 3, I argue for the influence of William James on Levinas’s adoption of embodied descriptions of indolence and

concept, of the a prioris and the transcendent horizons of language is *empiricism*. It is the *dream* of a purely *heterological* thought at its source. A *pure* thought of *pure* difference ... We say the *dream* because it must vanish at *daybreak*, as soon as language awakens. “Derrida, J. “Violence and Metaphysics,” in Bass, A. (trans.) (1978) *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, p. 151. Derrida is overtly critical of empiricism insofar as he thinks it holds no place for the transcendent power of language. Contrary to Derrida, Dominique Janicaud accuses Levinas of not being empirical enough in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn.”* Caught between a rock and a hard place, Levinas cannot satisfy either Derrida’s quest to overcome dualistic hierarchies between empiricism and metaphysics or Janicaud’s effort to restore phenomenology to Husserl’s “return to the things themselves!” An investigation of Derrida’s and Janicaud’s understandings of empiricism goes beyond my scope here, but in holding Levinas next to William James, I am suggesting an empiricism neither Derrida nor Janicaud considers.

8 Janicaud, D. “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” in Prusak, B. G. (trans.) (2000), *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn,” The French Debate*, New York, Fordham University Press.

9 *Ibid.* p. 65.

awakening. These descriptions signal a pragmatic turn in Levinas that brings his phenomenology into contact with James's radical empiricism. In section 4, I discuss the consequences of radical empiricism on James's and Levinas's conceptions of experience and religion. Section 5 concludes with an image for the minimal, but pragmatic hope characteristic of them both and underpinning Levinas's ethics.



Existence and Existents lays the groundwork for much of Levinas's later writings yet remains free of some of the language that has become synonymous with his ethics. Many of the phrases associated with Levinas ("ethics as first philosophy," "face to face") have become cliché and risk being worn out. *Existence and Existents* provides access to new vocabulary and can help us pass under the radar of traditional Levinasian scholarship. In this first book Levinas both continues and breaks with the phenomenology of his teachers (Husserl and Heidegger) and explores a less-well demarcated area somewhere between phenomenology and pragmatism.

Levinas began writing *Existence and Existents* as a prisoner of war in a French labour camp in the years between 1940 and 1945. The overt philosophic effort of this first book is to articulate an alternative to Husserl's transcendently ideal ego and Heidegger's ontology. While Husserl stands somewhat in the background of Levinas's critique in *Existence and Existents*, serving as a touchstone for Levinas's version of phenomenology, one he elsewhere calls "another phenomenology, even if it were the destruction of the phenomenology of appearance and knowledge,"¹⁰ Heidegger stands in the foreground as a more decisive point of departure – like a shore Levinas's thought seeks not only to touch but to erode in hitting up against it. Levinas makes this clear in his introduction, making Heidegger the first name to appear in the text. He confesses,

¹⁰ Levinas, "Transcendence and Intelligibility," in Peperzak, A.T., Critchley, S., Bernasconi, R. (eds.) (1996), *Basic Philosophical Writings*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 153.

If at the beginning our reflections are in large measure inspired by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where we find the concept of ontology and of the relationship which man sustains with Being, they are also governed by a profound need to leave the climate of that philosophy, and by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian.¹¹

Noting his debt, Levinas recognises the importance of going through Heidegger to arrive at a new possibility for philosophy that might go beyond Heidegger. The "climate" of Heideggerian philosophy is something he spends his life contesting by asking about a different possibility for meaning, one that is irreducible to the meaning of Being "in general" (EE 2) and centered instead on the meaning of the interpersonal. Levinas ultimately bases his "other" phenomenology on the primacy of sensibility over consciousness and the situational encounter with the face of another person.

Levinas envisions escaping Heidegger's "climate," but his fixation on imprisonment is not a philosophic reaction. The thought of radical confinement comes directly from his lived experience of isolation – a real separation from the world and not, as with Descartes, an imagined or staged retreat. Levinas's captivity, the deaths of his family members, and the political climate proceeding and following his imprisonment inform his first book and all of his subsequent work. Experience dictates the themes and style of his writing from his descriptions of horror, trauma, and insomnia in the 1940s to the question of whether we are duped by morality in the 1961 preface to *Totality and Infinity*.

Existence and Existents opens as if Levinas is trying to hold tightly to an intellectual model: a clean, dispassionate train of thought and argument that does not get bogged down with the details of concrete circumstances. There is a self-conscious sense of how a philosophical text is supposed to proceed. Yet to read *Existence and Existents* is to experience the dissolution of this intellectual remove and to find oneself, at the end, wading in details. As the details come to the forefront, Levinas begins to break with traditional philosophic language and to forgo the

¹¹ Levinas (1978), *Existence and Existents*, Lingis, A. (trans.), Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, p. 4. All subsequent references will be made in text as EE.

typical structure of philosophic argumentation – replacing theses, proofs, and evidence with a series of compounding descriptions. There is an effort here to come up with a mode of expression that will say the unsayable and show something unshowable – something Levinas remains concerned with for the rest of his life.

Existence and Existents returns us to a raw scene. There are threads Levinas casts here, along with a sense of urgency and confusion, all of which gets tied together or neatened over the course of his later work. All the threads are there in this first book, and in some ways it is easier to see what is at stake in seeing the bare threads loosely splayed. The text reads more like a narration someone can only give in the midst or immediate aftermath of tragedy: a strangely lucid running account that has not had the chance or the time for the reflection, editing, and faltering that will, later, make the story both leaner and more complicated.¹²

<II>

The themes of escape and rupture dominating *Existence and Existents* are inspired by Levinas's direct experience, but also reflect the profound influence of Henri Bergson's innovative account of time, creativity, and change. Bergson signaled a break with Kantian idealism in France, and his early writings of the 1920's were among Levinas's foundational philosophical influences.¹³

One can trace an explicit link between Levinas and William James back to their mutual admiration for and unique revisions of Bergson's work. In a letter from 1903 Bergson wrote to James, "French students passing through Cambridge...must have told you that I was one of your greatest admirers, and that I have never passed up an opportunity to express the great sympathy I have for your ideas to my listeners."¹⁴

¹² *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* has this remove and self-consciousness.

It has more structure and shows Levinas's development of a grammar and language that, compared with his earlier writing, can seem overly complicated.

¹³ For one history of this and other influences, see Moyne, S. (2005) *Origins of the Other, Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics*, Ithica, Cornell University Press, pp. 21 – 56.

James, proclaimed, "Bergson alone has been radical."¹⁵ He went on to praise Bergson's style, at the same time confessing, "Bergson's originality is so profuse that many of his ideas baffle me entirely. I doubt whether any one understands him all-over, so to speak."¹⁶ Both James and Bergson insisted on the independence of their work and their mutual surprise of finding each other, later, so closely allied in spirit and realm of investigation. James in particular felt that the coincidence of their thought despite their physical distance from one another testified to a genuine *Zeitgeist* and a convergence of pragmatism and phenomenology that had yet to be fully explored.

Levinas is one place to look for that uncharted convergence. Second only to Heidegger, Bergson is the most cited name in *Existence and Existents*. Levinas emphasised Bergson's profound influence on his early thinking and on phenomenology generally. In an interview with *Autrement* in November 1988, he responded to a question about his "contact" with the tradition of philosophy by acknowledging phenomenology and Heidegger, and then saying "I have hardly emphasised the importance (which was essential for me) of the relationship – always present in the background of the teaching of those masters – to Bergson." He continues,

I feel close to certain Bergsonian themes: to *durée*, in which the spiritual is no longer reduced to an event of pure 'knowledge,' but would be the transcendence of a relationship with someone.... Bergson is the source of an entire complex of interrelated contemporary philosophical ideas; it is to him, no doubt, that I owe my modest speculative initiatives.¹⁷

¹⁴ Bergson, "Villa Montmorency, 6th January 1903," in Ansell Pearson, K. and Mullarkey, J. (ed.) (2002), *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, New York, Continuum, p. 357, hereafter *HBKW*.

¹⁵ James, "Bergson and his Critique of Intellectualism," in McDermott, J. (ed.) (1977), *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, p. 566.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 560 – 61.

¹⁷ Levinas, "The Other, Utopia and Justice," in Smith, M. B. and Harshay, B. (trans.) (1998), *Entre Nous, On Thinking-of-the-Other*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 224.

Later, in the foreword to *Proper Names*, Levinas lists his beginning interests in philosophy, describing how he “marveled, while still in school, at the prospects for renewal recently introduced by Bergson’s conception of *durée*.”¹⁸

“The prospect for renewal” becomes a driving theme of Levinas’s early work. In *Existence and Existents*, he invokes Bergson’s concept of *durée* and *élan vital* – a vital impulse and creative urge to begin anew that is distinct from the ruthless forward march of Darwinian natural selection. *Durée* has a special place for Levinas, since it represents the priority of fluidity and change over permanence, opening the possibility of real novelty. Bergson reverses the classical hierarchy of the stable over the fluid, insisting that linear, measurable time derives from a more original experience of lived duration and endurance. This sense of living time makes room for the possibility of a radically new beginning – a possibility Bergson calls “creative evolution.”

Despite the lure of this thought and Bergson’s impact on him, Levinas concludes that Bergson sets the stage for Heidegger’s ecstatic temporality by describing time as “entirely contained in the subject” (EE 96). Reduced to subjective intuition, Bergsonian temporality leaves no opening for transcendence or infinity – terms critical for Levinas’s account of ethical subjectivity. Levinas thinks Bergson is right to reorient temporality around fluidity but wrong to describe the experience of fluidity in terms of a private or interior consciousness. Levinas embraces Bergson’s idea of a “creative evolution” – the idea that “to exist is to change, to change is to mature” – but contests the idea that “to mature is to go on creating oneself endlessly” or that evolution is “creation of self by self.”¹⁹ Ultimately, Bergson’s conception of time precludes the experience of a populated, intersubjective – *ethical* – world.

Existence and Existents is a sober text that is somewhat at odds with the exuberance of a creative life force. Not surprisingly Heidegger is

18 Levinas, “Foreword,” (1975), *Proper Names*, Smith, M. B. (trans.), Stanford, Stanford University Press, p. 3.

19 Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, in *HBKW*, p. 174. This Bergsonian theme bears resemblance to Stanley Cavell’s sense of “moral perfectionism” with its emphasis on the self and the future – Heideggerian emphases that Levinas ultimately contests.

the first name to appear in the book, but where one might expect to see Bergson’s name, the second name in Levinas’s text is Baudelaire and his image of “true travellers ... parting for the sake of parting” (EE 12). The line comes from “*Le Voyage*,” the last poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The entire stanza reads:

But the true voyagers are only those who leave
Just to be leaving; hearts light, like balloons,
They never turn aside from their fatality
And without knowing why they always say: “Let’s go!”²⁰

To part for the sake of parting, without knowing why, to always say, “Let’s go!” This is the attitude Levinas describes as “an evasion without an itinerary and without an end” (EE 12). Baudelaire’s “*vrais voyageurs*” leave naively, without anxiety and without the thought of fate or death. They don’t know where they are going or where they will end up. They simply set sail. They represent an idea about a beginning that breaks with the past and the future, an idea about beginning in the midst without any attempt to reach a destination or circle back to some place one has been before. This is the thought of a beginning unburdened by history and indifferent to destiny. A clean slate.

“To set sail and cut the moorings” (EE 15) is Levinas’s figure for an escape from ontology and a new approach to the meaningful centered on a radical beginning that has a concrete shape: another person. These first thoughts about beginning recall Hegel’s preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Husserl’s definition of first philosophy as a “philosophy of beginning,” but Levinas has Heidegger firmly in mind as he questions the authenticity of a beginning directed by an end. Is there another way of beginning, without projecting or returning?

20 *Mais les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-là seules qui partent
Pour partir; coeurs légers, semblables aux ballons,
De leur fatalité jamais ils ne s’écarterent,
Et, sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: Allons!*
Baudelaire, “Le Voyage,” *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 2e Edition, 1861. Reprinted in Hurlgen, A. O. (ed.) (1992) *Tous Les Poemes, White Plains, Longman*, pp. 121-125.

Baudelaire's "true travellers" are in fact setting sail in a move that Levinas ultimately associates with an exhausting dialectic between being and becoming. They are trying to escape existence, to leave without coming back. In the poem they do return, and when asked what they have seen, they reply that they've seen the same things everywhere – the same stuff of life in different shapes the whole world over. They are "weary." They have tried to escape, to flee or kill time, and instead of setting sail in a final, ecstatic departure, they return to say:

O bitter is the knowledge that one draws from the voyage!

The monotonous and tiny world, today

Yesterday, tomorrow, always, shows us our reflections,

An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom!²¹

Time has no exits. There is no way of escaping the world since there is no way of escaping oneself or seeing things from the beginning: separate, distinct, and free. Levinas insists, "existence drags behind it a weight – if only itself – which complicates the trip it takes" (EE 16). Later he stresses, "to simply say that the ego leaves itself is a contradiction, since, in quitting itself the ego carries itself along – if it does not sink into the impersonal" (EE 100). The "tiny world ... shows us our reflections." To begin from the beginning one would have to begin without taking oneself along, without the baggage of one's own ego. How then to escape? If it is impossible to shake free of yourself, how can you start over?

<III>

The promise offered by Bergson's *élan vital* ends up being a rather naïve escapism. In the end, it does not have enough weight or velocity to be a total escape or a completely new beginning. The hope fueled by this

²¹ *Amer savoir, celui qu'on tire du voyage!*
Le monde, monotone et petit, aujourd'hui,
Hier, demain, toujours, nous fait voir notre image:
Une oasis d'horreur dans un désert d'ennui!

idea – a beautiful hope – is tempered by a realistic vision of what one can do given the impossibility of an entirely new beginning. It's a lovely picture of setting sail, and Levinas gives us only the promising first lines of Baudelaire's poem in *Existence and Existents* – only the departure and not the return. He leaves off at the first stanza and leaves it to his reader to discover what the *vrais voyageurs* discover. Using Baudelaire as Bergson's poetic counterpart seems like a way of honouring Bergson and acknowledging the force of his idea. It is, however, a false start, and one can read Levinas's wish that starting over was as simple as setting sail, a wish coupled with his recognition that it is only a dream, that there is something much more heavy and difficult at work.

This somewhat reluctant distancing from Bergson could be read as pessimistic. But it could also be read as a pragmatic turn in Levinas – a turn in particular towards the "realistic spirit" William James associates with his radical empiricism. James describes radical empiricism as a "mosaic philosophy ... of plural facts" that is radical by virtue of its focus on "direct perceptual experience."²² He admits that this sort of empiricism is "like that of Hume and his descendents" (WPE 42) insofar as there is an emphasis on "the part, the element, the individual" (WPE 41). However, James claims that his empiricism differs from Hume's insofar as James counts the connectedness, or the "conjunctive relations" (WPE 44) between experiences as integral to the possibility of any experience at all. The real sense of connection and plurality is meant to save James's version of empiricism from skepticism and an ultimately despairing sense of the futility of trying to piece things back together from a set of disjointed particulars. Connectivity is not a supersensible "third thing," but something James expresses in the *Principles of Psychology* as "a feeling of *and*, and a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *by*."²³ The feeling of connectedness has just as much reality or truth as the weight of a stone in your hand (no more, no less). James thinks traditional empiricism, reacting to rationalism, overemphasises the "imperfect intimacy" [my emphasis] (WPE 47) holding things together. If rationalism over-optimistically unites everything, empiricism over-pessimistically

²² James, "A World of Pure Experience," in (1996), *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, p. 42. All subsequent references will be made in text as *WPE*.

²³ James, W. (ed. Miller, G. A.) (1983), *The Principles of Psychology*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, pp. 245 – 246.

dislocates everything. Radical empiricism aims for a hesitation between unity and disconnection.

Radical empiricism is meant to get at the real feeling of things in all their shifting weight and disjoint significance. The emphasis on plurality and experience disallows recourse to an ideal situated somewhere beyond or above the real that is the touchstone for transcendental idealism. But there is another arc within everything real, the tracing out of something thinly, vaguely, or provisionally ideal that can only be described as an ambiguous sense of plurality or endurance that trails off indefinitely. No experience is separate or final, and James concludes, "Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a *more* that continuously develops, and continuously supersedes them as life progresses" (WPE 71).

James is, in fact, the third proper name to appear in *Existence and Existents*, providing Levinas with a description of "indolence." One page after citing Baudelaire's "true travellers," Levinas invokes "William James's famous example" (EE 13) to describe an aversion to awakening. Indolence is a way of being stuck in the moment, incapable of getting started. Levinas turns to James for the description of the seemingly endless gap "between the clear duty of getting up and the putting of the foot down off the bed" (EE 13). The first chapter of *Existence and Existents* focuses on that gap and revolves around descriptions of fatigue and work that indicate a non-heroic struggle. In some ways these are moods like Heidegger's anxiety, curiosity or fear, but instead of highlighting a finding or losing of *oneself*, they show "a disquietude which his own existence awakens in man" (EE 105). They signal events in which existence feels bodily and heavy as something one has to face up to, take on, or put on as one might put on a heavy coat.

It is not hard to see James's appeal for Levinas as a prisoner in a labour camp. James is a master of examples that crystallise as recognisable feelings of weight or density. In the chapter entitled "Bergson and his Critique of Intellectualism" in *A Pluralistic Universe*, James writes about the unmanageable thickness of what he calls "sensible reality" and insists that "to get from one point in it to another we have to

plough or wade through the whole intolerable interval. No detail is spared us; it is as bad as the barbed-wire complications at Port Arthur, and we grow old and die in the process."²⁴ Sometimes there is no way of getting at something just by thinking oneself there with the ease of what James calls "conceptual reality" that "skips the intermediaries as by a divine winged power" (PU 248). James is interested in Bergson's idea about the primacy of perception, which he applauds as a return to "the despised sensible flux" (PU 248). Bergson argues that sensible reality has a visceral thickness impenetrable by concepts alone, requiring a return to "that flux which Platonism, in its strange belief that only the immutable is excellent, has always spurned" (PU 252). James takes this insight as an occasion to differentiate between "theoretic knowledge," knowing about things, and something else he calls "living or sympathetic acquaintance" (PU 249). "Theoretic knowing" knows from a distance, but "sympathetic acquaintance" is the direct experience James insists rounds out "theoretic knowledge" with an impenetrable, fleshy density.

"Skipping the intermediaries" is one way of describing Levinas's criticism of Heidegger. For all its equipment, being-alongside and in-the-midst, the "world" Heidegger describes ends up feeling surprisingly empty and weightless. Even "falling," which could indicate a gravity, looks more like the plastic bag weightlessly drifting in the opening scene of the film, *American Beauty*. Drifting is tied to a conception of thinking that Heidegger makes explicit in his essay "Building, Dwelling, Thinking." He explains,

When I go towards the door of the lecture hall, I am already there, and I could never go towards it at all if I were not such that I am there. I am never here only, as this encapsulated body; rather, I am there, that is, I already pervade the room, and only thus can I go through it.²⁵

The drift of thought can touch down anywhere. Heidegger is already here, there, and everywhere, pervading the room and escaping through the door he has yet to exit. He doesn't need to walk, just to think. But intending to

²⁴James, "Bergson and his Critique of Intellectualism" in (1996), *A Pluralistic Universe*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, p. 247. All subsequent references will be made in text as *PU*.

²⁵Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in Hofstadter, M. (trans.) (1971), *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York, Harper & Row, p. 157.

make an exit and actually making an exit are not the same thing. This where we are left at the end of Beckett's *Endgame* – with Clov's intention to exit and the vision of him standing there “dressed for the road. Panama hat, tweed coat, raincoat over his arm, umbrella, bag. He halts there by the door, impassive and motionless, his eyes fixed on Hamm, till the end....”²⁶ We never see him leave.

Thinking doesn't get one through the door. Levinas and James agree that intentions by themselves, however good, are never good enough. Levinas makes this explicit, insisting:

We are responsible beyond our intentions. It is impossible for the attention directing the act to avoid inadvertent action. We get caught up in things; things turn against us. That is to say that our consciousness, and our mastery of reality through consciousness, do not exhaust our relationship with reality, in which we are present with all the density of our being.²⁷

For both James and Levinas a critique of intellectualism coincides with a criticism of disembodied forms of thinking. To be “present with all the density of our being” is to be in a relationship that is more intimate and complicated than “knowing.” There is something inherently messy and specific about reality that resists and overreaches every intention, a residual resistance. “Theoretic knowledge” is a way of knowing what James admits “may indeed be enormous ... it may dot the whole diameter of space and time with its conceptual creations; but it does not penetrate one millimeter into the solid dimension” (PU 250). He continues, “Thought deals solely with surfaces. It can name the thickness of reality, but cannot fathom it, and its insufficiency here is essential and permanent, not temporary” (PU 250).

Sometimes you have to wade through the whole deep, sensible swamp. Thinking won't get you through and what you really need is something less essential and more real. This sense of wading without recourse to an imaginable or thinkable end – the sense of being in the thick of things – is descriptive of what Levinas calls “moments of human

²⁶ Beckett (1958), *Endgame*, New York, Grove Press, p. 82.

²⁷ Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?” in *Entre Nous, On Thinking-of-the-Other*, pp. 3-4.

density” (EE 7). Such moments show “the concrete forms of an existent's adherence to existence, in which their separation already begins” (EE 10). The first chapter of *Existence and Existents* opens with situations where action feels endless, impossible or useless and with forms of repetitive work and labour that dismantle the sense of work.²⁸ Levinas fixates on a situation where all the thinking or intending in the world will not bring you any closer to traversing the minimal and at the same time infinite interval between waking up and putting your foot down on the floor. There is space indicated by that gap, an opening in the present where things unfold differently than through a struggle to be authentically towards one's own “certain and yet indefinite”²⁹ future. It is a struggle to begin and not a struggle to end.

There are grey areas (making up a lifetime) between birth and death where one finds that being born wasn't enough of a beginning, or that death isn't enough of an ending. Indolence is one example of feeling left without the effort required to begin or end, as if the velocity of birth, of your thrown-ness into the world, wore off too soon or hasn't carried you far enough. Yet exhaustion, insomnia, and the sometimes impossible effort required to rise to the next day all indicate in their sensible density ways of rising despite yourself, rising when you don't want to, when you think, when you *know*, you can't or won't; when you are “weary of everything and everyone, and above all weary of [your]self” (EE 11). This minimal rising gesture (get up, put on your coat, go out) indicates an effort and a dignity in the midst of the darkest times. Life doesn't leave you alone. It is as if there are a thousand lives everyone lives out, endless beginnings and endings, and never the smooth path stretching forward and back. It is “an ill-paved road” and we are “jolted about by instants each of which is a beginning all over again” (EE 13).

²⁸ These are situations where nothing adds up, disrupting the Hegelian dialectic driven *forward* by negation. Howard Caygill notes this disruption and calls Levinas's description of limit situations “a deflationary reversion ... deflating the opening move of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which departs from the indication of ‘this’ or ‘that’ toward a universal or abstract notion of something.” Another way of saying this would be to say that Levinas describes a situation of being stalled at sense-certainty, stalled at “this.” Howard Caygill (2002), *Levinas and the Political*, London, Routledge, p. 54.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Macquarrie J. and Robinson, E. (eds.) (1962), San Francisco, Harper & Row, p. 356.

<IV>

Heidegger provides the launching point for *Existence and Existents*, Baudelaire provides a picture of escape, and James tempers Baudelaire's true travelers with a sober description of how hard it will be to get started at all. Things become increasingly "realistic" as Levinas moves from Heidegger's mythical "clearing" to the deck of Baudelaire's ship, and finally to James's bed. There is a closing in on the most intimate and solid thing. It is an attempt to think about confinement in the most confined space, to think about how it really feels, and then to ask about what kind of hope is available given *this* reality.

Experience invades a subject. *Existence and Existents* begins with a sense of maturity overly mature, too old too soon, and a parting glance back at something that feels like youth (and freedom) left behind. Experience puts its pin in you. There is no escape to a pure before, no way of going back behind or naively forward like Baudelaire's "*vrais voyageurs*" hoped to do. Instead there is the memory of a distant time, another life in another form – childhood, nature, freedom, a dream – and the tangible reality of a now that has divided everything into a "before and after" or a "now and then."

If Baudelaire's "*vrais voyageurs*" stand for the illusory promise of escape offered by Bergson, it is a point of departure that gives way almost immediately to weariness and the indolence that stalls effort. There are reasons for seeing the digression from Bergson to James as Levinas's own attempt to come up with an increasingly realistic description of life, death, escape, and time. In particular, Levinas cannot help including a psychological account of what time feels like in particularly hard and dense moments and how that time clings to you for the rest of your life.

This is something darker. It is something that James expressed in recounting a haunting memory of an epileptic patient in an asylum. He transcribes the description from a letter he attributes to a French

acquaintance "evidently in a bad nervous condition"³⁰ (VRE 179) – but it could easily be James himself describing the boy:

A black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them covering his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely non-human. This image and my fear entered into a species of combination with each other. That shape am I, I felt, potentially....it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear. After this the universe was entirely changed for me altogether (VRE 179).

The sense of things being "entirely changed for me altogether" is a radical shift. There are some experiences that one goes through, some scenes that transpire and leave everything intact. You can move through some things seamlessly (*this* to *that*, *here* to *there*). But there are other kinds of "pivotal human experiences" (VRE 155) that are unending and unending. Then it is as if, even at a distance, "sensible reality" has a hold on you and there is no movement from this to that. These experiences provoke a change and perhaps especially maturity, but added to this is a compounding sense of being insufficient to the task of coming through such a change, of bearing certain kinds of memories or beginning again, by oneself. There is a lasting sense of what James calls "this experience of melancholia" (VRE 163) that seemed to him to have "a religious bearing." That is to say, the upshot of such melancholia is a profound sense that something external and outside of one's own experience is required to get one through to another side, to begin again, make a new turn or simply orient in an "entirely changed" universe. James found

³⁰ James, W. (2002), *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York, The Modern Library, p. 179. All subsequent references will be made in text as VRE. In his Introduction to *The Writings of William James, A Comprehensive Edition*, John McDermott suggests that this passage is closely linked to passages from James's diaries from 1870, a year identified with his "Crisis" texts and his suicidal tendencies. In the chapter on "The Sick Soul," in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James tells us he will have to draw from personal experience, writing "Since these experiences of melancholia are in the first instance absolutely private and individual, I can now help myself out with personal documents" (VRE 163).

outside support in "scripture-like texts," mantras he could repeat to himself: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy-laden," without which he writes, "I think I should have grown really insane" (VRE 180).

James writes about religious experience in terms of a "more" with which we feel ourselves connected.³¹ The "religious" dimension of the "bearing" is just this outward gesture and ambiguous contact with "more," a leaning on the shoulder of someone or something else. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James differentiates between "institutional" and "personal" religion, saying he is only concerned with the latter. He goes on to describe "personal religion" as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (VRE 36). A few pages later he continues: "Religion, whatever it is, is a man's total reaction upon life" (VRE 40). This is a broad and loose description of "religion," so broad that it is hardly recognisable as anything other than the basic fabric of a person's life, the things that persist meaningfully through any number of setbacks or collapses, the things that stand when everything else falls. Such things for James happened to be the "scripture-like texts" that helped to bear him through when everything solid seemed to be slipping away. A mantra, a photograph, a line of poetry, an object, a person: any of it could serve as a touchstone and function like those scriptures, allowing the entire world to balance on the tip of a single, saving point.

Like James, Levinas describes being supported by something from the outside, but in Levinas's case, the saving point of contact is called a face. Like James, Levinas also invokes a certain "melancholy"³² that becomes descriptive of a mature hope and indicates being tinged with experiences that have invaded and wounded the psyche. For both Levinas and James, melancholy becomes a pivot mood. Something impinges from the outside. The subject is not ultimately self-sufficient. She finds that bearing up requires facing out.

31 See "Conclusions" to VRE, 528 ff.

32 In particular, Levinas describes a "melancholy that does not derive from anxiety." Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, Hamacher, W. and Wellbery, D.E. (eds.) (2000), Stanford, Stanford University press, p. 100.

Facing out toward a source of ambiguous "more" is the name for a gesture that both James and Levinas identify with religion. It is an open and vague sense of religion and not a specific dogma or set of beliefs. What is "religious" in their thought turns out to be an emphasis on plurality and a notion of experience as fundamentally excessive. Levinas in fact identifies religion with "the exceptional situation where there is no privacy" (BPW 29). This is a religion of the inter-human, of being attuned to and able to be moved by another person who remains irreducible to one's intentions. It is something Levinas calls "horizontal religion, remaining on the earth of human beings."³³ The only temple for this religion is the crowded streets, and the only after life is the life of another person who lives on after you. It is not an issue of belief. Life entails the *experience* that there is more life than one's own life, a visceral experience of a world populated with an infinite number of faces.

<V>

If Levinas's ethics is a "turbid, muddled, gothic sort of affair" (PU 7) in the spirit of James's radical empiricism as I have suggested, then it does not give us principles or rules we might learn and follow. If prescriptions are what we are looking for, Levinas will be disappointing. But perhaps he gives us something better. Levinas, like James, writes about an inner lining of hope. It is not just any variety of hope, but the kind of hope available in the most hopeless times. It is a hope found in other people and banal decencies, the hope inscribed in Levinas's description of ethics as these words: "After you."³⁴ There is a very real kind of promise he writes about that is not terribly complicated and certainly not mystical. It is the promise that, in the absence of any ethical guarantees and faced with the reality that things will, and do, fall apart, we retain a capacity to be decent and dignified. The possibility of saying "After you" remains open. This is not an account of love, friendship, trust, benevolence or justice. There is no big promise or full, exuberant hope. Rather, Levinas writes about the hope allowed by the repetition of

33 Levinas, "Hermeneutics and the Beyond," in *Entre Nous, On Thinking-of-the-Other*, 70.

34 "(We) say, before an open door, 'After you, sir!' It is an original 'After you, sir!' that I have tried to describe." Levinas, E. (1985), *Ethics and Infinity, Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Cohen, R. A. (trans.), Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, p. 89.

the seemingly least significant gesture. "After you." It is a decent thing to say. Often we say it without thinking about it. We even say it without saying it out loud - with a nod of the head or a sweep of the hand. Levinas pauses at this gesture, asking us to think about it so that, when it becomes less simple (as it inevitably will), we won't forget how uncomplicated it once felt.

We should not feel overwhelmed by being responsible for everything, because our "everything" is limited by the time we have to be responsible. In most cases, what we can do or accomplish will be less than ideal. Yet Levinas insists this is the margin of ethics, the margin of the human. Ethics works at the level of the ordinary - and Levinas insists all along that it can be summed up by the two words, "After you." It is surprising how hard it is to leave the "you" unqualified - to leave this minimal and at the same time huge ambiguity, to leave that opening open to every face.

Reading Levinas with James should help us see the minimalism of Levinas's ethical claims and the pragmatism of his hope. Hope does not always come in the form you first expected. Sometimes you find it in the least likely place. If you find it, it is unlikely that you find it once and for all. Philosophers tend to gaze up looking for a peak to climb for the best view. Levinas turns us around and brings us down to earth. He brings us all the way down to the closest, most dense things - to the people we live among, their expressions and faces. We have to give up the idea of a single peak with the best view. But we gain a new landscape that looks more like a place we could actually inhabit. We lose the overview, but we gain an infinite number of close-ups.

I will close with an image for this flashing, impermanent and nonetheless significant variety of hope that can be found throughout James and underpinning Levinas's vision of ethics. In his remarkable essay, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," James defends the idea of plural, indefinite meanings. He underscores our susceptibility to "a certain blindness" to the things that are meaningful in another person's life and generally to "how soaked and shot through life is with values and meaning which we fail to realise because of our external and insensible

point of view."³⁵ We fail to recognise what is meaningful because we fail to see as significant the things that don't register as significant *for us*. This failure is a failure of empathy that has consequences for how we treat others, but it is also a failure of wonder, curiosity, or imagination that has consequences for our own experiences of meaning and value in the world. It is a failure of vision that makes the world smaller, closing off whole chapters that we might otherwise be able to read.

James's example for an inner, invisible lining of meaning comes from Robert Louis Stevenson's essay "The Lantern Bearers." Stevenson describes what it was like to be "a boy with a bull's eye" under his topcoat. A bull's eye was a tin lantern that "smelled noisomely of blistered tin" and "never burned aright."³⁶ It had little or no practical value as a lantern and functioned only as a symbol of membership in the group of lantern-bearers who would fasten the old lights to their belts. Stevenson describes carrying the lantern hidden under his coat and meeting another lantern-bearer: "...there would be an anxious 'Have you got your lantern?' and a gratified 'Yes!'" (CB 632). The lanterns burned invisibly inside the boys' heavy coats and imbued them with a noble sense of purpose and community inexplicable to an outside observer who could see only the heavy topcoats and not the lights dimly burning underneath. Yet the lantern, the secret knowledge of its being there, gave the boys a hidden ground of joy about which Stevenson concludes,

The essence of this bliss was to walk by yourself in the black of night, the slide shut, the top-coat buttoned, not a ray escaping, whether to conduct your footsteps or to make your glory public, - a mere pillar of darkness in the dark; and all the while, deep down in the privacy of your fool's heart, to know you had a bull's-eye at your belt, and to exult and sing over the knowledge (CB 632-33).

The ground of a person's joy or sorrow is rarely, if ever, fully visible. We are prone to a certain blindness about what makes things

³⁵ James, "What Makes a Life Significant," in *The Writings of William James*, p. 645.

³⁶ James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings," in *The Writings of William James*, p. 632. All subsequent references will be made in text as CB.

significant, about where meaning lies. This blindness is not only with respect to others, but also with respect to ourselves, to the grounds of significance in our own lives that we routinely miss or take for granted. The negative claim of James's essay is: don't presume. We cannot see the bull's eye beneath the topcoat, and so we never know the whole story. The negative or limiting claim is coincident with James's belief that radical empiricism attends to the "imperfect intimacy" of things. Things are connected in a loose, shifting way and we should always be skeptical of claims to total resolution or knowledge, skeptical of final labels or ultimate definitions. But there is also a positive claim. This is the claim that we can become increasingly open and tolerant observers and participants in the world. We can, with practice, be more intimate with one another, see the glimmer of the bull's-eye, or at least be open to the possibility of it's being there – open to the possibility of others as unique "pillars of dark in the darkness." We don't have perfect intimacy or full disclosure, but thankfully we don't need either.

The darkness is very dark. This is something Levinas and James would agree about. But there are also lights in our midst. In the last pages of his 1966 essay, "Nameless," Levinas returns to the Second World War and writes:

In the accursed cities where dwelling is stripped of its architectural wonders, not only are the gods absent, but the sky itself. But in monosyllabic hunger, in the wretched poverty in which houses and objects revert to their material function and enjoyment is closed in on all sides, the face of man shines forth.³⁷

"The face of man shines forth," like a blinking light. Levinas writes from the double perspective of hope and despair. It is the hopefulness found in despair – demanded out of despair – the vertigo sensed in the face of abandonment met with an unimaginable return. Levinas's lights are faces, and he argues for their expressive, hidden depths. There is something like the "sting of the real" in Levinas, and it is the sting of these blinking lights. We never see them entirely or all at once, but they surround us like an infinite number of flickering close-ups, a crowd of

³⁷ Levinas, "Nameless," in *Proper Names*, p. 139.

faces, a sea of sometimes dimly and sometimes brightly burning bull's-eyes.