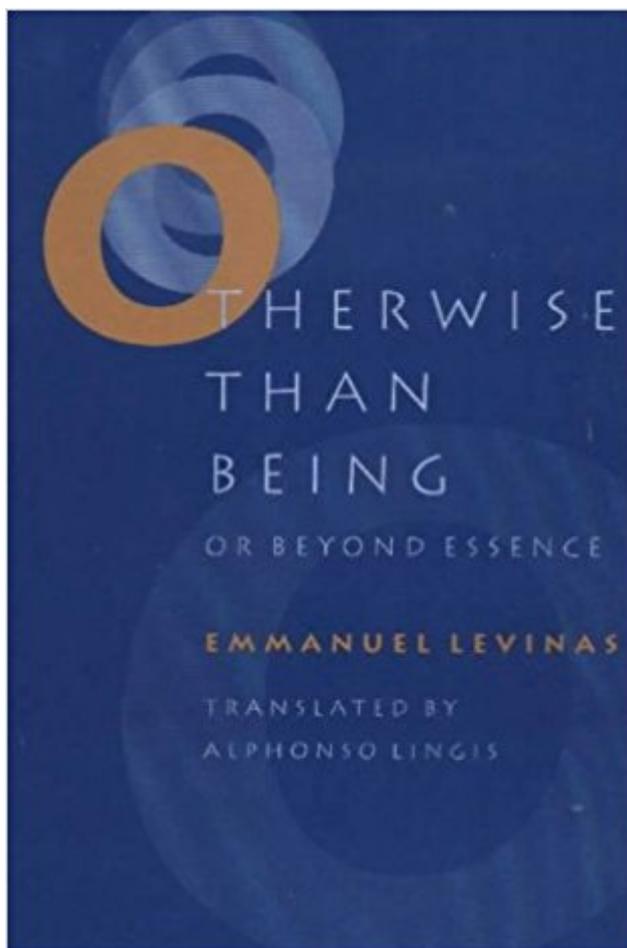


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Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence



Synopsis

Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence, first published in 1974, is the second of Levinas's mature philosophical works, the first being Totality and Infinity (first published in 1961). Otherwise than Being is essentially the sequel to Totality and Infinity, further elaborating the rich and comprehensive philosophy of ethical metaphysics that Levinas had introduced in the earlier work. At the heart of Levinas's writings is the irreducible ethical proximity of one human being to another morality, and through that encounter a relation to all others justice. Otherwise than Being emphasizes the themes of moral sensibility and language within this system of ethical metaphysics. These themes had been introduced in Totality and Infinity, but are developed in this later work. And while Totality is focused on ethical alterity, Otherwise is focused on ethical subjectivity. The process of the revelation of Being as laid out by modern phenomenological ontology is severely criticized, as Levinas claims that the ultimate account of these phenomena is not in ontology, but in a paradoxical discourse of what is beyond Being.

Book Information

Paperback: 253 pages

Publisher: Duquesne (May 28, 1998)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0820702994

ISBN-13: 978-0820702995

Product Dimensions: 0.8 x 6.5 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 13 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #157,066 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #35 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Phenomenology #63 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Philosophy > Metaphysics #222 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Metaphysics

Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation) Original Language: French

EMMANUEL LEVINAS, a major voice in twentieth century philosophical thought, died in late 1995. After studying under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in the late 1920s, Levinas went on to develop a philosophical system that placed ethics at its center. His writings have influenced several

generations of French philosophers, including Jacques Derrida, and have won him an admiring audience among theologians.

Initially, I did not think it would be possible to read and understand this work; I had read excerpts from it numerous times over the last several years and found it impenetrable. However, after purchasing the book and carefully reading Lingis' Introduction, it was much easier than I had thought. All in all, it took three month's of close and careful reading to complete, spending about one or two hours per day, usually first thing in the morning. I don't think this is the hardest work I read -- I failed miserably and eventually gave up on Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* after about 140 pages -- but certainly it was the most profound, and disturbing. Unlike *Totality and Infinity*, which dealt in depth with a number of different but related ideas, *Otherwise Than Being (OB)* is really much narrower in its scope. It deals specifically with subjectivity. Levinas uses an idiosyncratic terminology throughout this work. The word 'essence' in this work does not denote essence in the Aristotelian or the Husserlian sense. For Levinas it means simply 'being'. Another possible point of confusion is the word 'anarchy' which in OB does not have any political connotation; it means simply an-archic, or untimely, beyond time. The word 'interest' (or French, *interesse*) in OB means an inwardness of essence, the depth of the subject's inwardness in essence, or belongingness to being. There are some rather extraordinary claims in this work: Most importantly the claim that subjectivity itself is constituted by the exposure to the other in proximity. An even more extraordinary claim is that coherent rational discourse dissimulates transcendence, and "owe[s] its coherence to the State, which violently excludes subversive discourse" (p. 170). The work is extremely unsettling in this regard, for the anarchy of responsibility for the other is not to be confused with some project or intention willingly taken up by the subject. It is a hostage situation that is entirely passive, "an anachronous birth" in me, which I cannot except myself from. Over and over throughout the text this point is belabored: that this is not, not, not to be confused with self-sacrifice or being a do-gooder or asceticism. It is a phenomenological description of how subjectivity is constituted. Whether one in the end accepts Levinas' claims in this work, or brushes it off as nonsense, one will have to face the question of whether the *Otherwise than Being* is true. For Levinas, there two (several) truths: there is the beyond essence, and there is essence, just as there are two times, the past that was never present, and the present. This work is profoundly disturbing because it is claimed that there is no escape from the Good beyond being; dismissing the book as nonsense does not exempt you from the anarchy of responsibility.

13 YRS LATER: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF "KERYGMA": In 1961, Levinas gave us his masterpiece of "Totality and Infinity" where he outlined his basic position on phenomenology. Now, 13 years later, in 1974, he gives us a refinement of his phenomenology that emphasizes the otherness of "being", by designating it "Kerygma"

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