

The Object of Anxiety: Heidegger and Levinas and the Phenomenology of the Dead

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Heidegger and the Dead Other

In his reflection upon Dasein's attempt to approach, understand and appropriate the possibility of its own death in *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger makes an interesting side note on the phenomenological appearance of the dead body. Make no mistake, it is only a note – one made in passing en route to a much larger argument. But it is a note of interest nonetheless; for within it is contained the thread of a thought that, when pursued to its end, seems to unravel some of the fundamental elements of the Heideggerian analytic revealing a structural fragility to his phenomenological approach which, when examined, opens up a new way of understanding Emmanuel Levinas' critique of it.

Near the beginning of division II of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger turns his attention to an analytic of Dasein's being-toward-death, Heidegger notes what he calls the curious passage between states of being which is witnessed in the death of another.¹ "In the dying of the Other," Heidegger writes there, "we can experience that remarkable phenomenon of Being which may be defined as the change-over (*Umschalg*) of an entity from Dasein's kind of being (or life) to no-longer-Dasein," (or death).² By Heidegger's read what one observes in the death of another, it seems, is a kind of existential alchemy: death seems to have the power of transforming one mode of being, namely Dasein, into another mode of being. Thus, what one has before oneself in the dead body of another is, according to Heidegger, "no-longer-Dasein, in the sense of Being-no-longer-in-the-world," it is no longer a way of being through a lived body (*Leib*).³ Instead, what one perceives in the dead other is merely the "Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more (*Nur-noch-vorhandenseins*) of a corporeal Thing (*Körperdinges*) which we encounter," like a rock or a tool.⁴ Indeed, this latter comparison is made explicit by Heidegger who writes that once a body has passed from life into death (from being as a *Leib* to being as a *Körper*) it somehow loses its interest for us as another Dasein with whom

we may dwell. It is thus no longer the subject of Being-with (*Mitsein*) but merely an object of possible reflection, like a tool (*Zeug*), retaining interest perhaps only to “the student of pathological anatomy,” who may address it as the cobbler does the shoe or the butcher a slab of meat.⁵ So it is for Heidegger the change-over from life to death witnessed in the demise of another amounts to a kind of ontological devaluation of the body from lived-being to tool-being.

Of course very few of us actually encounter the corpse in the way described by Heidegger, as if it were simply another object amongst many, no different than the pen with which we write or the desk we write upon. Indeed, even the “student of pathological anatomy,” must take some time to accommodate him or herself to the appearance of the dead body of another to be able to see it as little more than “a corporeal Thing.” The initial, and perhaps more primordial, response one has to the presence of a corpse is disgust, revulsion and dread. So it is that from a natural standpoint we are inclined to think that there is something fundamentally different about the nature of the corpse which distinguishes it from other simple tool-beings. For, contrary to Heidegger’s claim, the corpse, unlike the pen or desk, does not in fact relinquish our attention – but demands it. The corpse stands out as a particularly fascinating object and is not easily passed over or moved to the background of attention. Quite to the contrary, the dead body of another seems to be the one object which in every case insists on being placed in the foreground of our intentionality. This is so much the case, in fact, that one cannot help but be surprised by Heidegger’s seemingly off-handed treatment of it. Indeed, it strikes the reader as somehow disingenuous. After all, we don’t ritualize the disposal of other such objects through funeral rites and mourning in the way we do the dead. At the same time, such accounts are perfectly in keeping with the logic of *Being and Time*; after all, it is not the phenomenon of the corpse that Heidegger is interested in as such; but what, instead, he argues it signifies, namely death, which is, of course for Heidegger, always only the possibility of one’s own death given Dasein’s nature as mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*). So it is that Heidegger’s interest in the corpse only extends insofar as it can represent (*vertreten*) for Dasein the possibility of its own dying.⁶

Thus, according to Heidegger, though phenomenologically no different than the pen or the desk or any other being ready-at-hand (*Zuhandenes*), the corpse nevertheless bears a special phenomenological

status for the proximal Dasein as “something *unalive* (*Unlebendiges*)” as something “which has lost its life,” as opposed to something which has never been alive.⁷ As a result, though perhaps phenomenologically no different from any other simple tool-being, in the natural attitude the corpse bears a significance to us which other such objects do not. As something *unalive*, argues Heidegger, the corpse presents living Dasein with a phenomenological site wherein it can apprehend the possibility of its own death. Indeed, it is this power of the corpse to confront the living with their own-most ultimate possibility that interests Heidegger in the phenomenon of the corpse at all.⁸ The corpse provides for Heidegger a way of getting into the main project of the second half of *Being and Time*, dealing with Dasein’s potentiality to assume itself authentically and realize its own being-toward-death.⁹

As a site wherein living Dasein can be presented with its own-most possibility, its own death, the corpse seems to function for Heidegger as a kind of *memento mori* reminding living Dasein of its ultimate end. So it is we see that Heidegger’s interest in the corpse has less to do with anything to do with the particular nature of the corpse than with Dasein’s existential relation to its own death. The power of the corpse to evoke a reaction from Dasein, Heidegger thus contends, is not properly its own - it does not have to do, as we may naively thing, with anything concerning the nature of the corpse itself. Instead, it comes from the Dasein to whom the corpse appears – it is thus a power which the apprehending Dasein attributes to it and not one which it possesses properly itself. Treated phenomenologically, he argues, the corpse appears to be little more than a sign signaling or a mirror reflecting Dasein’s own-most possibility, its own-death. The dead body of another is thus nothing more than the phenomenal place-holder of Dasein’s being-towards-death. The particular reaction a corpse incites is not special, nor inherent to its presentation, but is instead an emergent property of Dasein’s. Theoretically, at least then, the horror and dread inspired by a corpse could reasonably manifest in response to anything which Dasein has invested with the same referent – the skull and cross-bones on a flag, for example, or a rotting piece of fruit. So long as an object has been invested with the same kind of symbolic power as the corpse it should evoke, by Heidegger’s logic, the same reaction as a corpse.

Now, aside from appearing incredibly solipsistic, as if all Dasein ever encountered in the world were signs and referents to itself, a charge Heidegger would vehemently deny, after all, the entire project of *Being*

and Time is to establish an analytic of life which can avoid the excesses of such subjectivisms, there seems to be something about this account of one's apprehension of the dead which is terribly reductive. Is it true that all there is to the horror inspired by the dead is a reaction to the possibility of our own death? Is there nothing more to this experience than that? Is there truly nothing special or particular to the nature of the corpse which would fundamentally distinguish it from any other tool-being? Is it true, furthermore, that we could respond to a piece of rotting fruit, the Jolly Roger, or any other *memento more* in the same way that we do dead body of another? To answer these questions let us follow the advice that gave birth to the phenomenological movement itself and go "back to the things themselves."

Towards a Phenomenology of the Corpse

Take, for example, the recent debates in the news media concerning the questionable ethical value of broadcasting or publishing photos of the dead bodies of insurgent leaders and soldiers. Remember, for example, the international outcry in 2006 surrounding the release of the images of the dead body of Al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi even by those countries and organizations seeking his death. Or, the horror with which the world responded later that year to the leaked video of the execution of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. Note as well the Pentagon's 2001 moratorium on media coverage of the repatriation of the remains of dead American soldiers.

While one could read in these sorts of examples evidence of little more than political maneuvering or propagandizing, as indeed they most certainly are, they are at the same time evidence of something else which is going on in the collective consciousness of the public. Namely, they are examples of the fact that there is a latent belief that the dead body demands a certain dignity which should exclude it from such antics. So it is that we don't experience the same horror or disgust over other politically motivated images of war, say for example the night-vision shots of the bombing of Baghdad or the iconic shot of revelers toppling at statue, both images which just as directly testify to the possibility and actuality of death. And yet, our reaction to the broadcast of such images does not even begin to compare with our collective reaction to the broadcast of images of the dead.

What we see from this example is that it is not the political motivations behind the dissemination of such images, nor their reference to the possibility of death which they contain, it is the presence of the body itself which horrifies us. The dead body, our reactions seem to demonstrate, is a special kind of materiality, one which requires a certain modicum of respect and modesty in the way that other things, such as a fallen statue or cruise missile, do not; even if they also testify to the immediate possibility of death.

The curious phenomenal power of the corpse is also testified to in the banality of real-estate transactions. It is a well known phenomenon that the price of a house in which someone dies plummets, an especially strange fact considering that a body is just as easily removed from a house as the furniture of its previous occupant. And yet our convictions remain that there is something about the presence of the dead-body which cannot be removed quite so easily – some trace which denies even the power of Lysol and scrub-brushes. And so a house in which someone has died can remain empty for years, an object of fascination and horror to local children, the subject of nightmares and haunted fantasies. Why is this the case? Is it simply, as Heidegger would perhaps argue, that the house now stands as a reminder of death? If this were the case, then the church in which the memorial service took place, or the flag flying at half mast at the local post-office in remembrance of the dead should bear the same power; and yet they do not. There is something special about the house the deceased that the church and post-office do not have: namely, its proximity to the body of the dead. So it is that we see that our horror at sleeping in the house or the bed in which someone has passed is not so easily explained by their reference to death. Instead, one must once again recognize the curious and special power the corpse carries over and beyond its symbolic meaning. To use the simplest terms available to us, there is just something creepy about a dead-body and no one wants to live in a house or sleep in a bed wherein one was held.

From this example we see that the dead body seems to function not so much as a sign signifying the possibility of own death, but, just the opposite, the referent of a sign – in this case the house serving to remind us of what it once contained. It is the dead body itself that we do not want to think about, not some possible message that it broadcasts. Likewise in the debate surrounding the publication of images of the dead, it is not the fact that death has occurred that disturbs us nor the fact that more, including

ourselves, may die in a similar way, certainly images of the carpet bombing of a city broadcast this message, instead, it is the confrontation with the body itself.

Certainly the corpse suggests the eventuality of our own death, there is no use denying this. Only this message seems only part of what disturbs us so much about the corpses presence – which is why our reaction to it is different than our reaction to other reminders of death, say a grave-stone or even a doctor's diagnosis of cancer. Though these may be horrible and unpleasant, they don't horrify us in the same way that the corpse does. So it is that we must recognize that there is in fact something unique to the presentation of the corpse, something which cannot be overlooked and which is *en plus* to to our concern for our own eventual death.

A final example can be seen in the ubiquitous 'slasher' or zombie films which, at least in part, derive their power to horrify us through their presentation of corpses, either walking around half-decayed, or simply lying on the floor in various states of disrepair. In fact it seems to be this element, the presence of a dead body which in fact makes a horror film horrible in the first place. The element of surprise, ever present in horror films, is a mainstay in the action genre as is the nearly constant reference to the threat of death. And nowhere, does a film function more as a reminder of death than in a drama, especially those of a particularly existentialist bend. Think for example of Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal* – one can hardly fathom a film more overtly about the ever present possibility of death. Indeed, the whole point of the film is in many ways to force the audience to confront and come to terms with the eventuality of their own death. Yet, we do not identify such films as *horror* films, but perhaps merely as *heavy* films – films dealing with weighty subject matter. The crucial difference between such films and horror films then is not their reference to death, nor even their employment of surprise; it is exclusively their portrayal of death through the gore that is the dead body.

What we take from all of these examples is that there appears to be something particular to the nature of the dead body that grants it a power over us that other *memento mori* do not have. Dead bodies are creepy, we think. They make our skin crawl and repulse us. In this regard they are truly uncanny objects. Indeed, they are the exemplar par excellence of the uncanny, as Freud recognized in his classic treatment of the subject.

The Corpse as Uncanny

According to Freud, “to many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts,”¹⁰ or with “[s]evered limbs, a severed head, a hand detached from the arm,”¹¹ etc. Freud even notes the way in which the uncanniness of the dead body is often transferred to objects with which it has come into contact, like the house noted above. “[I]n some modern languages,” writes Freud, “the German phrase *ein unheimliches Haus* [‘an uncanny house’] can be rendered only by the periphrasis ‘a haunted house.’”¹² Freud defines this uncanniness one feels in the presence of something like the dead body as “that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and long been familiar.”¹³ The uncanny, for him is the human response to the reassertion or re-appearance of something that is typically taken for granted, something which typically operates silently in the background of all that we do and think. It is, in other words, the response provoked by the appearance of something which generally serves merely as the horizon of human life and interaction – it occurs when the horizon takes center stage, as it were. Thus, quoting Schellings, Freud defines the uncanny as that which “was intended to remain secret, hidden away, [but] has come into the open.”¹⁴ Hence his assessment of the dead body as the uncanny object *par excellence*. The body, typically experienced as that empowering field which enables life and existence, usually functions hidden within the background of all that we see or do, only coming to the fore when it demands something of us, such as when we are sick or hungry. In the dead body, however, we are presented with an image of the body no longer as background but as foreground. The horror of the dead body of the other is that it no longer functions silently and hidden, behind the scenes as it were, of our interaction with the other, but commands center stage of our attention. In the dead body of another we are presented with the horrible overwhelming reality of the materiality of the body. As the appearance of something which typically remains concealed, serving to empower or interests, when the body presents itself in death, usurping our interests, it “belongs to the real of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread,”¹⁵ and “anxiety.”¹⁶

Indeed, this has been what we have been pursuing all along. As the uncanny object *par excellence*, the dead body seems to inspire a kind of anxiety within us. Indeed, the dead body appears to be, to coin a phrase,

a kind of *object of anxiety*: an unsettling presentation that forces us to reckon with that which is typically taken *as given* (and one should hear a reference to Heidegger's formulation of being as the given (*es gibt*)) the corpse provokes a sense of anxiety within us. It is for this reason that we find corpses so disturbing. But what does it mean to attribute such a power to the dead body? What does it mean to identify it as an *object of anxiety*?

An Object of Anxiety?

Remember that in *Being and Time* Heidegger goes to great lengths to distinguish what he calls fear (*Furcht*) from what he terms anxiety (*Angst*). Fear, Heidegger writes, is always a fear before *something*, some determinate possibility or entity in the world.¹⁷ It is, for example, the feeling one has when confronted with a rabid dog or when surprised by a masked stranger. So it is that in fear, he makes clear, there is always some object upon which we fixate, which inspires our experience. By contrast, Heidegger argues that anxiety does not arise in the face of any definite possibility or entity in the world, but instead arises through their dissolution.¹⁸ By Heidegger's read, anxiety is thus not a framing of any particular appearance in the world on the foreground of our attention, as fear is, but is instead the very collapse of that world, such that *nothing* stands out bringing the horizontality of our attention into the fore. Anxiety thus accompanies the loss of such determinate entities and the subsequent appearance of that which lies behind their appearances, that which typically functions to enable and empowers them, *the nothing* (*das Nichts*).¹⁹ Anxiety thus does not arise from *somewhere* or *something* in particular, according to Heidegger, but instead proceeds from *nowhere* and *nothing* in particular²⁰ – it arises in the face of the general nature of Dasein's being itself, which, he claims, presents itself not through the appearance of any particular possibility, but through the presentation of the possibility of possibility itself.²¹ In a word, anxiety announces in the wake of the collapse of the definite the upsurge of the indefinite. Thus when one is overcome by anxiety what one feels, by Heidegger's description, is not the fear that any particular event will or will not occur; instead what one feels is a penetrating unease about the indefinite nature of existence as such.²² In other words, whereas fear arises before specific beings or entities, anxiety arises in the face of what Heidegger calls Being in general, which of course Heidegger notoriously aligns with the nothing. This is made clearest in his 1929 essay "What is

Metaphysics” where he writes that “[a]nxiety makes manifest the nothing.” Or again, where he writes that “[t]he nothing unveils itself in anxiety – but not as a being,” and again, “the nothing becomes manifest in and through anxiety.”²³

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As is well known, for Heidegger, the distinguishing feature of human existence is freedom – Dasein’s suspension above an abyss of possibilities. “Da-sein,” he writes, “means being held out into the nothing.”²⁶ This radical freedom – this ability to determine the way in which our being presents itself through a myriad of possibilities – is for Heidegger the most profound ways in which human existence distinguishes itself from other forms of existence. It thus functions for him as the Being, as it were, of our way of being. Anxiety, however, is, he claims, the price paid for this radically freedom and indeterminacy.²⁷ According to Heidegger “[w]hat oppresses us [in anxiety] is not this or that, nor is it the summation of everything present-at-hand; it is rather the *possibility* of the ready-to-hand in general; that is to say, it is the world itself.”²⁸ The weight of existence, the burden intuited in anxiety, is thus not, according to Heidegger, the fact of human finitude (the inevitability of death), nor any particular finite object which might threaten us with death or remind us of death; but, instead, it is the result of very way in which the Dasein is – the Being which allows Dasein to be itself. According to Heidegger then, anxiety is, in a sense, the intuition or apprehension of the nature of Being itself, understood as nothing, that which typically lies hidden behind our existence as its background and horizon empowering our freedom.

From this it becomes clear how Heidegger’s claims concerning the nature of anxiety resembles remarkably what we discovered phenomenologically as the effects of the appearance of the dead body, and which we furthermore saw confirmed in Freud’s psychoanalytic investigation into the nature of the uncanny. The dead body, as an *uncanny object*, an object which confounds our expectation by presenting something which typically remains hidden within human experience – something that typically operates unnoticed in the background empowering human

existence – seems to operate to inspire anxiety within the onlooker, and not merely fear. After all, Heidegger himself recognized the tie between uncanniness and anxiety arguing that “[i]n anxiety one feels ‘*uncanny*’ [*unheimlich*],” which Heidegger famously unpacks as feeling “*not-at-home*,” unsettled and disturbed, displaced and disrupted.²⁹ If indeed, the corpse inspires a feeling of uncanniness, of feeling “not-at-home,” disturbed and unsettled, isn’t there ground to identifying it as an *object of anxiety*, an object which unsettles our being-in-the-world and casts us into the realm of the indefinite? And, doesn’t this furthermore point to the fact that there is some intimate tie between the body and the horizontality of Dasein’s being-in-the-world – some since in which it can be identified with the empowering Being of our way of being?

Of course, to identify the corpse as an object of anxiety, immediately presents a problem to the orthodox Heideggerian; for how could any singular object function to present the indefinite nature of Being in general, which, according to Heidegger is the only source of true anxiety? More than just a problem for the faithful Heideggerian, this question presents a kind of logical conundrum for the phenomenological community as a whole. For, how is it possible that a singular finite being could present the infinite nature of Being as a whole and thus function as the source of anxiety and not merely fear, as distinguished by Heidegger? How is it possible that something seemingly phenomenologically less, a singular/particular body qua entity, contain within its presentation more than it presents, the Being of beings as such, the nothing? Clearly this is quite a serious problem. No wonder, then Heidegger’s desire to want to reduce the corpse to the status of simply thing reducing it merely to an object of fear instead of recognizing it as somehow inspiring deep dread and anxiety. If we are to be true to the results of our brief phenomenological analysis of the body, we must deal with these problems.

It seems then that we are left with a few options, either we deny the validity of our investigation and recant everything we have discovered concerning the phenomenal peculiarity of the corpse as an object of anxiety thereby opening a path to remain true to Heidegger’s claim that the corpse is phenomenally like any other tool-being and thus merely an object of fear; or we maintain our intuition that the dead body is different than other sorts of beings due to the way in which it can provoke feelings of anxiety and uncanniness, and in so doing betray the limits placed upon the nature of beings detailed in the Heideggerian analytic. If we are to take

this route, we are then seemingly forced to make another decision: either jettison Heidegger's analysis of the phenomenological difference between fear and anxiety; or, more intriguingly, deconstruct slightly his famous ontological distinction between being and Beings, which, as we will see shortly, is a route paved for us, at least in part, by Emmanuel Levinas.

If we were to take the first option, however, we must still account for the fact that at least within the natural attitude the corpse appears differently than other simply tool-beings and does indeed seem to inspire a kind of dread and anxiety that even a loaded gun, clearly an object of fear, does not. Of course this task would not be too difficult. One could argue, for example, that as something *unalive* which presents Dasein with the possibility of its death, the corpse presents Dasein with a future in which its specific being-in-the-world, its *Da*, is erased and it is absorbed back into the undetermined mass of *Sein*, Being in general. In this way, though still an object, the corpse's ability to provoke anxiety is explained: it is not the corpse which is the source of anxiety, but the return of Being in general effected in death as signified by the corpse. But by taking this route one quickly betrays their intentions of remaining true to Heidegger. For by allowing that the corpse does inspire anxiety one quickly erases the clean distinctions within Heidegger's system between objects of fear and the feeling of anxiety. Indeed, if one were to make this move any object of fear could all too easily transform into an avenue to anxiety. After all, as Heidegger claims, "[t]hat which fear fears about is that very entity which is afraid – Dasein." If all fear, as Heidegger seems to think, is fear about what could happen to Dasein, be it simply harm or death, and death presents Dasein with the possibility of the return of Being in general, then all fear could potentially breed into anxiety. So it is that one only remains true to the Heideggerian account in this way by betraying another, perhaps lesser, element of his analysis.

But, it is not our job to be apologists for Heidegger, nor attempt to cobble together different elements of his thought in the attempt to shore it up against possible criticism, especially when a much simpler answer exists: namely to argue that the corpse is phenomenally distinct from other simple tool objects in such a way that seems to destroy the clear delineations between singular beings and Being made in *Being and Time* in this way allowing it to function as an *object of anxiety*. Of course, if we choose to go this route a problem still remains, as we have noted, for we must still find a way of accounting for how it is that a singular entity/object such as the

corpse could present something so much beyond its limited phenomenal presentation like the indefinite/infinite nature of Being. Fortunately, as hinted above, Emmanuel Levinas has already identified and examined an analogous phenomenon in his work.

Levinas' 'Phenomenology' of the Face

Throughout his career, but most clearly in his early masterpiece *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas sought to phenomenologically define the curious phenomenon of the face of another. According to Levinas, the face of another presents otherwise than any object of comprehension, otherwise than any other simple thing, for the face, though “still a thing among things, breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it.”³⁰ Thus whereas other simple objects, as dead materials (*Körperdinges*), are completely exhausted in their presentation, concealing nothing behind their objectivity, “[t]he face is a *living* presence; it is expression,” and shows more than can be intuited in its formal presentation.³¹ The face of the Other is thus distinct from other objects, claims Levinas in that, “at each moment [it] destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of it *ideatum* – the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but *καθ'αυτό*. It *expresses* itself.”³² Given the way the face expresses itself, it seems to present more than it objectively presents, a seemingly impossible formulation. As such, the face can never be reduced to its own objectivity but must instead be recognized as a kind of “disengagement from all objectivity,” a rupture, as it were, within the field of phenomenality.³³ Indeed, according to Levinas, by presenting more than its formal objectivity permits, the phenomenon of the face signifies, in a sense, “the very collapse of phenomenality.”³⁴ The face, by betraying the limits of its own presentation and thereby opening a rift in the totality of the phenomenal field, expresses the fact that reality cannot be exhausted by phenomenological investigation, that something lies beyond that which presents itself, beyond that which is. Indeed, the face is for Levinas a trace of that which lies beyond all presentation and being, what he terms, taking up the language of Plato, the good “beyond”, or “otherwise than being.”³⁵

Because of the way that “the face is present in its refusal to be contained,”³⁶ and as such “arrests totalization,”³⁷ by phenomenological investigation and as such “escapes my grasp by an essential dimension,”³⁸

resisting both logical and objective comprehension, Levinas compares the presentation of the face to Descartes famous *idea of the infinite* presented in his third meditation. Indeed, according to Levinas, “[t]he idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face.”³⁹

Following Descartes analysis in the *Meditations*, Levinas identifies the “idea of infinity [as] exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea.”⁴⁰ But what is interesting in this exception, for Levinas, is what it signals about the nature of subjectivity. Because of the way its *ideatum*, the content of its idea, exceeds the idea itself, he argues, “the idea of infinity is not for me an object,”⁴¹ it is not some idea which can be entirely grasped by the mind. “The infinite can not be thematized, and the distinction between reasoning and intuition does not apply to the access to infinity.”⁴² Quite to the contrary, the idea of the infinite, expresses the very point as which rational power gives way to that which lies beyond it and unravels in the face of the absurd. As such, the fact that we have an idea of infinity, and idea which resists ideation, and thus appear capable of thinking that which by definition cannot be thought, signifies for Levinas an aperture within rationality. Indeed, it signifies for him the fact that our rationality cannot be closed off nor understood as a self-contained system. To the contrary, the idea of the infinite expresses for Levinas the presence of a kind of transcendence within human subjectivity – a kind of intrinsic connection within it to something which lies beyond it.⁴³ So it is, for Levinas, that fact that we possess within us an idea of infinity places subjectivity on a metaphysical ground, establishing it on a power which lies entirely/infinitely beyond its own being, in, which we mentioned before, Levinas calls the “beyond” or “otherwise than being,” and identifies with Plato as the Good. In other words, the idea of the infinite reveals, for Levinas, the ethical constitution of our being, which, he argues, forces us to reconsider our naively assumed commitments and responsibilities. “In metaphysics a being is in relation with what it cannot absorb, with what it cannot, in the etymological sense of the term, comprehend. In the concrete the positive face of the formal structure, having the idea of infinity, is discourse, specified as an ethical relation.”⁴⁴ By Levinas’ read, “infinity, overflowing the idea of infinity, puts the spontaneous freedom within us into question,”⁴⁵ forcing us to recon with the question of the Good, even at the expense of our own best interests.

And here is the rub for Levinas, by signaling a rupture within the

rational or phenomenal field, phenomena such as the face and the idea of the infinite function to disrupt our everyday interaction with the world calling “into question my joyous possession of the world,”⁴⁶ forcing us to reckon with the ethical demands of the good.⁴⁷ It is this ability of the face to present us with an ethical possibility that interests Levinas in the phenomena of the face and the idea of the infinite in the first place. But it is not Levinas’ ethics which interest us here, but the way in which his phenomenological descriptions of the face break with some of the fundamental claims made about the presentation of beings in Heidegger’s early phenomenology. By accounting for a being, or object, which presents otherwise than other simple tool-beings or dead materials – that is, by phenomenologically detailing the presentation of a being which somehow presents a window to that which lies infinitely beyond its presentation, that which lies beyond being – Levinas provides a way in which we can account for the being of the corpse phenomenologically all the while recognizing its curious power to inspire the kind of anxiety described by Heidegger as only occurring before Being as the nothing as such.

Corpse as Face?

Perhaps we could argue, in line with Levinas’ claims concerning the face, that the corpse somehow phenomenally presents more, as it were, than it presents – bearing in its phenomenal presentation a trace of that which lies beyond its presentation. In this regard, the corpse, like Levinas’ face, could be read as a rupture within the phenomenological field which presents infinitely more than it objectively presents functioning as a window to that which lies beyond it, the Being of beings. Perhaps this is why it inspires anxiety within the onlooker – it carries in its presentation the trace of the horizontality of beings, the nothing.

Clearly we must immediately nuance this claim; for whereas the face, for Levinas, signals a rupture within the phenomenal realm wherein the good “beyond being” shines, and which thus inspires ethics and functions as an *object of desire*, the corpse must be understood, conversely, as an *object of anxiety*, to express a rupture within the phenomenal realm wherein Being in general, as detailed by Heidegger, manifests. In this way one could account for the difference between the ethical exigency inspired by the face, as accounted for by Levinas, and the anxiety inspired by the corpse. Given this profound difference, we must be careful not to say then that the face

of the Other, as described by Levinas, and the phenomena of the corpse, as we have investigated it here, are twin phenomena. Quite to the contrary, they seem to express almost reverse phenomena, each signifying beyond itself in the opposite direction of its other. Nevertheless, by employing Levinas' phenomenology of the face we find a way of accounting for the phenomenal peculiarity of the corpse as an object of anxiety.

Perhaps we could say, employing Levinas' language, that in the corpse we catch a glimpse of the "face" of Being – that which lies beyond all particular phenomenal presentation. Or, perhaps we could expand this argument and claim that whereas the *living* "face" in Levinas presents otherwise than being towards the good expressed in the idea of the infinite, the *dead* face of the corpse presents, likewise, beyond all determinate presentation, only towards Being in general, what Levinas elsewhere terms the *il y a*, or the bad infinite.⁴⁸

Clearly there are a number of possible directions we could take these insights. To explore then fully, however, would require much more space than we have here and would involve and much more detailed explication of the respective claims of both Levinas and Heidegger, especially with regards to their respective analysis of the nature of Being and the infinite. Let it suffice for here then to make a much more modest assessment; namely, that there appears to be certain phenomenal realities, like the corpse, which seem to distinguish themselves from other similar beings, and as such appear to resist the limits set within the Heideggerian analytic; and that, furthermore, to account for these uncanny phenomenon we must stray beyond the limits of the Heideggerian system and appeal to the work of someone more capable of recognizing such "saturated phenomenon", someone like Emmanuel Levinas.⁴⁹ Only in this way will we be able to account of many of the rich phenomena so much a part of human experience which, contrary to Heidegger's intuitions, seem to fall beyond the limits of the canny realm of tool-being and into the uncanny realm of the beyond.⁵⁰ Furthermore, let us assert that by examining such phenomenon we are supplied a new way of understanding Levinas' critique of the Heideggerian analytic. Long held to be a reaction solely to the apparent lack of ethical consideration in Heidegger's phenomenology, we see from the above investigation that there is much more at stake in Levinas' critique of Heidegger than is generally recognized. Indeed, in light of what we have seen here, one could argue that while Levinas' ethical critique of Heidegger is certainly central in his work, the beating heart of that

critique lies in a different way of conceiving of ontological difference and approaching the nature of phenomenality as such. Uncanny phenomena, like the corpse or the face, seem to deconstruct for Levinas that difference so essential to Heidegger's system forging a new possible understanding of the nature of beings not as a closing off or occult of their horizon but as a window onto it.

Notes

¹ In keeping with the traditional English translation of Heidegger's early analysis of ontological difference I will use the lowercase being to indicate entities (*Seiendes*), or being in particular, and the upper case Being to indicate Being in general (*Sein*). It is only to Heidegger's earlier work that I will turn at this time, though some suggestion of possible parallel with an aspect of his later thought will be suggested later in the paper, any attempt to flesh out this parallel would exceed the scope of the current investigation.

² Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962. p. 281.

³ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 283.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁸ Heidegger openly confesses that he is not interested in "asking about the way in which the deceased has *Dasein*-with or is still-a-*Dasein* [*Nochdaseins*] with those who are left behind," but exclusively interested in how the presence of the deceased opens living *Dasein* up to an encounter with its own potentiality (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 283).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 296-311.

¹⁰ Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock. New York: Penguin Books, 2003. 148.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹² *Ibid.*, 148.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 180.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 231-232.

²² *Ibid.*, 231

²³ Heidegger, Martin. "What is Metaphysics," in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 89.

²⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 231.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 231-232.

- 26 Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics," 91
- 27 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 232.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 231.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 233.
- 30 Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987. p. 198.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 50-51.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 34 Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998. p. 88.
- 35 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 3-4.
- 36 Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 194.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 281.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- 43 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 80: "the idea of the Infinity is transcendence itself, the overflowing of an adequate idea."
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 47 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 48 Levinas follows Hegel in noting a difference between the good infinite of the otherwise than being and what he terms the bad infinite of Being in general which he defines as a mode of existence "without limits [. . .] The absolute indetermination of the there is, an existing without existents, is an incessant negation, to an infinite degree, consequently an infinite limitation," (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 281). The clearest presentation of what Levinas sees as the bad infinitude of a plenitude of Being is detailed in his text *Alterity and Transcendence* (cf. Levinas, Emmanuel. *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. p. 59-76). It should be noted however that some ambiguity between these two forms of the infinite have been noted in Levinas' work, most famously by Maurice Blanchot, somewhat blurring the possible distinction made above. But again, to further explore this ambiguity would require more time and space than we have here.
- 49 Deliberate reference is made to Jean-Luc Marion here whose phenomenological analysis of "saturated phenomenon" such as the icon resemble our analysis of the corpse here. Cf. Marion, Jean-Luc. *In Excess: Studies in Saturated Phenomenon*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud. New York: Fordham University Press, 2004.
- 50 The article cannot adequately be concluded without offering a word of thanks to Rudi Visker whose thought and work have greatly influenced this text especially his groundbreaking article "Is There Life After Death," in *Umbr(a): A Journal of the Unconscious*, no. 1, 2006. p. 101-117.