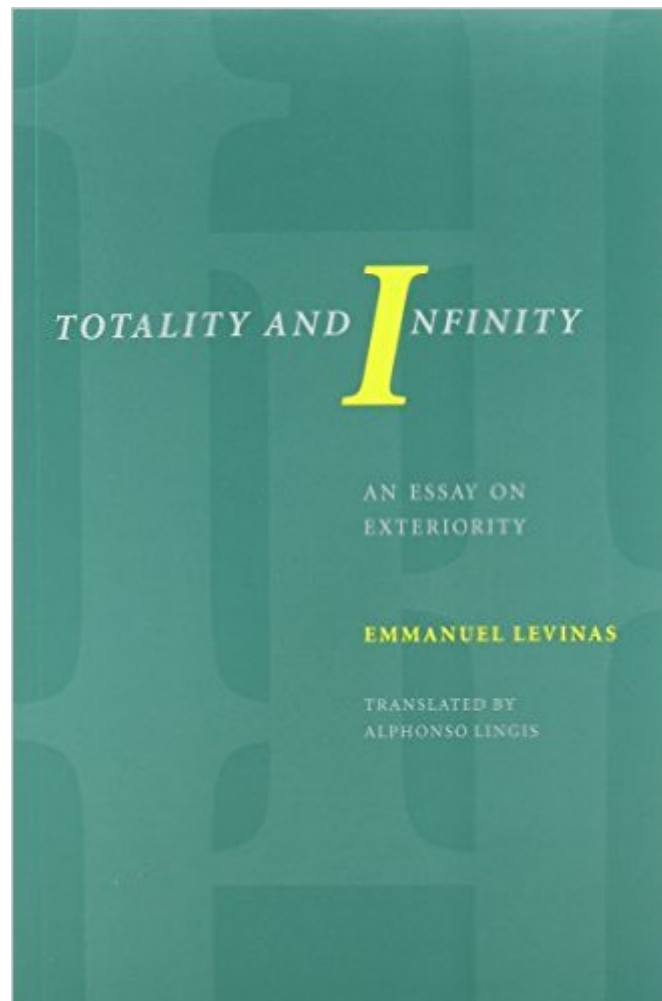


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Totality And Infinity: An Essay On Exteriority (Philosophical Series)



Synopsis

Influenced in part by the dialogical philosophies of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, *Totality and Infinity* departs from the ethically neutral tradition of ontology to analyze the "face-to-face" relation with the Other. First published in English by Duquesne in 1969, this has become one of the classics of modern philosophy. Fully indexed.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

To previous reviewers:~ Levinas is trying to uncover the source of the idea of infinity ~No, infinity by definition is boundless and cannot be encompassed or reduced. Levinas is not asking the Cartesian question nor concerned with securing the `existence' of the external world. The concept of infinity is unique in that its content always exceeds or overflows its concept. Ethical relation operates in just this manner: the relation to the other is not negative (ala Idealism) but rather a relation to an excess. This excess is no *Hinterwelt*, but rather goodness.~ Then he proceeds to "show" that the face to face relation with the Other is the source for our capacity to have theoretical and practical knowledge. ~Indeed. Though the term `source' is very problematic. Levinas shows theoretical and practical `knowledge' - science and law/politics - are fundamentally social. In this way, the ethical relation opens and conditions this `knowledge,' while always exceeding it. What if science claimed to discover that women were `inferior' to men? We would no doubt question the `truth' of this discovery. Why? Because such a claim seems to exceed the bounds of what scientific activity can produce. This example shows how ethics exceeds theoretical knowledge. The same goes for the

`practical.' Why do we think that segregation is wrong or unjust? Why is excluding the `other' from basic political participation, and the responsibility and rights it entails, a problem? Political theory and practice, which in its way is a kind of `scientific ethics,' can also lead to problematic situations. How are we able to judge or discern or resist claims that seek to justify unethical attitudes and practices?

Totality and Infinity is Levinas's first magnum opus, one of two. It is truly an amazing and magnificent piece of work. I had read later Levinas first and began reading this one initially as a sort of self-imposed mandatory prerequisite to read his second magnum opus Otherwise Than Being. Being used to later Levinas, it was an adjustment to read this earlier text. The language of both eras is highly dense and complex (and original), but the earlier language is more pedagogic and the structure more methodic. At times, I didn't think I would finish the book. I knew I loved Levinas, but in this book the phenomenological analyses are so thorough and extensive, that I wondered if it was the same author at times or when I'd find the definitive Levinasian mark of ethics, of the face. However, I am very happy that I did finish this book. Virtually the first half of the book is about Separation - an ambivalence in which a being masters and enjoys but is also dependent on the resources of the world. Interiority does not commence as a cogito or reason, but as enjoyment (of the world). Every being, in their enjoyment of this life, is separated from a totality that would fully account for all of them. The vertigo of existence, of the "il y a" ("there is"), is subsided in the prolongation of labor and in the dwelling. However, the interior economy is still not in a "face to face." Only separated beings can enter into a face to face and share their resources with an Other. Finally, the last sections (beginning from section 3) of the book begin to look a lot like later Levinas, and he goes into extensive and radical analyses of the ultimate, irreducible relation of the face to face and its highly ethical situation. He ruminates on goodness, justice, language, plurality, and peace.

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