Summary

In order to present Otherness as something that eludes the grasp of the phenomenological method, Levinas must propose an original methodology, one that allows his description to avoid the charges of being either arbitrary or mythological. Previous defenses of Levinas’s position have avoided such charges by arguing that Levinas remains rigorously faithful to the phenomenological method, even as he critiques it. My goal here is instead to demonstrate that Levinas’s philosophy does not consist in a renewal of the phenomenological method, but rather in an attempt to deformalize the primary concepts that emerge from Husserl and Heidegger’s phenomenology in order to further specify their meaning. In this way, the problem of phenomenology does not lie, for Levinas, in its inability to describe pure alterity as such, but rather in the formality of the primary notions that it deals with. Thus, the deformalization of phenomenology entails the elaboration of a deductive method that is no longer phenomenological, but which resituates the phenomenological discoveries of Husserl and Heidegger within concrete horizons of their own meaning.

Levinas and the deformalization of phenomenology

Historically, there have been two standard ways of relating Levinas to phenomenology. The first is to present Levinas as proposing a kind of paradoxical phenomenology, one that describes phenomena (such as the Face of the Other) that have no place within the framework of traditional phenomenology. The second option has been to present Levinas as breaking entirely with the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. Contrary to both of these readings, I argue that Levinas’s primary goal is neither to refute nor to overcome phenomenology on the one hand, nor to propose an alternate phenomenology on the other. Rather, Levinas seeks to deformalize the central concepts that constitute the traditional phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger. My goal here is thus to define this idea of “the deformalization of phenomenology,” and to demonstrate the stakes of that deformalization.

50.1. The deduction of entities in the early Levinas

In the 1947 text *Existence and Existent*, Levinas raises the possibility of deducing the ontological difference between Being and beings, in opposition to Heidegger. From Levinas’s point of view,
although these concepts originate with Heidegger, they remain underdetermined and vague in the latter's thought. Indeed, for Levinas, the majority of phenomenological notions will remain unclear so long as the events that undergird them, which are presupposed as the very conditions of their possibility, remain undisclosed. However, any such disclosure could not be based on phenomenological intuition, but it would rather entail a break with the phenomenological concepts discovered in perceptual intuition. Levinas refers to the method required as a "deduction." And although he refers to this idea of "deduction" as early as Existence and Existents (1947), he only defines his deductive method for the first time rather late, in Totality and Infinity (1961).

In the Preface of Totality and Infinity, Levinas says that "The break-up of the formal structure of thought (the noema of a noesis) into events which this structure dissimulates (emphasis mine), but which sustain it and restore its concrete significance, constitutes a deduction" (1969, 28). Deduction in Levinas’s sense thus consists in allowing for the appearance of those fundamental events that are obscured by phenomenological intuition. Such a deduction is necessary for the appearance of events that are hidden to the phenomenological approach, because within the phenomenological framework, the instant is restrictively given to the phenomenological intuition as an unbreakable state: "the difficulty of separating Being from beings and the tendency to envisage the one in the other are not accidental. They are due to the habit of situating the instant, the atom of time, outside any event" (Levinas 2001, 1). If Heidegger discovered the ontological difference in Being and Time, Levinas reminds us that "in Heidegger there is a distinction, not a separation" (Levinas 2001, 24). According to Levinas, phenomenology as a philosophical method can only approach the instant as an unbreakable state: for phenomenological analysis, the instant is "something that cannot be decomposed" (Levinas 2001, 2). And it is for this reason that the phenomenological approach to the instant misses the very articulation of the instant as such: "An instant is not one lump; it is articulated. This articulation is what distinguishes it from the eternal, which is simple and foreign to events" (Ibid.)

In this way, Levinas’s notion of deduction intervenes as a way to exceed phenomenological intuition, and thus the restriction of the instant as an unbreakable state. This is what he means when he speaks of “a method” thanks to which “thought is invited to go beyond intuition” (Ibid., 63). What is at stake in the deductive method is thus a description of the instant in which it is no longer understood in terms of the unbreakable state entailed by the phenomenological framework. Instead, Levinas provides an understanding of the instant as an “event,” “the very event through which, in the pure act, the pure verb, of Being, in Being in general, a being is putated, a substantive which masters that Being” (Ibid., 2). To “deduce” in the Levinasian sense means to break the phenomenological “play of light” (Levinas 1969, 27) in which the instant is given as an unbreakable state, in order to reach existing and existent in their very articulation, grasped as an “event”: the birth of an existent in existence. This “event of birth”—described as the very passage from pure existence to existence as the existence of an Existent—coincides with what Levinas calls “hypostasis.” For Levinas, Heidegger’s phenomenological approach to the instant falls short of the genetic approach to ontological difference, in which existence is presented in the instant, as becoming the existence of an existent, and thanks to which an existent is then deduced in its ontological meaning. If the deductive method is required to counterbalance the effects of the phenomenological approach, it is because phenomenologists, and Heidegger first and foremost, start directly with “Mineness” (Jemeinigkeit) as an existential.1

By this notion of “Mineness as an existential,” Levinas refers to the idea that existence is always already conceived of as being the existence of an existent:

In Heidegger there is a distinction, not a separation. Existing is always grasped in the existent, and for the existent that is a human being the Heideggerian term Jemeinigkeit
Emmanuel Levinas

precisely expresses the fact that existing is always possessed by someone. I do not think Heidegger can admit an existing without existents, which to him would seem absurd.

(1987, 45)

In breaking down that which remains unbreakable to the phenomenological glance, Levinas proposes that we think the constitution of existents from the fact of existence prior to any existent, in other words, from being in its pure verbality, or the “work of being” (œuvre d’être). In other words, he suggests that we think being prior to the subject–object distinction: “The subject-object distinction by which we approach existents is not the starting point for a meditation which broaches being in general” (Levinas 2001, 52).

Once being in general “in its impersonality” is taken into account as the point of departure for ontological inquiry, it in turn becomes possible to take the act of hypostasis into account. This allows Levinas to explain the way in which an existent arises, emerging from hypostasis, as an act of the mutation of the verb to be. For Levinas, the thematization of the arising of existents in existence from the ontological mutation of the verb to be coincides with the deduction of the ontological meaning of an entity: “On the ground of the ‘there is,’ a being arises. The ontological significance of an entity in the general economy of being, which Heidegger simply posits alongside of Being by a distinction, will thus be deduced” (Ibid., 83; emphasis added). Once phenomenological intuition is broken, it becomes possible to describe the passage from one state of being to another, to describe the “instant” as an event that remains hidden to the phenomenological intuition of phenomena. Such a description, beyond the phenomenological approach, coincides with the description of the passage from one state of being (anonymous existence) to the other (existence as possessed by an existent), instead of thinking Being and beings simultaneously (phenomenologically). This means that Levinas’s description coincides with the deduction of the ontological meaning of an existent “in the general economy of being.”

Through this method, which is no longer phenomenological, an existent can no longer be understood alongside existence, but as what becomes “the subject of the verb to be” (Ibid.). For Levinas, in remaining faithful to the phenomenological method, Heidegger “posits being alongside entity,” instead of thinking the constitution of the latter from the ontological mutation of the former. Levinas claims that because Heidegger begins with the ontological relation as an unbreakable state; the author of Being and Time overlooks being in its verbal (prior to any existent) dimension: “Fundamental ontology itself, which denounces the confusion between Being and entities, speaks of Being as an identified entity” (Levinas 1998, 43). As we can see, this claim deeply complicates the opposition traditionally drawn between Levinas and Heidegger, historically understood in terms of a conflict between the primacy of Being (Heidegger) and of that which is Otherwise than Being (Levinas).

Against this oversimplified view, it is crucial to see that Levinas places that which is “Otherwise than Being” in opposition to Heidegger’s thought of Being because he proposes a notion of Being altogether different from that of Heidegger. Levinas’s view is one of Being detached from entities, Being entirely thought in its verbal dimension, as an anonymous dimension. In other words, Levinas’s opposition to Heidegger consists in the idea that, for the latter, the verbality of Being remains unthinkable in the framework of Mineness, since being is not dissociated from the existent. It is for this same reason that, following Heidegger, Levinas describes Being in its verbal dimension as “there is,” “il y a.” However, once it is detached from the horizon of existents, Levinas ascribes an entirely different meaning to this notion.

This difference is evinced in the interview Ethics and Infinity, where the following question is put to Levinas:
A moment ago you evoked the “es gibt,” the German “there is,” (il y a) and the analysis Heidegger made of it as generosity, since in this “es gibt” there is the verb geben which signifies to give. For you, on the other hand, there is no generosity in the “there is” (il y a)?

Levinas responds:

I insist in fact on the impersonality of the “there is” (il y a); “there is,” as “it rains,” (il pleut) or “it is night” (il fait nuit). And there is neither joy nor abundance (...). Existence and Existents tries to describe this horrible thing, and moreover describes it as horror and panic.

(Levinas & Nemo 1985, 48–49)

Because Heidegger does not think the ontological independence of Being towards entities, Being as anonymous there is, Levinas argues that he therefore cannot ultimately think the “hypostasis of the instant” as the very passage from the pure verb to substantives. In this way, Heidegger’s approach to ontological difference remains formal. In other words, from Levinas’s perspective, the Heideggerian approach necessarily overlooks what Levinas calls “the constitution of an existent (la constitution d’un existant)” (2001, 103).

Levinas’s method is thus, strictly speaking, no longer phenomenological, since, as we have already seen, it requires a focus on the “anonymous vigilance” which “goes beyond the phenomena:”

The affirmation of an anonymous vigilance goes beyond the phenomena, which already presupposes an ego, and thus eludes descriptive phenomenology. Here description would make use of terms while striving to go beyond their consistency, it stages personages, while the ‘there is’ is the dissipation of personages. A method is called for such that thought is invited to go beyond intuition.

(Ibid., 63; translation modified)

### 50.2. Events behind the subject–object relationship: the path to “Totality and Infinity”

In Totality and Infinity, Levinas emphasizes the ontological event represented by the way in which the Face of the Other overwhelms the intentional knowledge of the subject who seeks to discover and reveal the Other in the light of knowledge. This event reveals the capacity of consciousness to depart from the activity of unveiling the world in order to produce what Levinas calls nocturnal events. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas further seeks to describe a singular experience in which consciousness enters into a relationship with an existent, an Other, which is not an object, but reveals itself by overflowing its illumination by a subject. In the social relation, consciousness enters into a relationship with an existent who does not discover itself in the light and who escapes visibility:

Consciousness then does not consist in equating being with representation, in tending in the full light in which this adequation is to be sought, but rather in overflowing this play of lights—this phenomenology—and in accomplishing events whose ultimate signification (contrary to the Heideggerian conception) does not lie in disclosing. Philosophy does indeed dis-cover the signification of these events, but they
are produced without discovery (or truth) being their destiny. No prior disclosure illuminates the production of these essentially nocturnal events. The welcoming of the face and the work of justice—which condition the birth of truth itself—are not interpretable in terms of disclosure. Phenomenology is a method for philosophy, but phenomenology—the comprehension effected through a bringing to light—does not constitute the ultimate event of being itself.

(Levinas 1969, 27–28)

In nocturnal events, consciousness overflows the activity of illumination and objectification and thus enters into relation with the Other. In so doing, consciousness transcends the “play of light” by which it typically discloses/represents objects, a “play of light” that, for Levinas, is constitutive of traditional phenomenology: phenomenology is “the comprehension effected through a bringing to light.” In order to properly describe the originary movement of the production of these nocturnal events—what Levinas calls “the ultimate event of being itself”—he must modify Husserl’s method of “phenomenological reduction.” This is because the latter reduces the activity of consciousness exclusively to the intentional relation to an object given in “adequation” to the subject’s representation—which Levinas refers to above as “equating being with representation.” Because the Other is presented by Levinas as not being an object given in adequation to the subject’s knowledge, the discovery and description of the subject’s relation to the Other requires a renewal of the phenomenological method, which remains restrictively based on the subject–object structure. In order to properly describe the originary movement of the production of these nocturnal events, Levinas must modify Husserl’s method of “phenomenological reduction.” Because the Face is never reducible to an object given in adequation and visibility, the discovery and description of the subject’s relation to the Face requires a renewal of the phenomenological method based on the subject–object (discovery of an object by the subject) paradigm.

As we have seen, Levinas affirms that consciousness is not limited to the discovery of being in its disclosure by illumination. Instead, its originary movement consists in overflowing the disclosure of an object in the production of nocturnal events—relation to the Other—which undergird consciousness and illumination themselves, and which sustain, in other words, the subject–object relationship. Nocturnal events thus make the diurnal activities of consciousness possible—knowledge of an object in adequation to the subject’s representation—i.e., to the discovery of the object in the element of light. What Levinas is saying, in other words, is that Objective knowledge depends upon the social relation—which is to say, the interlocutory relationship to the Other who is never present to consciousness in the form of a given visible object: “The welcoming of the face and the work of justice—which condition the birth of truth itself.”

And yet, for Husserl, the transcendental reduction provides access to the absolute sphere of the cogitatio, while disregarding the Idea of the Infinite (the relation to the Other).² In order to return to the originary movement of consciousness, which exceeds (phenomenological) knowledge defined as the activity of unveiling objects, Levinas must propose a method that allows us to go beyond Husserl’s reduction in order to recover those nocturnal events upon the foundation of which the intentional knowledge of the object is based. This new method consists in the deformalization of the phenomenological apparatus based on the subject–object structure. To deformalize the subject–object structure thus means nothing less than the attempt to inscribe the subject–object relationship into the interlocutory context that renders such knowledge possible.

We have, then, a decisive indication of the real project of Totality and Infinity: Levinas does not seek to renounce the phenomenological reduction, but rather to resituate the noetico–noe-
matic (the technical name given by Husserl to describe the subject–object relation) structure of the reduction within the interlocutory, social context that is constitutive of it. And for that reason, the contextualization of the noetico–noematic structure requires a method wholly unlike that of traditional phenomenology, as the latter consists in “the comprehension effected through a bringing to light.” Indeed, the required method “is invited to go beyond intuition,” as Levinas says: “a method is called for such that thought is invited to go beyond intuition” (2001, 63). It is for this reason that the repositioning of phenomenological inquiry beyond the noetico–noematic structure proceeds from what Levinas calls a rupture of the formal structure of noesis and noema. It is thus a question of beginning with Husserl and the noetico–noematic structure, in order to then go beyond Husserl and resituate that structure within the concrete interlocutory context to which it belongs. As Levinas puts it,

The break-up of the formal structure of thought (the noema of a noesis) into events which this structure dissimulates, but which sustain it and restore its concrete significance, constitutes a deduction—necessary and yet non-analytical. In our exposition it is indicated by expressions such as “that is,” or “precisely,” or “this accomplishes that,” or “this is produced as that.”

(1969, 28; translation modified; emphasis added)

Here, Levinas indicates the steps of the method that he mobilizes. It will thus become a question of beginning again from the place of the Husserlian noetico–noematic structure, in order to bring into view those concrete events that this formal structure covers up and upon which it is nevertheless based. Levinas’s approach accomplishes this revelation precisely by deforming and concretizing that structure itself. Indeed, Levinas speaks explicitly of the deductive rupture brought about by this deformalization, which is to say by the resituation of the formal structure in question within the concrete horizon of its performance. Any such rupture must allow us to specify the meaning of the formal noetico–noematic structure that comes from the phenomenological apparatus (again: “The break-up of the formal structure of thought (the noema of a noesis) into events which this structure dissimulates, but which sustain it and restore its concrete significance.”)

This means, therefore, that the goal of Levinas’s method of deduction is in fact to specify those structures that the phenomenological reduction conceals (and first and foremost: the noetico–noematic structure). In other words, its aim is to show that the subject–object relation (noesis–noema) that Husserl describes depends upon the social relation—the relation to the Other—which does not have the form subject–object, but in fact sustains it. Levinas’s discovery that the subject–object structure depends upon the social relation in turn allows for the specification of the significance of precisely those fundamental structures discovered by Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology.

**Conclusion**

We can see, then, that Levinas’s phenomenology in fact aims to give an account of those events which are behind the subject–object structure. The discovery of these events is necessary in order to reveal the concrete meaning of such cognitive structure, as that meaning eludes the grasp of the formal approach to the ontological structures in question proposed by traditional phenomenology. Levinas resituates the event of hypostasis below the instant, and the revelation of the Other beneath the noetico–noematic structure. For him, it is always a question of describing the events hidden beneath the ontological structures discovered by Husserl and Heidegger,
whose presentations of those structures remain abstract and formal. Levinas, to the contrary, seeks to restore their “concrete significance.” Deformalization is thus not a refutation nor a refusal of phenomenology—“the comprehension effected through a bringing to light”—but rather a restoration of the concrete meanings of the essential concepts of phenomenology.

Notes

2 As the specification of such complex structures would take us too far outside of the present focus, I invite the reader to see Moati 2017, Chapter 6, “The Metaphysical Context of Intentionality.”
3 See again Moati, 2017, Chapter 7, for a more detailed discussion of the intersection of the subject–object relationship and the subject–other relationship.

References