

SECTION II—INTERPRETING THE SELF

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Language and Responsibility in the Ethical Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

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1. Introduction

An essay, even in the hands of a master essayist such as Emmanuel Levinas, becomes vulnerable to self-refutation in asserting that "truth is produced only in veritable conversation." Levinas makes this assertion, not in a conversation, but in an "essay on exteriority," the subtitle of *Totality and Infinity*, one of his major philosophical works.¹ If the proposition that "truth is produced only in veritable conversation" is true, as it is doubtlessly intended, then, either it is also untrue, given its essay-origin, or what *appears* to be the essay in which the proposition is found is not an essay at all but a linguistic mask or Nietzschean skin revealing the concealment of a hermeneutic dimension to Levinas's work. Such an interpretation would account for the important qualifier "veritable" in Levinas' assertion.

Levinas's problem of trying to communicate in an essay how the essay is intrinsically inadequate in its representation of fundamental ethical truths, involves the same problem of self-refutation that troubles skepticism: the infamous *circulus vitiosus*. It is a hermeneutic concern which, as we shall see, goes to the heart of Levinas's philosophy.

But the hermeneutic questioning of language, interpretation, and meaning will take a new turn in Levinas's ethical 'metaphysics.' Going beyond Heidegger's existential analytic of Dasein, where Interpretation is understood as an ontological "being-in-the-world," Levinas will argue that language is primarily a "being-with" and a "being-for" the Other. Being-with-the-Other Levinas calls "Proximity," a pre-thematic contact or "Sociality" with the Other to the extreme point of being substituted for the

Other, a taking of the Other's place, a being held hostage by the Other. Being-for-the-Other, in the context of Proximity, prior to any choice on my part, is Levinas's meaning of the term "Responsibility." These present reflections intend to explicate the radical hermeneutic relationship between Levinas's conceptions of Responsibility and Language within the framework of Proximity or Sociality.

Keeping in mind Nietzsche's advice to callow lovers who would grasp truth by the scruff of the neck and drag her home, we will begin by taking an oblique approach to Levinas's ethical rendition of the relation between Responsibility and Language through a brief reflection on the difference between the essay and the letter. This grammatological rumination will, nevertheless, serve two purposes: (1) it will provide a bridge to an understanding of the main thrust or style of Levinas's ethical metaphysics, and (2) it will illustrate a thoroughgoing methodological 'problem' in Levinas's philosophy along with the antidote of an *epistolary hermeneutics* which I believe is suggested therein.

2. The Essay and the Letter

An essay differs from a letter in that an essay is an attempt to *assay* what is *essential*, to *grasp* the weight and measure of something and to represent what is thus assessed in language that is more or less equivalent to it. Such assaying is, however, in Levinas's view, altogether impossible when that "something" is the weighing and measuring by which the weighing and measuring is itself weighed and measured—a hearkening back to Aristotle's productive problem of the intellect's inability to grasp the origin and nature of its own activity or agency (TI 49). Levinas would view Aristotle's apparent 'failure' as a 'success,' just as the inherent 'failure' of the essay to make Being appear once and for all, is the inherent success of the letter. The essay is derivative of the philosophy of consciousness, of which Levinas is critical, if it is not enlightened to its own limitations, if it does not see its intrinsic inability to bring into view that which is beyond the essential, what is beyond every conception of the beyond.

To be able to 'hear' with our inner ear that which is beyond the statement of a theme, beyond the "said" of language, there is the necessity, Levinas argues, of "abusing" or "deconstructing" the pretensions of conceptual representations in a procedure of negative positing which he labels "apophansis:" an abuse of language, a violence which attempts to say that which properly speaking cannot be said. This self-conscious abuse of language, foreshadowed by Descartes's methodological doubt and Husserl's phenomenological *epoche*, this negative moment—Levinas here points to the "in" of Infinity in us—is the making-present of that which is prior to

presence. But what is the measure by which we can measure this making-present of that which is prior to presence? In Levinas's philosophy the "measure" is understood as the *trace*. The trace is, as Levinas puts it, "a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, which is always past" and which, therefore, can be 'measured' only by and as a *going toward* an other.²

Levinas's "essay on exteriority," therefore, given the exposition worked out under the aegis of this subtitle, is a contradiction in terms. Exteriority, in the context of Levinas's understanding of the trace, is precisely that which would not permit the *inscription* of exteriority within the interiority of the essay. *Totality and Infinity* is an "essay" on the overcoming of the ethical inadequacy of the essay. Levinas's essay exposes the presumption of the essay to make Being appear as an absolute totality. This presumption is a will-to-power, Levinas argues, which results in a domination of the language of responsibility that joins me to the other, and a false reduction of this ordinary ethical language to the ontological or representational language of the Same. As with Nietzsche, language never absolutely gives what it promises; it is a skin, a surface, an exteriority.

But how then can Levinas justify his own assaying of this problem after recognizing the trace structure of all signifiers—including his own? Only the pursuit of *justice* in the world, as we shall see, the extension of the theme of responsibility into society and the political arena, justifies, for Levinas, this necessary abuse of language. This will be further elaborated in the final section of this paper which deals with the nature of the genuine Work.

The essay, particularly the one that puffs itself up with the pretense of being a treatise, set forever in type and written in the third person, aspires to the same completeness of the thief who wishes to commit the perfect crime by eliminating every trace of his or her passing, leaving everything undisturbed and appearing as if it had always and will always be that way, just as it is, intact, complete, definitive, clear and distinct, *authoritarian*. Of course, the perfect crime, or essay, is an impossibility since every elimination of a trace of one's passing also leaves a trace. All inscription leaves fingerprints, even if they are the fingerprints of an author or thief busily wiping away his or her own fingerprints or signature. But the letter, to the contrary, *exploits* the presence-in-absence 'structure' that is the hallmark of the trace. A letter is not merely a substitute for presence, but a recognition and humble admission of its impossibility. Every sign, Levinas says, is a trace. But in addition to the "signification proper to a sign" there is also, in a letter, understood as a trace, the exposure of a signifyingness unsuspected by the essay, a signifyingness which is "the passing of him who delivered the sign":

This signifyingness resides for a letter, for example, in the writing and the style of that letter, in everything which makes it possible that simultaneously with the transmission of the message, we pick up, starting from the language of that letter and its sincerity, someone passing purely and simply.³

The essay is addressed anonymously. It is the expression of a neutral philosophy which is always in danger of becoming a treatise on a subject: the loathsome, authoritarian 'final word.' But philosophical discourse, in Levinas's view, must be "a drama between philosophers and an intersubjective movement" if it would avoid being violent and naive.⁴

3. Ethical Expression and Anarchical Metaphysics

In a note to one of his commentaries on Levinas's philosophy, Jacques Derrida points out that one must be cautious in speaking about Levinas's work "because Levinas's writing, which would merit an entire separate study itself, and in which stylistic gestures (especially in *Totality and Infinity*) can less than ever be distinguished from intention, forbids the prosaic disembodiment into conceptual frameworks that is the first violence of all commentary"⁵ It is in this *resistance* to "prosaic disembodiment" that the ethical metaphysics developed by Levinas, is inextricably connected to his understanding of discourse, language, speech, signification, and expression.

In any utterance, Levinas explains, what is *said* cannot be understood apart from the *Saying* 'from' which it is said. "Saying," for Levinas, is a pre-thematic and pre-conscious expression of our being-with-the-Other, a "signification" or signifyingness which is not yet syntactical speech but which, from a certain desire, gives rise to an intention that results in a statement, a "said." Saying only occurs in relation with an Other. In Levinas's view, it *is* that relation. Every said thus involves a kind of betrayal of the Saying from which it condenses. Within the context of this necessary violence, and with all humility on the part of the violater, this betrayal is perpetrated within the structure of responsibility, not by foregoing the said in favor of quietude (in truth, a worse violence, as Heidegger realized) but by taking on this violence first and foremost within oneself, within the Sayer. As Levinas succinctly puts it, "the face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation" (TI 201).

Saying, the very possibility of language, *obligates* because language is first and foremost an ethical relation. It is a being-for-an-other, a willingness to express myself to an other without calculation, an already-expressing-myself. This necessarily puts my identity into question.

If the face-to-face relation is manifested as Saying or Expression, it is yet necessary that this Saying not congeal into a dogmatic thematizing of the Other. It is not that the face-to-face *requires* a new form of speaking. Understood as a trace it *is* already a new form of speaking which would be undone by the imposition of the *noesis/noema* structure of representational language. Here is how Levinas expresses the relation between the face (as a trace) and Saying (Language):

A face as a trace, trace of itself, trace expelled in a trace, does not signify an indeterminate phenomenon; its ambiguity is not an indetermination of a *noema*, but an invitation to the fine risk of approach qua approach, to the exposure of one to the other, to the exposure of this exposedness, the expression of exposure, saying. *In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word*, the caress a saying. The thematization of the face undoes the face and undoes the approach. (OB 94, emphasis added)

The being of being-for-the-other, which establishes the ethical relationship as responsibility, is a communication of oneself in the sense of expression or giving oneself with "total gratuity" (OB 96), as Levinas puts it, a speaking which undoes every representational structure through a renunciation of the need for absolute and final certitude—to the extreme point that one would not know whether one had actually accomplished this renunciation or not.

Indeed, to think that one had accomplished this radical undoing of representational intentionality would be a sure sign that one had not achieved it. For the command to be responsible for the Other, Levinas argues, comes "from I know not where" (OB 150), "like a thief" (OB 148), which "has meaning only negatively, by its non-sense" (OB 137), a command which is "prior to any movement of the will" (OB 110), an "anarchy" which "escapes any principle" (OB 101) where I might know what I am doing. Responsibility, as vulnerability and openness to the Other, as sensibility and the capacity to be wounded, to be subjected, as suffering and persecution, i.e., as a passivity more passive than any passivity, is something which happens to me through an "election," an "assignation," an imperative which commands me to obey before I could ever have any concept of this command or this obedience. An "obedience to the order to go," Levinas says, "without understanding the order, this obedience prior to all representation, this allegiance before any oath, this responsibility prior to commitment is precisely the other in the same, inspiration and prophecy, the *passing itself* of the Infinite" (OB 150).

4. Language and the Problem of Method

The first violence of language is not the wrenching of predication from the universality of Being, not, as Nietzsche realized, the clumsy, straightforward seduction of feminine truth, supposing truth to be a woman. . . . No, the first violence of language is not the constitution of linguistic objects within a system of knowable and graspable signs. Rather, the first violence of language is the relinquishing of that *egoism* and *dogmatism* on the part of the sayer which presupposes that language, as a pragmatic manipulation of signs, is merely a *tool*, even a hermeneutical tool, with which one labors instrumentally to construct a system of knowledge that grasps and conquers the otherness of the world, while maintaining itself at a 'safe' distance behind these signs. In the same way that it is impossible to "understand" Husserl's *epoche* without actually undertaking it, as I have argued in another place,⁶ so also one cannot grasp Levinas's notion of the ethical outside of the ethical relationship in which it is produced, as an objectification represented by a language which has not undergone the purgation of representation in the 'reduction' of the face-to-face relationship. To do this, in our view, would be to miss Levinas entirely. If the purity of the language Levinas desires is an actual impossibility given the finite, historical situation of the human speaker, it is yet a purity which is infinitely desired, thereby producing—not the pure language itself—but a language that maintains within itself a constant tension between the silence of the taut bow and the violent inscription of the plucked bowstring.

Levinas's language is productively anarchical. It undoes itself at every turn because it seeks to express that which refuses to be expressed. It is given over to a saying which can only be said, as Levinas says, in the "alternating rhythm of the said and the unsaid, and the unsaid being unsaid in its turn;" Levinas, like Nietzsche and Socrates, desires not to speak *about* the ethical but to speak ethically.⁷ The violence done lovingly to the originary word *must* be undertaken if there is to be philosophy, if there is to be justice and peace in the world. Yet one must always be on guard, as Husserl warned, against slipping back into the "natural attitude." This fundamental hermeneutical problem haunts Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* and is addressed time and again, not unlike Husserl's repeated performance of the reduction throughout his various "introductory" works. It might be understood as *the* methodological problem for Levinas: how to say that which infinitely surpasses or overflows the said without permitting this saying to collapse into the static categories of ontology.

This ethical-linguistic problem, encountered throughout the description of the relation of the Same and the Other as Responsibility in *Totality and*

Infinity, becomes the primary problematic of *Otherwise Than Being*. In this text Levinas formulates the co-relation of the said and the saying as follows:

We have been seeking the *otherwise than being* from the beginning, and as soon as it is conveyed before us it is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it. A methodological problem arises here, whether the pre-original element of saying (the anarchical, the non-original, as we designate it) can be led to betray itself by showing itself in a theme (if an an-archeology is possible), and whether this betrayal can be reduced; whether one can at the same time know and free the known of the marks which thematization leaves on it by subordinating it to ontology. (OB7)

The betrayal of language is necessary if Being is to be shown, if peace and justice are to be accomplished for the Other in the world. The methodological possibility of this productive betrayal, avoiding the extremes of absolutism and relativism, is worked out by Levinas, as I have tried to show, in the notions of Proximity, Responsibility, and Substitution in *Otherwise Than Being*, developments which are rooted in the formulation of the face-to-face ethical relationship as it is worked out in *Totality and Infinity*.

To recapitulate: for Levinas the ethical is not a system of moral prescriptions but a being-for-the-other, a proximity or pre-conscious "contact" with the other in the face-to-face relation which already defines what it means to be human and which, in the responsibility demanded by this contact, is always prior to contracts and prescriptions concerning it. Thus the epiphany of the face is the origin of the ethical (TI 199). As Max Scheler also argued, to be truly human is to be one-for-the-other. It is not, however, as if the human already exists and is consequently in need of the guidance of the ethical as something added to it which would then ensure its genuine humanity, as if, prior to the ethical, the human could be conceived as a neutral entity distinct from the Levinasian categorical imperative of Sociality. Rather, Levinas says, "the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity" (TI 213).

Thus Levinas is led to assert that the ethical is prior to the distinction between Being and beings; metaphysics precedes ontology. And if, in order for Being to appear as beings, the metaphysical must be inscribed within the ontological, i.e., if Saying can only become known within the Said, within the space of the structure established by the ontological difference, it is thus inscribed, for Levinas, only as a "non-indifference" to the other (OB 97). This keeps the ethical inscription from becoming hypostasized as merely the *noematic* correlate of an intentional *noesis*, the *cogitatum* of a *cogitatio*—a false reduction, which, for Levinas, is tantamount to the violence of Cain.

5. The Work of Responsibility

Let me bring these reflections to a conclusion with a brief sketch of Levinas's understanding of the Work. In this notion his ethical and linguistic theories are illustrated in action.

Responsibility, in Levinas's view, involves the production of a kind of Work which *must* be rejected in one's lifetime, a Work oriented to a future beyond the worker. Work, in the realm of language, becomes genuine only in the transcendence of a giving marked by the real or figurative death of the author. In his article, "La Trace de L'Autre," Levinas puts it this way: "*the Work conceived radically is a movement of the Same towards the Other which never returns to the Same*"—a preference for the stark errantry of Abraham over the romantic return of Ulysses.⁸ For Levinas, there is a necessary *inequality* in the relation between the Same and the Other, an inequality which is the very possibility of there being Ethics. For Levinas, the face of the Other is a trace of God. The Other comes to me from a height, a "curvature of space," because the approach of the Other, *in the incommensurableness of this approach*, reveals itself to be a trace, a passing of the personal Other which, resounding to Infinity, reveals a trace or passing of the Infinite Other.

The ethical challenge posed by this intrinsic inequality of the face-to-face relation with the Other, in Levinas's view, takes the form of a call to generous and even complete self-sacrifice in the non-suicide of responsibility. Thus we are not fundamentally beings-toward-death as Heidegger thought, but beings-toward-a-time-after-our-death. This ethical formula is concretely illustrated in Levinas's understanding of the nature of the Work:

A Work thought all the way through requires a radical generosity of the Same, which in a work goes toward the Other. It consequently requires an ingratitude of the Other; gratitude would be the *return* of the movement to its origin. . . . One-way action is possible only in patience, which, pushed to the limit, means for the agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering into the promised land. . . . To be for a time that would be without me, to be for a time after my time, for a future beyond the celebrated "being-for-death," to-be-for-after-my-death . . . [this] is not an ordinary thought which extrapolates its own duration, but is the passage to the time of the Other.

Levinas names this totally gratuitous giving of one's self in the Work, without expectation of return, by the Greek term "Liturgy," a term used initially without religious significance, although Levinas adds that "a certain

idea of God should turn up as a trace at the end of our analysis."⁹ Liturgy, the *celebration* of the liturgy in our daily work, for Levinas, is a living of the practice of death as Socrates argued. This is the ethical sacrifice *par excellence!*¹⁰

So conceived, the transcendence of the work as "an eschatology without hope," must be prepared for in advance (in fact, is always in preparation) by taking-on the death by which the work is liberated for-the-other, without nihilism. The 'taking-on' of this detachment as a practice of dying toward what is beyond oneself, by renouncing "being the contemporary of the triumph of one's work," is precisely what makes the genuine work possible, but without guaranteeing its success. The *pre-donation* of my work is what allows my work to be done. Thus, only when my work is no longer for me but wholly *for the Other* can it genuinely be "mine."

Responsibility, as the practice of death in the Socratic sense, is thus, as Levinas puts it, "vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution . . . a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity" (OB 15). There is the greatest danger in formalizing this as a theoretical representation. Theory must be the self-reflection of a practice which is theory-in-action as I have described this elsewhere in the context of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics.¹¹

But who would have the strength to take up the thankless task that is ordered by Levinas's ethical phenomenology? Who could accomplish such living in the open? Who could eschew the support and the security of the herd and the polis? For Levinas, it is only the one who has given up the need for security, who has taken on the practice of death as a daily task of releasement and dis-possession, who is radically given over to the work whose life and truth will come into being only for future generations. This radical work *must* be rejected, must be cast out of the polis; it will not be understood for a hundred years. It is the work that is wholly gift, wholly an act of responsibility toward the other. In short, it is the work of love.

When Levinas says that "a breakdown of essence is needed," a "weakness," a "relaxation of virility without cowardice," I understand that without this orientation, this liturgy, it is impossible to live where "the substitution of the hostage discovers the trace" (OB 185). To accomplish this is in truth to die to one's self-interest, as in Kant, and thus to fulfill in one's self the greatest achievement of love: the laying down of one's life for the other, without suicide.

In its purity, Levinas's philosophy is for everyone and no one. It is unabashedly utopian, but in the true etymological sense of this abused Greek term: like Plato's *Republic* it is "no place" and it is not intended to be any place. Socrates would have been humorously astonished by Ploti-

nus's nostalgic plans to build a *Platonopolis*. The call to the kind of responsibility which Levinas describes demands the ultimate dispossession of the unity and the identity of the self and of the presupposition that such a unity and identity is possible. It is the pluralistic relinquishment and welcoming of all positions and non-positions. That a utopia, by definition, cannot be, that it is inherently self-contradictory, is exactly the point. "Truth is produced only in veritable conversation." To hear what Levinas is saying in his said requires "an exposure to the other without this exposure being assumed, an exposure without holding back . . ." (OB 15), the relinquishment of the egoistic hold on the world which conceptualization would obtain.

One will find nowhere to lay one's head in Levinas's thought, no security in the grasp of a final solution which will make a deep and refreshing sleep possible. Levinas is all wakefulness and insomnia. No one can avoid the call of the Other. Even the escape of eternal sleep that suicide promises is, according to Levinas, "a self-defeating defection," and inadvertently an affirmation of life (TI 149). It is possible to close oneself off to the call of the Other but it is not possible that there be no call, no approach. For, being closed-off, according to Levinas's thought, is possible only within the context of already being open to the Other.

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NOTES

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 71; hereafter 'TI'.
2. Emmaneul Levinas, "La Trace De L'Autre," in *En Decouvrant L'Existence Avec Husserl Et Heidegger* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1967), pp. 201-02. My translation.
3. Levinas, "La Trace de L'Autre," p. 200.
4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, trans. alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 20; hereafter 'OB'.
5. Derrida, "Violence and metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 84, n.7.
6. Robert D. Walsh, "Husserl's Epoche As Method and Truth," AUSLEGUNG, forthcoming (sum 1988).
7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht/Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 173.
8. Emmanuel Levinas, "La Trace De L'Autre," p. 191; cf. "La Signification et le sens," *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale*, 2 (1964), pp. 139 ff.
9. Levinas, "La Trace," 191-92.

10. For a poetic rendition of this principle see Charles Bukowski's poem "love and courage" in *Dangling in the Tournefortia*, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), pp. 51-52.

11. Robert D. Walsh, "Reason In The Age of Science," AUSLEGUNG, 11 (1984), p. 421.