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**SAYING BEYOND PHENOMENOLOGY: LEVINAS'S RESPONSE
TO DERRIDA**

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is not a mere comparison of the ideas of Levinas and Derrida. I will focus on the reading of one particular text: Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, which is considered the most representative of Levinas's later philosophical development and in it, we find some ideas that contrast with what we found in his previous work, *Totality and Infinity*. My point is that Derrida's questioning of some of the ideas that appear in *Totality and Infinity* in his text "Violence and Metaphysics" are crucial to understand the changes that Levinas introduces in his later work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. This discussion raises huge questions concerning the nature of philosophy, history, ethics or phenomenology among others. I will point out first how *Otherwise than Being* responds to the main problem that Derrida presents in "Violence and Metaphysics": that Levinas uses philosophical language against philosophy itself, and by using the language of philosophy, he is carrying with it certain presuppositions that he would like to avoid. And Secondly, that Levinas's later notion of the *Saying* launches an attack against the metaphysics of presence, as well as Derrida's notion of *Writing*, and thus, gets both philosophers closer to each other.

In general, there are numerous studies about the philosophical relationship between Levinas and Derrida (See e.g. Bernasconi 1988, Critchley 2014, Srajek 1998). In most cases, those studies focus on the relationship between Derrida's later ethical thinking and Levinas. The specificity of my study lies in that I am going to focus on the early Derrida. Plus, I am going to take the whole text "Violence and Metaphysics" and try to clarify it showing the main objections that Derrida is presenting against Levinas. Later, I am going to contrast my analysis with some of the main theses that appear in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. And finally, I am going to defend that both Levinas and Derrida present an attack to the metaphysics of presence. There are other studies written, for example, on the basis of the idea of "the ending of metaphysics" (See Bernasconi 1986) or "eschatology" (See Bernasconi 1998) to mention some, but not taking "Violence and Metaphysics" as a whole and re-structuring it in a way that presents its main problems to the reader.

First, I will present briefly Levinas's philosophical project as it appears in *Totality and Infinity* (Chapter 1) in order to contextualize this problem. In Chapter 2, I am going to present Derrida's reading of *Totality and Infinity* as it appears in "Violence and Metaphysics" and the main philosophical questions that his reading raises. I will organize

this issue in 3 subchapters (look at the table of contents). In Chapter 3, I am going to focus on Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* in a way that it will be a response to Derrida. Finally, in Chapter 4, I will show that both the philosophers get closer to each other because both Levinas's *Saying* and Derrida's *Writing* attack the traditional metaphysics of presence and logocentrism.

Chapter 1

Contextualization of the question: Levinas Philosophical Project in *Totality and Infinity*

Levinas's main concern is if morality as it has been presented to us by our philosophical tradition has any validity after the Holocaust and World War II: "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality" (Levinas 1979: 21). What is the question that Levinas wants to answer in *TI*¹? Plainly: how can philosophy talk about ethics after the disasters of the 20th century? The promises of philosophical tradition about truth, progress and, enlightenment have failed and, this failure coincides with a crisis in metaphysics understood as ontology: a complete systematic effort to understand reality. Moreover, Levinas silently assumes that the development of occidental rationality as metaphysics leads to those disasters.

Here, I am going to explain firstly, what is ontology and its relation with Levinas's key term "totality". This will let me explain the most important terminology in *TI* (Same, Other and totality). Secondly, I am going to present the three ways in which Levinas describes violence and its link to war. Thirdly, I am going to explain the essential bound between Ontology and totality, on one side, and war, on the other. This will include Levinas's rejection of the philosophy of Hegel. And finally, I am going to clarify the sense of Levinas's ethics on the basis of what has been exposed.

1. Ontology and Totality

Philosophical discourse is necessarily linked to the verb "to be". The main question of philosophy has been: "why are there beings at all instead of nothing?" (Heidegger 2000: 1). The philosopher is always interested in what things are and in what there is. Besides, to talk about reality is to talk about what "it is", through philosophical language. Being and philosophy are inseparable.

In philosophy the study of being is called ontology², and it has dominated philosophical discourse since Plato and Aristotle.

¹ I will abbreviate *Totality and Infinity* as *TI* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* as *OB*.

² Etymologically coming from *ὄντος*, genitive singular of *ὄν* [reality, entity, being] and *λόγος* [science, language, reason].

Levinas thinks that the development of ontology throughout the history of philosophy as the main philosophical investigation has brought with it the ambition of reducing the world to its knowledge and thought: the apprehension of its being. Levinas explains it in this way in an interview that appears in the book *Ethics and Infinity*:

In the critique of totality [...] there is a reference to the history of philosophy. This history can be interpreted as an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus become absolute thought. The consciousness of self is at the same time consciousness of the whole. There have been few protestations in the history of philosophy against this totalization. (Levinas 1985: 75-76)

This effort to totalize everything in a huge philosophical system is understood by Levinas as the reduction of the “Other” to the “Same”. These are the other two main terms in *TI*. “Sameness” or “the Same” is basically the realm of subjectivity, freedom and consciousness. Levinas follows in this aspect the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and Heidegger (in *Being and Time*), in the sense that transcendental subjectivity in Husserl and, *Dasein* in Heidegger are, generally speaking, the ones that constitute the world, the ones that give sense to what there is. The world is basically a human world. I develop myself, constitute myself as freedom in labor, joy and economy; constituting the world as my world, giving sense to it.

Levinas presents in *TI* a new approach to subjectivity that wants to abandon what he calls the egoistic subjectivity. He seems to want to differentiate his philosophical work from other existentialisms³ that share this same concern with Levinas: how to protect individuality and subjectivity against the rule of the universal or totality. Levinas uses the idea of “infinity” to differentiate himself from those other existentialist philosophers, including Heidegger (when he mentions angst before death):

This book then does present itself as a defense of subjectivity, but it will apprehend the subjectivity not at the level of its purely egoist presentation against totality nor in its anguish before death, but as founded in the idea of infinity. (Levinas 1979: 26)

The Other or otherness is the surplus of being which is not reducible, assimilable, absorbable or enclosable by subjectivity/sameness. This obviously means that the conceptual tools that subjectivity uses to apprehend and dominate the world are not able

³ By this I mean mostly Jean-Paul Sartre. Kierkegaard could be considered too. But a fair and further comparison between Levinas and those authors would be good enough for another investigation.

to grasp the Other. If the Other could be apprehensible then it would not be Other anymore. The otherness of the Other would be lost. The Other can never be reduced to my sphere of subjectivity (in Husserlian terms). This will lead Levinas to claim that the only possible relationship between the Same and the Other is an asymmetrical one.

This relationship must be asymmetrical because if it were symmetrical one could equally go from one side of the relationship to the other side. The Other would be easily apprehensible by the Same. The relationship would be defined by a third neutral concept that would reduce the Other to the Same. The Other could be easily determined as what the Same is not, a mere negation of the ego. Thus, the Other must be an infinite Other and not just the negative of the Same⁴. We can take, for example, what the social sciences do: reduce and explain the intersubjective experience to relations of class, gender, culture, and so on.

Totality, to clarify further, would involve this neutralization that we have just explained. The neutral explains any possible relationship between Same and its Other on the basis of a discourse that constitutes a totality. A philosophical system is a totality. Totality in itself has no ethical connotations⁵. What Levinas wants to stress is just the idea that the Other cannot be reduced to any totality. Sameness wants to grasp the otherness of the Other because, according to Levinas, there is an essential metaphysical desire towards the Other. But the Other is characterized as infinite precisely to guarantee its unreachability and the asymmetry that makes possible the relationship between Same and Other without totality. This metaphysical desire is, thus, impossible to satisfy, to accomplish.

2. Violence and War

The reduction of otherness to sameness is a form of violence. This is essential to understand Levinas's opposition to it. To clarify it I am presenting here how Levinas describes violence and its link to war.

There are three characterizations of violence in *TI*:

⁴ "Just the negative of the Same" would be "alterity" and not "otherness" for Levinas.

⁵ We could say that we should avoid totalization as much as possible because it wants to reduce the Other. So, in this sense it is bad, but Levinas accepts the impossibility of avoiding totalization in his account of the metaphysical desire towards the Other. Subjectivity tends to totalization. Levinas is not telling us to eliminate it once and for all, but he is reminding us that in our totalizations we lose sight of the primordial relationship between Same and Other as an asymmetrical relationship.

1) Violence as the destruction of someone's identity and roots: "Violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves" (Levinas 1979: 21). This first characterization is the one that we encounter in the reduction of the Other to the Same. The Other is denied its own identity by being subordinated to the Same.

Then we have 2) Violence as non-adequation: "the violence which, for a mind [*esprit*], consists in welcoming a being to which it is inadequate" (Levinas 1979: 25). And at this point it needs to be clarified (because then it will be relevant to comment on Derrida's interpretation), that violence is only unethical when we take into account the destruction of one's identity, but not necessarily because of the non-adequation. Violence is present in the moment of ethics. And we could take this as the third way of presenting violence.

3) Violence as the sudden and unexpected encounter with the infinite Other: "What, in action, breaks forth as essential violence is the surplus of being over the thought that claims to contain it, the marvel of the idea of infinity" (Levinas 1979: 27). Why? Because the last characterization of violence as ethical violence is the non-adequation *par excellence*.

Finally, what we have in war is the context or moment in which violence manifests itself more powerfully. It is manifest in all of the three ways mentioned above. The unethical aspect is pretty obvious, why the ethical as well then? The ethical aspect appears as a lack. The concentration camps are a good example to illustrate this point. In the context of horror and despair certain attitudes of fraternity among the victims appears as well as a moment of reflection about the ethical and the human that Levinas experienced himself. Levinas's focus on war plays the role of showing that with the violence of war we gain consciousness of the sense and fragility of ethics. War becomes a moment of ethical reflection. Certain situations and relations with others appear in a way that could never happen on our daily basis and that are crucial for our understanding of ethics.

3. The Link Between Ontology and War

Levinas wants to show a fundamental bond between war and ontology. There is a parallelism between the determination of being in ontology and the determination of reality in war. War subordinates everything to the violence of its events. War determines reality (being), in a way in which everything is interrupted and forced out of its place to

violently play a new role in a new state of affairs. War becomes a totality that subordinates the other aspects of life in the most radical way. Levinas straightforwardly claims in his preface: “We do not need obscure fragments of Heraclitus to prove that being reveals itself as war to philosophical thought” (Levinas 1979: 21). Before introducing the main terminology that he is going to use in this book, he wants to call our attention on this link between war and being and how philosophy thinks on the basis of this link.

Far from being obvious, the main philosophy that exploits this bond is the philosophy of Hegel⁶. Levinas situates himself against Hegel here. The difference that we find between Levinas on one side, and Hegel on the other, is that war is not philosophically relevant because of its role in the progress and understanding of being in history, but because of the loss of morality, autonomy, individuality, freedom and so. In Hegel, being is understood or determined through the absolute spirit. The development of the spirit is the development of a rational history directed towards an end. The crucial stages in which the spirit is embodied or that suppose a decisive direction in its progress towards the end of history are mostly moments of war and conflict. Thus, war is crucial in the development of being. Hegel is, because of this, considered the maximum exponent of the traditional philosophical rationality as totalization by Levinas. What Levinas brings to criticize Hegel’s philosophy that links being to war, is the idea of war as a totality in which all the individuals who suffer it are reduced to the catastrophe.

So, what Levinas wants to stress is that, in war, the need of morality, the need of the ethical appears stronger than in our everyday life. It is in the moment of war when we know that our freedom is always in danger, that autonomy and morality are in danger. Morality appears in war times as an illusion. The institutions, that are supposed to maintain our moral duties fall, and our lives are reduced to the extreme violence that hits our lives as the most imminent reality: “at the very moment of its fulguration when the drappings of illusion burn war is produced as the pure experience of pure being” (Levinas 1979: 21). This is the basic idea behind Levinas claiming that freedom consists in knowing that our freedom (and here we can include, autonomy and thus, morality) is in danger (Levinas 1979: 35), and that “to philosophize is to trace freedom back to what lies before it” (Levinas 1979: 84). This trace back means something like tracing back its

⁶ Here I obviously mean Hegel as it is interpreted by Levinas. Maybe this interpretation is unfair, but that is a whole other issue. Here I present in a general and summarized way the interpretation that Levinas has and that he is presupposing in *TI*.

unsuspected principles. We take freedom for granted as one of the most fundamental things because in our daily basis we live within morality and institutions that guarantee freedom, but war shows how this freedom can be in danger⁷, that it can be lost. Our freedom is built upon our relationship with others⁸.

Thus war, as we said before, constitutes a totality because the individuals who participate in it and the elements of their lives become meaningful only by taking into account the ends of war. Sacrificed for the formation of a new being, of a new state of affairs, the justification of which through the process of war determines the sense of everything else. The imposition of politics and power over morality. The totality that appears in war (for the reasons explained above that clarify the link between war and being), is a reflection of the ontological totality that operates in the core of traditional philosophical reasoning. Ontology subordinates the fundamental difference between individuals, their intersubjectivity, to a common being that reduces the particularity of each of those individuals to the neutral intersubjective corpus. In this corpus, the primordial relationship between subjects could be reduced to social sciences, for example. The individual then is just a type, an instantiation of a certain ontology, but this treatment destroys the primordial human face to face relationship that is for Levinas the basis of all experience.

4. A New Understanding of Ethics

The sudden and unexpected introduction of otherness in sameness is what Levinas calls ethics (Levinas 1979: 43). Levinas presents a new understanding of ethics. Instead of a systematic effort devoted to clarifying what is good and bad, ethics has to do (following the phenomenological fashion) with experience: “if experience precisely means a relation with the absolutely other, that is, with what always overflows thought, the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word” (Levinas 1979: 25). As we said before, the face to face relationship is the basis of experience. This is the key idea of Levinas’s philosophy. Ontology, philosophical truth, language as wanting to say something, morality etc., all of them depend on the previous face to face encounter with another. I do philosophy because I need to respond to someone

⁷ This tracing back has more connotations. It also means that freedom on its own is not enough to understand ethics. Freedom must be determined and based in my relationship with others to be worth. But this issue would take us further.

⁸ Contrary to some existentialist philosophies of that time which say that human being is condemned to freedom (See Sartre 1946).

else, I need to give reasons to someone else. The realm of being or truth on its own, a solipsist consciousness or a transcendental ego are worthless if they do not satisfy the responsibility that I have towards the Other. This fundamental responsibility is the engine of everything else in philosophy, this is why in Levinas, ethics is called first philosophy instead of ontology.

Levinas situates ethics as first philosophy in opposition to ontology following Aristotle's formulation. In Levinas's view this overcomes the traditional distinction between theory and practice because ethics was conceived by tradition as practical philosophy. First, we had to understand the theory to act in accordance afterwards. So, there was a hierarchy that situated theory above practice. By situating ethics as first philosophy the traditional hierarchy is overcome (Levinas 1979: 29). We do not need to understand the essence of the Other or the theory to the Other to approach it. Instead, it is that, thanks to the approach to the Other, we should start formulating the question of being. Similarly, the question about good does not need to be subordinated to the question about the being of good (what is good?).

So, as this relationship between Same and Other breaks any adequation, it always leaves a surplus of being which cannot be said in the language of the Same, a surplus that is the central issue of this work⁹. So, we cannot use the traditional language of metaphysics or ontology to talk about this surplus. And it is in this challenge against traditional metaphysical language where Derrida focuses his commentary on "Violence and Metaphysics".

⁹ The infiniteness of the Other that questions my spontaneity and to which I need to respond.

Chapter 2

Derrida's Deconstructive Reading of Levinas: "Violence and Metaphysics"

First, I must clarify that "Violence and Metaphysics" is not an attack on Levinas. Derrida himself explains that: "We will attempt to ask several questions. If they succeed in approaching the heart of this explication, they will be nothing less than objections, but rather the questions put to us by Levinas" (Derrida 2005: 104). However, Derrida's reading is indeed a deconstructive reading of Levinas. The difference is simple: Derrida is not presenting Levinas's philosophy as a philosophical position and then, from the outside, he attacks it and gives us his alternative position in response. Very differently, Derrida is commenting Levinas as truthfully as possible and then raises problematic questions that appear during the reading of Levinas's work itself, from within, with his own terms and ideas. Deconstructive reading must involve this double gesture in which first I read the text as rigorously as possible, and then, a series of antinomies appear from within this reading (Critchley 2014: 23-27). Besides, those antinomies open up new questions and possible unsuspected readings of the text.

The central issue of "Violence and Metaphysics" is the possibility of questioning philosophy from within philosophy, or (in a more aggressive way) getting rid of philosophy from within. Levinas wants to denounce traditional philosophy¹⁰ but, in his attempt to denounce it, he is using its language, and while doing so, he accepts implicit premises that the language of traditional metaphysics intrinsically carries in its terminology. Derrida says straightforwardly that he is going to treat questions about language and the question of language (Derrida 2005: 136).

As a preliminary remark, we should say that Levinas's philosophy is, in its effort to be anti-ontological, a philosophy that is never going to define or present purely what it is talking about; it is a philosophy that works only by suggesting its ideas through a very metaphorical language and negation. Derrida explains it this way:

It could doubtless be shown that it is in the nature of Levinas's writing, at its decisive moments, to move along these cracks, masterfully progressing by negations, and by negation against negation. Its proper route is not that of an "either this... or that," but of a "neither this...

¹⁰ I am using traditional philosophy and Greek philosophy as the same in accordance with Levinas. Levinas accepts, in a Heideggerian way, that philosophy is essentially and traditionally Greek.

nor that.” The poetic force of metaphor is often the trace of this rejected alternative, this wounding of language. Through it, in its opening, experience itself is silently revealed. (Derrida 2005: 112)

It is also described as: “the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition” (Derrida 2005: 398). Insistence that haunts the question again and again without never completely delimiting it.

Levinas’s attack against philosophical tradition includes, and is specially focused on, an attack against phenomenology: the philosophy of both Husserl and Heidegger. Levinas criticizes them, but at the same time, accepts phenomenological terminology. He wants to overcome certain phenomenological themes but when he is using phenomenological language, Levinas cannot avoid carrying the presuppositions that he wants to avoid. How can he get rid of the language that he is presupposing and accepting beforehand?

To illustrate this last point a little better: Derrida talks about the logic of “inheriting” in his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”. He explains how ethnography cannot avoid the discourse of the European science that it tries to attack. The ethnologist wants to develop a discourse outside of the traditional Western ethnocentric anthropology in order to criticize this ethnocentrism. But such a thing is impossible because when the ethnologist is attacking Western tradition, he is doing it from within the discourse and terminology that he has inherited from Western tradition. The use and acceptance of this language carries implicit premises with it: “The ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them [...] This necessity is irreducible; it is not a historical contingency” (Derrida 2005: 356).

Going back to the main point, Levinas’s work is an attempt to overcome philosophical language in philosophical tradition to express a new notion of ethics as the relationship between subjectivity and otherness without totality. I will focus mainly on two problems: the first problem concerns the question whether Levinas can escape the traditional philosophical conceptuality. By “traditional conceptuality,” I mean the language of the whole of Western metaphysics starting from classical Greek philosophy all the way up to phenomenology. Now, what would it really mean if it is the case, as Derrida suggests, that Levinas cannot escape the traditional conceptuality of philosophy? And the second problem is that, in Derrida’s view, the language of Husserl and Heidegger

is even better to reach the goals of Levinas's philosophy precisely because they are more aware of their use of traditional language with its ups and downs.

1. Escaping from Greece: The Metaphors of Light and Space

As we saw in the previous chapter, Levinas wants to develop a philosophy against ontology. But the difficulty of this project lies in the fact that philosophical language itself is traditionally an ontological language, a language about being. It is not just that the language of philosophy is rooted in Greek language, but that philosophical language carries its ontological heritage in its Greek terminology. That means that when we are using Greek terminology, we are carrying certain ontological commitments with it (Derrida 2005: 100).

In Levinas's thought we see how the Greek source of philosophy has some sort of a triangular understanding that involves, being, theory, and light. Aristotle (*Eth. Nic.* 8) situated theory as the highest human activity, and Plato (*Phd.* 247d) considered it the essential activity of the soul in the realm of forms. Theory is essentially linked to seeing, since etymologically it gains its meaning from the Greek *θεωρός* which basically means "witnessing a spectacle" (Nightingale 2004: 4). The *θεωρός*, in the context of ancient Greece, was basically an ambassador who visited a foreign city to witness some sort of a festival, before theory gained any intellectual or metaphysical meaning:

In the traditional practice of *theoria*, an individual (called the *theoros*) made a journey or pilgrimage abroad for the purpose of witnessing certain events and spectacles. In the classical period, *theoria* took the form of pilgrimages to oracles and religious festivals. In many cases, the *theoros* was sent by his city as an official ambassador: this "civic" *theoros* journeyed to an oracular center or festival, viewed the events and spectacles there, and returned home with an official eyewitness report. (Nightingale 2004: 3)

It is, then, only after Plato and Aristotle that *θεωρία* gained its intellectual and metaphysical meaning. The metaphors of light or the literary use of light in philosophical tradition is justified because of this prevalence of the seeing¹¹ over other senses; light, as that which brings clarity, that which helps us to see. Finally, the verb that dominates all theory is the verb "to be." In theorizing we try to grasp the essence or the being of that

¹¹ In (Taylor 2006) you can find a study about the role of vision and ethics in Derrida and Levinas.

which we theorize about. Clarifying or seeing something amounts to knowing what the being of this thing is¹².

Now I am going to explain how Derrida finds a metaphor in the “face”, one of the central terms of Levinas’s philosophy, that gains its meaning from the traditional metaphor of light. First, we will see how the face is linked to light, and then how Levinas also wants to avoid understanding “exteriority” as a spatial metaphor, but it becomes a really hard, if not an impossible, task.

The same controversy appears with other terms such as “nudity” (Levinas 1979: 74), for example. The use of metaphors in Levinas’s discourse aims to be absolved from their metaphorical character once the idea that they want to express beyond language is successfully suggested: “The word nudity thus destroys itself after serving to indicate something beyond itself. An entire reading and interrogation of Totality and Infinity could be developed around this affirmation” (Derrida 2005: 132).

“The face” is a recurrent term in Levinas’s philosophy. It is described as the entrance and welcoming of the Other. However, Levinas says that it is an “epiphany”. Epiphany as *επιφάνεια* carries the idea of appearing or showing, and thus, bringing to light. Moreover, Levinas claims that this epiphany is an appearing that does not appear (Levinas 1985: 85). How is this possible? He tries to justify the manifestation of the Other while avoiding traditional seeing at the same time.

Levinas claims that the face is not a metaphor (Levinas 1979: 207). The Other is not shown through it, that it is not the mediation of anything. The face itself is the appearing of the Other. But it is not a simple human face as we usually understand it. Nonetheless the epiphany of the Face is not able to abandon its condition of metaphor of light in Derrida’s view: “How, for example, will the metaphysics of the face as the epiphany of the other free itself of light?” (Derrida 2005: 114).

Moreover, Levinas’s face is not just vulnerable from being a metaphor of light. Levinas claims that the Other expresses an exteriority more exterior than exteriority itself (Levinas 1979: 50): exteriority that is not a spatial metaphor anymore. He wants to avoid the traditional inside-outside opposition and metaphors to overcome traditional

¹² Levinas’s rejection of light and theory leads him to an understanding of ethics refractory of being determined in concrete laws: that is what a traditional ethics would do; being prescriptive. Derrida calls it an ethics of ethics (Derrida 2005: 138). Levinas just philosophizes about the sense of ethics, but he is not proposing any moral to follow.

metaphysical language. However, in what sense is it legitimate to say that the Other is pure exteriority without metaphor? Levinas uses the concept of “exteriority” but an exteriority that would be beyond any spatial determination. A non-spatial relationship makes no sense, because relationship already presupposes space, and non-spatial relationship can only be indicated negatively.

Inaccessible, the invisible is the most high. This expression [...] tears apart, by the superlative excess, the spatial literality of the metaphor [...] But what necessity compels this inscription of language in space at the very moment when it exceeds space? And if the pole of metaphysical transcendence is a spatial non-height, what, in the last analysis, legitimates the expression of trans-ascendance, borrowed from Jean Wahl? The theme of the face perhaps will help us understand it. (Derrida 2005: 116)

We should remember Derrida’s aim again at this point. He is not interested in saying that Levinas contradicts himself or that he is not coherent. He wants to point out the impossibility of getting rid of certain language while using it: “We are not denouncing, here, an incoherence of language or a contradiction in the system. We are wondering about the meaning of a necessity: the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it.” (Derrida 2005: 139).

Another problem concerns onto-theology. As we said above, Levinas’s face is not simply a human face, but is neither the face of God, but rather the similarity between man and God. Levinas wants to reinterpret this traditional similarity without “participation”, because participation would involve totality: the two elements related by similarity would participate in a total, higher common essence. Levinas uses the idea of trace. The face is the trace of God, and a trace involves the appearing of something that is absent. The trace indicated that something was at some place at some point, but now is not there anymore. It has left us just a trace. The trace always points further.

If we follow Derrida, Levinas would be, in a certain sense, still making onto-theology. Even if God is not understood as a supreme being, it carries certain metaphysical implications and it works as the center of his philosophical discourse. A “center” as Derrida explains in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”, is a concept that organizes and orients the other elements and concepts of a given philosophical discourse. Those other elements receive its sense in relation to this center, but the center, is, in a sense, outside of the system; it does not receive its sense from any other element (Derrida 2005: 352). Levinas, in the same way, situates God and

the Other outside of philosophical discourse but, at the same time, they need to be inside of it as the ultimate source of meaning if he wants to carry on with his philosophical discourse. But still, even if Levinas's philosophy follows "the form of negative theology" (Derrida 2005: 132), there is a significant difference: Levinas does not eliminate language. Derrida claims that traditionally negative theology was characterized by a devaluation of language: Language cannot express the ultimate reality of God, so we have to approach it negatively and then we get rid of language once we are done. Negative theology values the capacity of intuition over language (Derrida 2005: 144). But this is not Levinas's philosophy. Levinas wants to make justice with language. Indicate the violence in language with the same language that causes this violence. But, is it possible to have a non-violent language if language is already situated in the realm of the Same? (Derrida 2005: 145).

Besides that, Derrida finds something attractive in Levinas's idea of "trace", but he turns this idea upside-down. In opposition, Derrida says that the dialogue between the Same and the Other happens not in the trace of God, but instead that God would be a product of the trace as well (Derrida 2005: 135). God would be an illegitimate substantiation of the trace. In Derrida's view, Levinas does not need this substantiation and it would make his point easier if he avoided it.

In summary: firstly, Levinas wants to escape the language of traditional philosophy because it is too theoretical to develop a new understanding of ethics. Secondly, some of Levinas terms as the "face", "exteriority" or "God" cannot avoid carrying with them metaphysical and traditional implications. Thirdly, the idea of "trace" without the substantiation of God is more attractive to Derrida.

1.1. Phenomenology as Traditional/ Greek Philosophy

Now, the philosophical language that Levinas uses is the language of phenomenology, and again, there is a rejection of phenomenology as Greek philosophy that is done from within: Levinas rejects phenomenology while using it and by using it he is accepting its ontological commitments. We have, firstly, that phenomenology is the philosophy that Levinas recognizes many times as its own (Levinas 1979: 28), but at the same time he is always trying to overcome it. And secondly, a critique of both of his masters: Husserl and Heidegger. Both of them are too Greek in Levinas's view. Husserl

for being mainly theoretical¹³, and Heidegger for not giving up the idea of philosophy mainly as ontology and Greek. But, in Derrida's view, the language of both Husserl and Heidegger is even better to achieve Levinas's own philosophical goals.

1.1.1. Husserl

Husserl's philosophical project is strictly modern and epistemological, by which I mean that it is still trapped in the subject-object schema. He wanted to develop philosophy as a rigorous science with the development of phenomenology. Phenomenology is focused on the constitution of things as operations of a subjective consciousness, the sense-giving operations of consciousness. This means that the Other and the world had to be reduced to the operations of consciousness and treated as objects for a subject. Besides, Levinas would agree with others such as Ricoeur in the idea that Husserl's philosophy is also focused in perception and mainly in a "philosophy of seeing" (Ricoeur 1967: 18).

Derrida indicates that in *TI* Levinas seems to understand phenomenology as a methodology (Derrida 2005: 147), and asks: is it possible to get rid of this methodology as if it were a mere tool? Something that Levinas in his early works had denied. What we mean by tool here is that, in *IT*, Levinas seems to say that phenomenological language is the best at hand to express what he needs to say (Levinas 1979: 28), but as it is a Greek language, we should abandon it in the end, similar to Wittgenstein "throwing away the ladder" in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 1961: 89). But the *naïveté* here lies in the fact that what we want to express is inseparable from the language in which it is expressed. Thus, Levinas cannot avoid phenomenology.

What Levinas preserves more from traditional phenomenology is the idea of intentionality, which is reinterpreted beyond the noesis-noema distinction according to Derrida (Derrida 2005: 147). This means that the Other is not a moment of my consciousness. I do not reduce the Other to the structure of intentionality as the correlation between noesis and noema in consciousness. In Levinas's new understanding of intentionality I am the pointed- intended by the face of the Other, and in the moment of pointing-accusation, a dialogue is established. The phenomenological "to the things

¹³ In the sense specified above.

themselves” in Levinas is read as a non-mediated dialogue with God. A dialogue that happens in the encounter with the Other’s face¹⁴.

Derrida defends Husserl because, in his view, Husserl’s phenomenology already denies the distinction between practical and theoretical philosophy: ethics is not deduced from phenomenology. But ethics needs phenomenology to gain any sense, to express itself as its medium (Derrida 2005: 152-153). Derrida’s point is basically, that only in the language of being can we build a discourse about the Other. However, notwithstanding what we have just pointed out, in Derrida’s view, phenomenology is defective in its treatment of the non-present, because it is, from its very roots, a philosophy of presence (Derrida 2005: 167).

How does Derrida conciliate here the non-being subordinated by theory by using the language of being to express ethics? Derrida says that there are two meanings of objectivity: 1) objectivity as determination, the one that bothers Levinas, and 2) objectivity as sense. If ethics has any sense, this means that we can build any discourse around it and make it sufficiently understandable for any other reader. Then we have a theory of ethics. Any ethical sense presupposes noematicity in general, but this never implies a real/factual relationship or dependence between ethics and phenomenology (Derrida 2005: 152). If we would completely deny noematicity, this will lead us to negate conceptuality.

1.1.2. Heidegger

Heidegger introduces his own understanding of phenomenology going back to its Greek root, as the composition of *φαινόμενον* and *λόγος*. *Φαινόμενον* is derived from the verb *φαίνεσθαι* that means to show itself. At the same time *φαίνεσθαι* is derived from *φαινω* that means “to bring to the light of day”, the stem *φα-* as in *φῶς* (light) denotes manifestation, to make something visible, to clarify etc. The phenomena are, thus, what they show themselves as and what can be brought to light. And Heidegger equalizes it to the term *τὰ ὄντα*, the entities. But *φαινόμενον* has in Greek also the sense of appearance, something that seems like (Heidegger 1962: 52).

Heidegger reinterprets phenomenology as “fundamental ontology”. Levinas rejects this reinterpretation because it favors ontology over ethics. Levinas claims in *TI*

¹⁴ I am going to treat this issue in depth in the 2nd subchapter of this chapter: “The Other as Infinite” (see below).

that ontology subordinates our relationship with existents, entities, to the comprehension of the being of those entities. Heidegger's philosophy is an accomplice of this subordination (Levinas 1979: 45).

However, Derrida defends Heidegger, firstly, because being, as it is used by Levinas, is not what Heidegger meant by it. Levinas confuses being with a concept, predicate, or even with an *ἀρχή* in *TI*, which would be true when criticizing traditional metaphysics, but not regarding Heidegger. It is precisely Heidegger who denounces the confusion between being and *ἀρχή* throughout the history of philosophy, and in this sense, Levinas's critique of ontology is very similar to Heidegger's critique of traditional metaphysics and the forgetting about the question of being (Derrida 2005: 177).

But in Derrida's view (and, secondly), Heidegger's criticism to humanism applies to Levinas's philosophy as well because of Levinas's focus on the similarity between God and mankind described as a substance, a thing in itself, that appears in the face (Derrida 2005: 178). Heidegger's question of being does not mean the substitution of God for being or vice versa. The face can only appear thanks to the "letting be", a Heideggerian notion that consist in the respect for the other's being, only possible if I accept the language of being, and the difference between being and entity (Derrida 2005: 179). The difference between being and entity, contrary to what Levinas thinks, does not entail any oppression or constraint of any kind of being upon the entity. The distinction between being and entity is not a relation of any kind, but they are, in fact, inseparable.

Thirdly, Derrida claims that with Heidegger's distinction between being and entity, it is precisely the Being which permits the difference between Same and Other and not the opposite. Being is trans-categorical as the Other in Levinas (Derrida 2005: 175). Being in Heidegger must not be confused with a supreme entity or a special region of being. The *ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*¹⁵ thus, must mean beyond the totality of existents or being understood as "what there is", but not beyond being in the Heideggerian sense.

¹⁵ *ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*: Beyond being. It makes reference to the idea of good beyond being that appears in the *Republic*. At the same time, Levinas connects Plato with Descartes. In the third meditation, Descartes conceives the idea of infinite as that which is in me, but it cannot possibly had been originated in me because it exceeds my capacity. It exceeds the realm of immanence in a way Husserl did not pay enough attention: "An absolute outside, an exteriority infinitely overflowing the monad of the ego cogito. Here again, Descartes against Husserl, the Descartes of the Third Meditation allegedly misconstrued by Husserl" (Derrida 2005: 132).

Therefore, Derrida defends Heidegger's language and philosophy as better prepared to face a criticism of the history of metaphysics than Levinas's language. Basically, it is because Heidegger embraces the use of being in philosophy with its consequences instead of wanting to get rid of it as Levinas's seems to try to achieve.

In summary: Firstly, Levinas cannot avoid the metaphysical presuppositions of phenomenology because he is using phenomenological language. Secondly, he preserves mostly the Husserlian idea of intentionality in a novel and less theoretical way. Thirdly, in Derrida's view, Levinas's critique to Husserl and Heidegger is unfair, and the language of both is even more attractive to achieve the goals of Levinas's philosophy than the one Levinas is using himself in *TI*.

2. The Other as Infinite

Going back to the metaphor of exteriority. As it was said before, Levinas says that the Other is more exterior than exteriority itself; an exteriority that should be beyond spatial determinations (Levinas 1979: 50). This exteriority is infinite. This attribution raises a series of questions: how can the Other as infinite, as non-spatial, enter into a relationship with the Same, with subjectivity? Any encounter or relationship needs a spatial point to happen, to make it possible (Derrida 2005: 140). But would this point of encounter become, then, a mediator that makes impossible the asymmetry that Levinas demands? But what does this asymmetry carry with it if the Other is completely different from subjectivity?

First, Derrida suspects that the attributions of the adjectives "finite" and "infinite" are not justified enough. Totality is always presupposed as finite totality in Levinas's discourse, but this is not obvious at all (Derrida 2005: 133). In Hegel's philosophy, we find subjectivity as an infinite totality. If we completely accept Levinas philosophy, totality should always be a closed system. But if we also accept that subjectivity develops itself in totalization, as Hegel does (and Levinas seems to agree with), then totality cannot be completely closed because the development of subjectivity always depends on its contact and confrontation with the world and with what this subject is not in the beginning. If we accept a closed totality, we are forced to accept a hermetic subjectivity as well, but Levinas rejects such a thing (Derrida 2005: 148-149).

If subjectivity is not completely enclosed, if the operations of my consciousness are not completely identical with what there is, the possibility of encountering the Other

makes more sense. Something may enter into, or be in contact with, a solipsistic ego only if this ego is open and incapable of grasping the totality of reality. However, if the Other is pure transcendence, pure exteriority, how does the ego find it? The Other needs to lose the exteriority to enter into a relationship with the ego. But where should we find the point of contact or encounter between Same and Other, finitude and infinitude? The dangerous aspect of this is that this point of encounter can easily transform Levinas asymmetry into a symmetry. Because the point of encounter could work as a neutral mediatory concept. Following Derrida, if sameness is not static, if there is economy and joy in the Same, and if the ego is not a solipsistic one but an open one able to find something outside of itself, there must be a constitution of the Same by a self-negation produced by an encounter with another. But this could lead to the confusion of otherness and alterity (Derrida 2005: 158).

The infinite exteriority of the Other would make any contact impossible due to the rejection of any space, and this affects the face as well: how can the face have any corporality? Besides, the only possible solution to maintain this infinite positivity of the face would be a certain dualism in which we would have to distinguish between the mundane face (the face of alterity) and a non-mundane one (the face of the infinite Other) (Derrida 2005: 143).

The confusion of otherness and alterity threatens the asymmetrical¹⁶ status of the relationship between Same and Other beyond totality. Levinas needs to maintain this asymmetry to break with Hegelian approaches to alterity because in Hegel's philosophy the Other is just a moment of subjectivity; what appears to my consciousness is not-me or different from me but understood on the basis of me of my consciousness. In order to avoid this formulation, Levinas proposes a new metaphysics as desire towards the Other beyond being. Desire appears as a movement towards the Other in an anti-Hegelian fashion (Levinas 1979: 34). This movement establishes a principle of asymmetry by which the Other cannot be determined on the basis of any characteristics of the Same. Radicalizing the idea of otherness, Levinas wants to avoid in this way any symmetry as a possible means of assimilation.

This asymmetry carries with it important differences between Same and Other that can have serious consequences: what if the Other in its difference is not an alter ego? Levinas identifies the Same with the I and the Other with an infinite Other. But he does

¹⁶ See chapter 1.

not confer the characterization of alter-ego on the Other. This would be a mistake in Derrida's view because I should be recognized as Other by my other. Egoity maintains the independence of the Other with respect to me. Kierkegaard's egoity¹⁷ is not the empirical ego, but subjectivity in general and Levinas does not want to give up the idea of subjectivity (Derrida 2005: 159).

Husserl's philosophy is in Derrida's view a better and already achieved overcoming of Hegelianism. Moreover, it already had the sense of asymmetry that Levinas needs, and the characterization of the Other as an alter ego that Derrida believes fundamental (Derrida 2005: 149).

The Other is in Hegel the non-defined negativity of the spirit. But Levinas does not want to situate the Other as negativity of the Same. In Husserl, the irreducibility of consciousness as intentionality cannot be reabsorbed as self-consciousness, it cannot become absolute knowledge. This means that consciousness for Husserl can never be self-consciousness as it is for Hegel. In Husserl the experience of the object as it is perceived for me never apprehends the object itself, for the object is always exterior, other to me. I only work with it as given and presented in a certain way. Hegel does not respect this exteriority; in Hegel adequation and symmetry are perfect, the I and the non-I, subject and object are a moment in the development of the spirit as self-knowledge. There is no reality beyond subjectivity and consciousness. In Husserl there is always a surplus in the noematic which transcends. This transcendence is already situated in immanence makes the goal of adequation impossible (Derrida 2005: 150). In this non-adequation Husserl maintains the respect, the distance with the Other. This surplus involves that the dative dimension (to whom I speak) must not be confused with the accusative dimension (what I am talking about). Levinas philosophy is about talking to the Other in opposition to theorizing about the Other.

Derrida's defense of Husserl against Levinas works this way: what Husserl presents in his *Cartesian Meditations* is the Other as it appears in the *sphere of the ego*. But: A) Husserl never claimed straightforwardly that the Other could be reduced to the *sphere of the ego*. He always respected the realm of otherness of the Other (Serafini 2016: 483). I do not have access to the "what" of the Other. The Other is just present as the

¹⁷ Kierkegaard's subjectivity would be a good alternative against Hegel, but Levinas was not happy with it because he considered it (fairly or unfairly) not enough focused in the Other.

“who” that I am talking to. But the only possible theory that I can make about the Other is this one: to talk about the phenomenality (what is given to me) of the non-phenomenal (the Other). Besides, B) the idea of *analogical appresentation* does not involve an access to the Other. There is otherness also in things according to Husserl, but the otherness of things lies in the impossibility of encountering the object absolutely because of the limits of my perception. The Other subject is not just non-completely-graspable because of my perceptual limits, but because I cannot access its subjective experience. And, C) Husserl’s *empathy* does not involve that the Other is a moment or modification of my subjectivity. Alter-ego means that the Other has the form of an ego, and not that this “alter” depends on my ego (“alter” is not an epithet of the ego). If that were not the case, there would not be a recognition of violence towards anyone. Violence would have no victim and no author as well (because the Other has to recognize me too). Levinas’s ethical asymmetry must depend on this first symmetry that recognizes Same and Other as egos (Derrida 2005: 160).

3. The Violence of Language to Denounce Violence

Now, regarding the question: What would it mean if Levinas cannot avoid traditional philosophical language? First, I must remind the reader at this point that Levinas wants to avoid traditional philosophical language because this language fails in expressing the sense of ethics that Levinas wants to express, and furthermore, that this language is intrinsically violent because it is intrinsically ontological. Then, following Derrida, the impossibility of avoiding traditional language would mean that we can only denounce the violence in metaphysical language using metaphysical language, with the difficulties that it entails (Derrida 2005: 146). The main difficulty this subchapter will focus is about the impossibility of getting rid of violence in language.

In his essay, Derrida gets to a point where he claims that if Levinas is in search of a pure ethical language without violence, then his goal is unreachable. When Levinas accepts philosophy and phenomenology he is carrying its ontological implications and their violence as well. The confrontation of metaphysics with more metaphysics turns into what Derrida calls the economy of light against light (Derrida 2005: 146).

But Derrida does not only want to indicate this necessity in language. He goes even further. In his view, God and peace presuppose War. This means that only because of the fact that there is violence in war we need peace. Only in the moment of violence

the necessity of going back to the face of the Other becomes imperative. The dualism ethics-violence is what makes ethics intelligible (Derrida 2005: 184). An absolute respect for the face (pure ethics without violence) as well as a complete disrespect for it (pure violence without ethics) would lead to the non-intelligibility of violence. There is violence because there is face. The face is what offers itself to violence.

However, a different question could arise as well: if a non-metaphysical approach to ethics is impossible, why should not we remain in silence? If metaphysics carries an inherent violence with it, why do we not end metaphysical discourse? (Derrida 2005: 185). Derrida believes that peace as the absolute absence of language would lead to the greatest violence, the total silence which would lead us to the absolute naught, and therefore, again, ethics would not have any place. The only possibility is to do less possible violence with language. Again, to put violence against violence.

In summary: 1) Levinas tries to criticize philosophy using philosophical language. And if he uses philosophical language, he is carrying with it the presuppositions that he would like to avoid. At the same time 2) he is criticizing the language of phenomenology, but it seems that phenomenological language is better prepared to achieve the goals of his project. Thirdly, 3) if there must be an asymmetrical relationship between Same and Other how can this relationship take place (the Other seems to be an infinite Other)? And finally, 4) Does Levinas philosophy end in a philosophy of silence? If philosophical language carries certain violence with it should we stop philosophical discourse?

Chapter 3

Levinas's Response to Derrida: *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*

This chapter is going to take a look at Levinas's second major philosophical work *OB*. I am going to consider Levinas's later philosophical development on the basis of this work. Now that we have already exposed Derrida's objections in our previous chapter, let's see how it affected Levinas later philosophical development. *OB* can be read as a response to Derrida (Herrero Hernández 2005: 15). However, this does not mean that *OB* is merely a response to "Violence and Metaphysics". Our point here is that some of the objections or problems that Derrida presents in "Violence and Metaphysics" should be now reconsidered to take into account the changes in Levinas's philosophy. We are taking *OB* because it represents Levinas's later philosophy at its best, but our conclusions should apply to the whole of Levinas's later development¹⁸.

We were facing a problem in language: how can we attack philosophy if philosophical language is the only possible language that we have to do it? How, if when using philosophical language, are we reintroducing the presuppositions that we want to avoid? Levinas wants to present a new understanding of ethics that would be beyond the scope of traditional philosophical language, but how can we talk about what is beyond the scope of philosophical language if we need this same philosophical language to express it? This question affected Levinas's thought, and later in *OB* we find a deeper concern on this issue (Critchley 2014: 12).

However, if we think that the new direction that Levinas will take after "Violence and Metaphysics" is going to be more moderate, we are wrong. Levinas does not moderate his language, he gets more heterodox and poetical instead. Besides he mixes Judaism with philosophy more than ever before. But the point is that he raises the question about the possibility of betraying philosophical language from within. Levinas's answer consists in saying that it is the duty of philosophical language to criticize the primacy of ontology even if it requires the use of ontology at the same time (Levinas 1998: 7).

In this chapter I will firstly focus on this possibility of criticizing ontology and then I am going to move to Levinas's new proposal regarding subjectivity. The first issue will include: 1) the fundamental distinction between the Saying and the Said, 2) the

¹⁸ Derrida does exactly the same when he is mainly focusing his reading on *TI*.

relationship between Greek and Hebrew aspects of Levinas, 3) a new consideration regarding Husserl's phenomenology that will reinterpret Levinas's project towards phenomenology again, and finally 4) a response to the problems regarding violence and language as we presented at the end of the last chapter. All of these subchapters or secondary points are basically responding to the idea of doing philosophy against traditional philosophy. The second issue is going to basically respond to the difficulties presented before by Derrida regarding the possibility of an infinite Other and its relationship with the Same.

1. Otherwise than Being: The possibility of philosophy against philosophy

Levinas accepts that the only possible way of philosophizing is by using the language of being: "All research and all philosophy go back to ontology" (Levinas 1998: 24). The reflection that we find throughout the whole work (*OB*) about the language of philosophy insists in this idea. So, Levinas acknowledges the impossibility of abandoning the language of being. The impossibility of abandoning ontology carries with it, at the same time, the recognition and respect for the history of philosophy and its classics. So, even if *TI* indicated the desire of a departure or break from tradition, this departure should not be understood as a denial of philosophical tradition at all. Levinas expresses this idea in this way:

Philosophy thus arouses a drama between philosophers [...]; empirically it is realized as the history of philosophy in which new interlocutors always enter who have to restate, but in which the former ones take up the floor to answer in the interpretations they arouse, and in which, nonetheless, despite this lack of "certainty in one's movements" or because of it, no one is allowed a relaxation of attention or a lack of strictness. (Levinas 1998: 20)

However, Levinas insists in the fact that his philosophical goal needs to introduce new terminology or reinterpret traditional terminology in a novel way to express his new understanding of ethics. But that does not mean to deny traditional philosophy, its status and its authority. Levinas claims it in this way:

How can such a research be undertaken without introducing some barbarisms in the language of philosophy? Yet philosophy has, at its highest, exceptional, hours stated the beyond of being and the one distinct from being, but mainly remained at home in saying being, that is, inwardness to being. (Levinas 1998: 178)

We can even claim from this quote that, according to Levinas, the idea of "beyond being" has been present in some "exceptional" moments in the history of philosophy. The

idea of “beyond being” has been an already a latent idea in the history of philosophy that demands our attention.

Finally, it is not just that being is the only language at hand but that being carries in itself the possibility of its disruption. The idea of “beyond essence” does not mean to abandon ontology once and for all, not even a place outside of ontology. Ontology itself in its language brings the possibility of its own critique. This last point is what Levinas wants to develop by introducing the new distinction between the Saying and the Said.

1.1. The Saying and the Said

Levinas introduces for the first time in *OB* a distinction between the Saying and the Said. The Said is the thematization, the language of ontology already determined by a system from which any given, or particular, Said is given a particular meaning. The Saying, on the other hand, precedes the Said and it is what makes it enunciable. That is, the very possibility of language before its thematization.

Anything that has meaning, that can be elucidated by saying that it “is”, like in the form x is p ¹⁹. Something, that becomes present by any kind of ontology, is already part of the Said; the Said is something, it means something; it is determined, constituted. It makes sense in relation with other elements of a given system in which it has been included. When things are clear and communicable, they belong to the sphere of the Said. The Said is the phenomenon of phenomenology that appears to consciousness as well.

The distinction between Saying and Said is by no means separable (Waldenfels 2005: 88). These are two sides of the same coin. However, the Saying includes the Said because, the Saying gives the Said the property of being removable and open to new contexts and interpretations. A good example of this is found in the biblical exegesis. According to Levinas, the Said that is established by a certain interpreter does not exhaust the whole meaning of the interpreted verse, and the Saying of the verse is the capacity that it has for being constantly renovated by new interpretations and discussions. Levinas says for example:

Scripture as writing involves a call to posterity. Exegesis would be the possibility for one epoch to have a meaning for another epoch. In this sense, history is not something that relativizes the truth of meaning. The distance that separates the text from the reader is the space

¹⁹ A further linguistical approach to the issue of the Saying and the Said is found in (Waldenfels 2005) and (Ricoeur et al., 2004).

in which the very evolution of the spirit is lodged. Only this distance allows meaning to mean fully, and to be renewed. In the light of exegesis, then, one may speak of continuous Revelation, as one speaks in theology and philosophy of continuous Creation. (Levinas 1994: 170)

The continuous renovation of the letter cannot be exhausted by any Said, but the renovation, the new interpretation as another one is a new Said. The Said on its own, without Saying, would be like a language preestablished forever outside of time and space that would leave no room for any possible modifications or changes. Only because the Said has the property of being renovated by the Saying language is flexible and open to new significations. So, when we say that the Saying precedes the Said, we mean precisely this.

However, apart from these linguistic considerations, the priority of the Saying in Levinas bears the sense of encountering another. Language must be saying something to someone else, to respond. The way we are living in the world with others is understood by Levinas as a constant responding, unavoidable responsibility. Here is where Levinas situates ethics as the essential feature of language. It is actually not even a feature: language is basically ethics. This constant responsibility that we find in Saying, is what Levinas calls: "Saying as being exposed to another" (Levinas 1998). Another who is not me and to whom I respond. Following this line of reasoning, in Levinas's view, any philosophical discourse should presuppose a reply to someone who is absent in the philosophical discourse.

Furthermore, this Saying cannot be translated in terms of being in the language of ontology, because ontology as thematization depends upon the Saying. There is a surplus of Saying that is non-graspable by any thematization. The Saying has the surplus of the infinite, a surplus of absence that can never be completely expressed by any Said, it is never completely put into words, any thematization, any appearing: "Philosophy underestimates the extent of the negation in this 'not appearing', which exceeds the logical scope of negation and affirmation" (Levinas 1998: 168). However, this does not mean that philosophical discourse cannot indirectly, in a forced way, express the idea of the Saying. Even further, Levinas claims that in the Said the Saying can find the potential to renovate itself. This renovation would produce new Said. Philosophy can only be Said. But in the Said, the philosopher must try to philosophize about the idea of the Saying, and, thus, the philosopher needs to express it as much as possible.

Now, we are back to Derrida's problem: is it possible to explain this idea of "beyond essence", that means not reducible to consciousness, in ontological language? As it is expressed by Levinas:

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. (Levinas 1998: 7)

By the very fact of formulating statements, is not the universality of the thematized, that is, of being, confirmed by the project of the present discussion, which ventures to question this universality? Does this discourse remain then coherent and philosophical? These are familiar objections! (Levinas 1998: 155)

In order to answer, Levinas establishes a simile between his own philosophy and skepticism. The skeptic who by saying that "nothing is true" is pretending to say something true. The skeptic falls, like Levinas, prey to the language that he wants to denounce (the language of truth and knowledge) every time that he is presupposing it to express the idea that "actually nothing is true". But Levinas's point is that regardless of the paradox, philosophy is obligated to fight skepticism in a never-ending fight because in skepticism we face a problem inherent to philosophical language, and the fact that it has been a major problem, proves its moment of truth:

Philosophy is not separable from skepticism, which follows it like a shadow it drives off by refuting it again at once on its footsteps. Does not the last word belong to philosophy? Yes, in a certain sense, since for Western philosophy the saying is exhausted in things said. But skepticism in fact makes a difference, and puts an interval between saying and the said. Skepticism is refutable, but it returns. (Levinas 1998: 168)

As "philosophy is not separable from skepticism" ontology should not be separable from its own critique as well. Then, Levinas even goes further and says that the history of Western philosophy, which has been many times read or interpreted as the refutation of skepticism, is actually better interpreted as "the refutation of transcendence":

The history of Western philosophy has not been the refutation of skepticism as much as the refutation of transcendence. The logos said has the last word dominating all meaning, the word of the end, the very possibility of the ultimate and the result. Nothing can interrupt it. Every contestation and interruption of this power of discourse is at once related and invested by discourse. (Levinas 1998: 169)

Because skepticism is already a theoretical question, that means, ontological in the end, and with it we already presuppose the primacy of being and its λόγος. Philosophy has always reduced everything to the λόγος of being. This has been explained enough in the present study.

1.2. Hebrew and Greek

This problem helps us in clarifying what Levinas's philosophical project is about. It is not just a question of language, but a question of how we interpret the history of Western philosophy, when we say that the tradition has been a Greek philosophical tradition.

This specific issue does not concern *OB* as much as it does with other texts written by Levinas that would work better as a source, but it is accepted that the way Levinas changes and even radicalizes his language in *OB* is in huge part because of his growing interest in the Hebrew textual tradition, especially the Talmud (Herrero Hernandez 2005: 16).

Levinas's idea would not be to find a third term in between Hebrew and Greek, like this "Jewgreek" (Derrida 2005: 192), but to elucidate the relationship between those two and denounce a certain interpretation of tradition that legitimates the Greek aspect over the Jew. Levinas prefers a fruitful dialogue between Hebrew and Greek. But it would not be exactly a dialogue because they are not at the same level and conditions. Greek is already accepted and legitimized as the language of philosophy, while the Hebrew needs to be vindicated, renovated and reintroduced in philosophy. But the point is that this relationship between the Hebrew and the Greek must not end in a synthesis or "assimilation" that is actually what Levinas wants to avoid and would denounce as totalization.

It has been a question if what Levinas wants to do is to translate Hebrew into Greek²⁰, but the idea of translating here is very problematic because of what we have just mentioned: if translation involves some sort of assimilation or synthesis, then it must be avoided. Besides, it is not just about expressing Hebrew in Greek terms. Instead, the point

²⁰ We find this expression in the English introduction to *Nine Talmudic Readings* by Annette Aronowicz from 1990 (Levinas 1990).

is that by expressing and introducing Hebrew in Greek, Greek must be modified and questioned.

Levinas's new understanding of ethics as the questioning of sameness by otherness is read in this issue as if Greek was the philosophy of sameness and Hebrew was the Other. The way the Jew is alien to Europe is the way traditional philosophy wants to subordinate the non-Western into its same language or conceptuality. Under the idea of universalism and truth, western civilization justifies herself to be legitimated enough to "assimilate" the non-Western. "Levinas believed that the pursuit of assimilation by the dominant culture had a philosophical source in the Greek conception of truth" (Bernasconi 2014: 262).

Actually, the interpretation of tradition as Greek is not so old, and it has been part of anti-Semitism during the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe: "it has only been in the last 200 years or so that philosophers have identified their discipline as Greek and thereby sought to locate Judaism outside an exclusively Greek philosophical tradition" (Bernasconi 2014: 265). A certain reading of tradition involves a certain reading of Europe and that worries Levinas for obvious historical reasons (the Holocaust). If the interpretation of traditional philosophy had consequences with Nazism and the Holocaust (as Levinas affirms), then a criticism of philosophical tradition and its language is needed.

In conclusion, Levinas's problem is the questioning of tradition that can be read as the questioning of European ethnocentrism. However, the vindication of the Hebrew is not a vindication of the alien to criticize European culture, as if Levinas wanted to change two cultures in opposition. It is about reinterpreting and reviewing the way philosophical tradition has been understood until the Holocaust²¹.

1.3. Reinterpretation of Husserl's Reduction

Now I want to point out that in *OB* Levinas goes back to Husserl in a novel way. The point is that Levinas reinterprets Husserlian reduction. But now instead of consisting in the parenthesizing of the natural attitude that should take us to pure consciousness, it is interpreted as taking a step back, precisely before consciousness, to capture the idea of the Saying. Only executing this reduction, we can take a step back and understand the

²¹ In (Moyn 2003) you can find a good account of Levinas's reception of Jewish tradition and how he uses this tradition to rethink and reinterpret the concept of tradition itself.

importance of the Saying over the Said: “The movement back to the saying is the phenomenological reduction. In it the indescribable is described” (Levinas 1998: 53).

Here Levinas is defending that his reduction is his philosophical activity or exercise. Levinas is writing a philosophical text about the Saying (something prior to consciousness and the Said), because he is in a *sui generis* sense parenthesizing the priority of consciousness and presence as the sources of all meaning. He justifies in this way his “treason”. It is a treason because, the Saying can never be completely presented or exposed as a Said. Levinas, in writing a philosophical work about the Saying seems to be committing this treason of talking about that which cannot be put into words. The treason that aims to defend that which is beyond the borders of philosophical language through philosophical language: “But is it necessary and is it possible that the saying on the hither side be thematized, that is, manifest itself, that it enter into a proposition and a book? It is necessary” (Levinas 1998: 43). Only the parenthesizing of consciousness makes it justifiable for me to talk about what is beyond consciousness.

Husserl is attacked for the reasons already mention in this study, but now, we see how Levinas vindicates his figure and philosophy by claiming that his project follows the logic of phenomenological reduction:

Husserl will have taught us that the reduction of naivety immediately calls for new reductions, that the grace of intuition involves gratuitous ideas, and that, if philosophizing consists in assuring oneself of an absolute origin, the philosopher will have to efface the trace of his own footsteps and unendingly efface the traces of the effacing of the traces, in an interminable methodological movement staying where it is. (Levinas 1998: 20)

However, what follows from the above quotation is that pure consciousness and transcendental subjectivity are, in Levinas’s eyes, Husserl’s own naiveties that call to be reduced (Sebbah 2012: 77)²².

The reduction presented by Levinas involves a phenomenology that, taken seriously to its limits, leads us to the acceptance of non-adequation and non-presence. The otherness that does not appear in the phenomena: “But the reduction is reduction of the said to the saying beyond the logos, beyond being and non-being, beyond essence,

²² In (Sebbah 2012) we find a good study about how some French philosophers (like Derrida, Levinas or Henry) by taking the principles of phenomenology to its limits end up overcoming phenomenology itself.

beyond true and non-true. It is the reduction to signification, to the one-for-the-other involved in responsibility” (Levinas 1998: 45, 142).

1.4. Language and Violence

In *OB* Levinas accepted the encounter with the Other as ethical violence much more than he did in *TI* and he even uses a more violent vocabulary to talk about responsibility (Sebbah 2012: 209). However, I think that Derrida is not very fair regarding this point. I mean: Derrida was questioning if Levinas philosophy was in search of pure peace without violence (Derrida 2005: 133). But, in our first chapter I already presented how Levinas accepts a certain violence in ethics (Levinas 1979: 53).

In *OB* the renovation of the Saying as the interruption of the Said means that when a dominant discourse (philosophical tradition here) is interrupted, the violence of this interruption counts as ethical violence: the violence caused by the sudden appearing of the Other in the Same: “The surprising saying which is a responsibility for another is against “the winds and tides” of being, is an interruption of essence, a disinterestedness imposed with a good violence” (Levinas 1998: 43).

Levinas uses along his work the term “trauma” or “traumatic” to describe the demand that responsibility carries. So, responsibility would involve a certain unavoidable violence, but this violence is justified by the fact that it comes from responsibility itself. We are always responsible towards the Other, that cannot be qualified as good or bad in a traditional sense:

The one affected by the other is an anarchic trauma, or an inspiration of the one by the other, and not a causality striking mechanically a matter subject to its energy, in this trauma the Good reabsorbs, or redeems, the violence of non-freedom. (Levinas 1998: 123)

Levinas uses the term “Good” with capital letters to mean something previous to the common usage of “good”. He basically means that one is responsible before any value, any distinction between good and bad. Responsibility is not valuable in this same sense. Then Levinas says that the Good “redeems” the violence, but what it is meant is precisely that responsibility in itself is non-qualifiable. Only because there is infinite responsibility, I can value good and bad the way we usually do: “Responsibility is what first enables one to catch sight of and conceive of value” (Levinas 1998: 123). So, following this line of reasoning, the opposition peace-war, or good-bad is not solvable. The intangibility of one element needs the other, and that even reinforces much more the

idea of infinite ethical responsibility. If the opposition cannot be solvable the necessary presence of war makes the imperative of responsibility infinite or constant.

Derrida's concern is if Levinas's attack against philosophical language (because of its inherent violence) could become a justification of silence, then it will end in a greater violence that has been already contested when we clarified the issues regarding language. But I wanted to go deeper into this point and show how the acceptance of violence in ethics and their necessary relationship is accepted by Levinas.

2. A New Understanding of Subjectivity: The Trace of the Other in the Same

Let's turn finally to the second big issue here: subjectivity. Regarding this issue, we saw in the previous chapter that Derrida's problem was the description of the Other as an infinite Other. How can the Other as infinite, as non-spatial, enter into a relationship with the Same, with subjectivity? How can Levinas maintain an asymmetrical relationship while at the same time accept a point where Same and Other must be connected? How to justify a non-spatial relationship?

What in *TI* seems like an abyss between the Same and the Other in favor of the asymmetrical character of the relationship between Same and Other, is in *OB* saved. Levinas overcomes this abyss by directly introducing the Other in the Same. The Other and the Same are not two separate elements, they are only separable in our philosophical discourse. But the Other is already in subjectivity. There is no complete closed sphere of subjectivity and subjectivity is already growing, developing itself in otherness. There are two elements that help Levinas to justify this idea: substitution²³ and the trace.

The first element is the reinterpretation of subjectivity in *OB* as "being subjected to". Subjected to the Other is what Levinas calls "substitution", which entails that I am always facing the Other and being responsible towards him. This unavoidable position towards the Other is described by Levinas as being a "hostage". But substitution would add as well that I am not just responsible for the Other in the sense of being in front of it, being there for it, but at the same time that I am responsible of its actions as well. Levinas claims that subjectivity as being-a-hostage has the form of "the one-for-the-other". With

²³ R. Bernasconi has already outlined that *substitution* is a key idea that can be read in part as a response to Derrida (Bernasconi 2004: 249).

this form Levinas is not just introducing otherness in subjectivity, but at the same time, giving an ethical drive to it (Bernasconi 2004: 235).

Subjectivity as “the-one-for-the-other” instead of the traditional “for itself”, in Levinas means that self should never be approached as an abstraction. This is what traditional philosophy has done, focusing on the self as a universal subjectivity, completely separable from the Other (Bernasconi 2004: 241). Levinas presents the subject as the speaker, which is not separable from the speech²⁴, a speech that is understood as always responding to someone else. That is why it is understood as infinite responsibility. Plus, it has an accusative form (instead of nominative). The subject is not the ego who originates meaning, it is the “here I am” accused (in the sense of being interpellated, interrogated, or questioned), by the Other instead (Bernasconi 2004: 244).

R. Bernasconi detects a crucial change from *TI* to *OB* regarding subjectivity, he claims that: “In *Otherwise than Being* the responsibility inherent in subjectivity is prior to my encounter with an other, whereas *Totality and Infinity* had located the possibility of ethics in the concrete encounter that realized the formal structure of transcendence” (Bernasconi 2004: 242). This means that in *TI* Levinas is presupposing subjectivity as a separated ego beforehand, and then he explains the relationship with the other as an encounter. In *OB* Levinas changes his strategy and situates the Other at beginning, the relationship is already established (Bernasconi 2004: 246).

What we find in *OB* may be read as a less hermetical conception of subjectivity: “We have to conceive in such terms the de-substantiation of the subject, its de-reification, its disinterestedness, its subjection, its subjectivity” (Levinas 1998: 127). This “de-substantiation” is what makes possible being affected by the Other. First in a radical passive way, that would come to express the radical subjection to the Other, and then, being affected in psychism, already involving the operations of consciousness.

In the second section of *TI* we find Levinas’s analysis of subjectivity as self-constitution, the analysis of economy, separation, joy and others. Self-constitution involves freedom. In *OB* Levinas’s picture of subjectivity is the one that determines freedom in its being determined by responsibility: “The self is the very fact of being exposed under the accusation that cannot be assumed, where the ego supports the others, unlike the certainty of the ego that rejoins itself in freedom” (Levinas 1998: 118). But,

²⁴ But again, the speaker here is not the abstract “emitter” in linguistics (Waldenfels 2005: 90).

let's be careful. This does not mean that the free subject and the analysis of *TI* are rejected. The point is that Levinas is developing and focusing on the idea of subject as passive subjection prior to freedom. In a single short paragraph Levinas summarizes his whole idea like this:

Signification, the-one-for-the-other, the relationship with alterity, has been analyzed in the present work as proximity, proximity as responsibility for the other, and responsibility for the other as substitution. In its subjectivity, its very bearing as a separate substance, the subject was shown to be an expiation for another, the condition or unconditionality of being hostage. (Levinas 1998: 184)

The second element is the trace. The trace of the Other, or the face, is what makes possible his appearing and not-appearing at the same time. Derrida already acknowledged this point, but he did not want to follow the idea of being a trace of God, because God would involve a substantialization of the trace. This objection is contested straightforwardly: “A face does not function in proximity as a sign of a hidden God who would impose the neighbor on me” (Levinas 1998: 94). Even if the face is presented as the trace of divinity this does not lead us to God as an ultimate source, or to say anything about God (to claim anything in the way theology as an ontological discourse would do). Levinas does not follow negative theology because he does not want to claim anything about God, not even negatively. The binary structure of affirmation and negation would already belong to the language of being, and God in Levinas cannot be approached in this language, not even negatively (Levinas 1998: 162).

Regarding Derrida's defense of Husserl's language in the 5th meditation. To recognize the Other as alter-ego is just one aspect of the question of otherness. Levinas's question of otherness is not just about the other human. Derrida is right in defending Husserl by saying that Husserl leaves the otherness of the alter-ego untouched, unreduced, and that it is a misreading to say that Husserl reduces the alter-ego to an operation of my consciousness. However, if the Other is just an alter-ego Levinas philosophy would not be able to justify the priority of responsibility before consciousness because the character of egoity and of subjectivity would be already presupposed. Levinas wants to prioritize the character of otherness before anything else. This entails a dehumanization of this otherness, in the sense that the Other as a philosophical category in Levinas philosophy would include the other human, but otherness is not just the other human. The other human is included in otherness, but otherness includes the other culture, the other

language, the other kind, and so on. It is true that Levinas's work is focused specially in the other human, but the Other is not always meant as the other human, and his philosophy can be applied to further analyses of specific others.

In summary: Levinas addresses Derrida's problem regarding language 1) first presenting the idea of the Saying that would come to justify the possibility of philosophizing against philosophy even with a philosophical language. Secondly, 2) regarding Levinas's position towards tradition, he re-situates and re-interprets his work as part of phenomenological tradition by following the Husserlian method even if this leads him to reject some principles of Husserl's philosophy. Plus, the heterodox language that may be interpreted as a Hebrew turn is not abandoning Greek philosophy but reinterpreting tradition taking into account of the Other non-assimilable by the Greek tradition. Thirdly, 3) Levinas acknowledges the necessary opposition war-peace and his philosophy should not be interpreted as a philosophy of silence. And finally, 4) Levinas presents a new account of subjectivity that overcomes the abyss between Same and Other.

Chapter 4

Levinas's *Saying* and Derrida's *Writing*

What I am going to do in this last chapter is, in order to close the circle, a final comparison between Levinas and Derrida to show how they are actually closer to each other than it may seem. Notice that there are two moments in Derrida's philosophy: an earlier Derrida that is more focused on deconstruction, and a second one that is more ethical and political. In this later Derrida, the influence of Levinas's philosophy is more obvious (Serafini 2016: 482), but I am not going to talk about it. I am only considering "Violence and Metaphysics" because the influence of Derrida's earlier work in Levinas's philosophy is not so obvious and discussed by scholars.

I need to justify this comparison again. It is not just about similarities or disagreements. That would be pointless. The point is that we can consider both philosophers as philosophers against the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism. What I am going to do here is first to explain what logocentrism is and, how Derrida's idea of *writing* criticizes logocentrism and its metaphysics of presence. Secondly, I am going to take Levinas's idea of *Saying* and see if it undermines the metaphysics of presence. Let's keep in mind that I am doing this comparison on the basis of "metaphysics of presence" and "logocentrism". These are terms or ideas from Derrida, so we are taking him as the philosophical referee again. Here phenomenology would be criticized as well because according to Derrida phenomenology is the latest philosophical development of the metaphysics of presence (Derrida 1972: 13).

Derrida says that logocentrism lies at the heart of occidental metaphysics. Logocentrism is the idea that writing is secondary and subordinated to speech. Speech seems immediate to our intuition, seems like I am completely aware of what I am saying and that I have a control over it. That the meaning of what I am saying and what I want to say is present to my consciousness in the moment or context in which it is said. The voice carries with it a "phonetic substance" that reinforces the idea of being present, appearing to me, to my consciousness in the present moment, creating an illusion of immediacy. The voice is, in this sense, linked to the idea of consciousness as presence (Derrida 1972: 32). In logocentrism, the prevalence of presence aims to not let any "residue" outside the present totalization or context (Derrida 1988: 14). Or, as expressed by Derrida elsewhere: "conscious intention would at the very least have to be totally

present and immediately transparent to itself and to others, since it is a determining center [foyer] of context” (Derrida 1988: 18).

These are the reasons why traditional metaphysics is fundamentally metaphysics of presence: being has been interpreted as being present, and truth as clear and pure appearance. It goes hand in hand with the idea that whenever something is missing, I can trace it back; that there is an ultimate source of meaning or sense. And this ultimate source has been traditionally conceived as being outside of any context in order for it to be pure; working as a fundamental center. Some examples of this center are: God, transcendental subjectivity, pure reason, structure, and so on.

But Derrida’s idea is that there is no such thing as an ultimate source that would make possible this tracing back of our concepts to its original meaning. And in the same way, there is no possible way of telling how a certain context is determined, in the sense of saying where it begins and where it ends in order to have a clear unit of meaning presentable and separable from the elements absent that may determine any given context. For example, my present perception of a tree is always mediated by my native language, the other trees that I have perceived previously, if I know enough biology to look at it scientifically, or I look at it as a painter (for example), if it has any folkloristic relevance for me, and so on. A sign (as it may be the tree in our previous example) depends on its relation among, and with, other signs. This depends on its difference from those other signs as well (this tree is not that other tree, and it is not an animal, nor a tool, etc.). This differing makes impossible the pure presence of the meaning of any given sign.

The present element depends on the non-present, creating a play of differences. This play or movement of differences is what Derrida calls *writing* or *différance*. Metaphysics has always wanted to isolate a layer of sense as pure sense outside of *différance* (Derrida 1972: 44).

Derrida extends *différance* to experience as well. It is not just a linguistic question: “I shall even extend this law to all "experience" in general if it is conceded that there is no experience consisting of pure presence but only of chains of differential marks” (Derrida 1988: 10). Then, experience is not a purely present thing. Experience, if we take it as appearing to consciousness, cannot be a pure present appearing to consciousness and this includes self-presence as pure present subjectivity. In Derrida’s words:

What holds for consciousness also holds here for what is called subjective existence in general. Just as the category of subject is not and never has been conceivable without reference to presence as *hypokeimenon* or *ousia*, etc., so the subject as consciousness has never been able to be evinced otherwise than as self-presence. The privilege accorded to consciousness thus means a privilege accorded to the present. (Derrida 1973: 291)

Subjectivity (and consciousness), as pure subjectivity cannot be isolated in this sense from *différance*, there is no self-presence and the subjective experience depends on the play of *différance* (Derrida 1972: 41).

Traditionally, writing was conceived as a secondary representation of speech that was the vehicle to transmit thought and ideas (Derrida 1988: 4). *Writing* in Derrida does not have a center or a fundamental source of meaning that could be traced back. So, it is not the vehicle of a pure idea or thought. A text, as the written form, does not depend on anything pure or transcendental as an ultimate origin of its meaning, and it has the open possibility to be quoted, reproduced, and developed again and again. As it is explained:

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be cited" put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchoring. (Derrida 1988: 12)

This means that the meaning of a given text is not determinable by any hermeneutical exercise. The reading of the text does not amount to a “decoding of a meaning or truth” (Derrida 1988: 21). Its meaning is not fully reducible to “a wanting to say”, an author or a context. It has the possibility of dissemination beyond any “wanting to say”. Writing is not exhausted by the transmission or exchange of what we want to say [*vouloir-dire*]. The exchange of “wanting to say” would involve conceiving communication just as the exchange of pure present ideas from one consciousness to another (Derrida 1988: 20).

Dissemination is the property of being quotable. To take something written out of its context and find a new context for it. It is basically the plasticity and flexibility of language. *Writing* involves the possibility of overcoming any context as the hermeneutic horizon in which meaning as what encoder/speaker wants to convey is presented to consciousness. (Derrida 1988: 9). This is why Derrida says that “no context can entirely enclose it”. Dissemination carries with it “the always open possibility of its

disengagement and graft” (Derrida 1988: 9). And dissemination is sometimes described by Derrida as the spacing of the letter: “spacing as a disruption of presence in a mark, what I here call writing” (Derrida 1988: 19).

Derrida presents a new concept of writing; however, it does not mean that he is inverting the traditional relation between speech and writing (Derrida 1972: 37). If that were the case, we would only be choosing one side of the traditional distinction speech-writing and we would not be able to understand what traditional metaphysics is presupposing in this distinction.

Now, turning to Levinas. Levinas understands ethics as a philosophy of experience, that for the first time is not going to take experience only in terms of presence. This critique of experience as presence goes hand in hand with a critique of consciousness as presence, like in Derrida’s case. Levinas would say that consciousness amounts to the synchronization of time that would come to reduce any experience to its representation. Levinas puts it this way:

The temporalization of time, as it shows itself in the said [...] synchronizing the signs, assembles into a presence, that is, represents, even the time of responsibility for the other. But it is not possible that responsibility for another devolve from a free commitment, that is, a present; it exceeds every actual or represented present. It is thus in a time without beginning. Its anarchy cannot be understood as a simple return from present to prior present, an extrapolation of presents according to a memorable time, that is, a time assemblable in a recollection of a representable representation. (Levinas 1998: 51)

The synchronization of time makes possible the recollection and expectation of experience. In this way, experience would be knowledge by a consciousness that could trace it back and forth. And in this way, consciousness becomes self-presence and Levinas’s account of subjectivity would be precisely the opposite of this self-presence. Why? Because in his new understanding of subjectivity as substitution, responsibility is not an operation of consciousness, it does not depend on my freedom, nor on my representations: I can never be completely responsible because the imperative of responsibility can never become completely present. Moreover, we cannot trace back its origin:

The responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a "prior to every memory," an "ulterior to every accomplishment," from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the

other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question "Where?" no longer holds. (Levinas 1998: 10)

The pre-originality of this anarchy that avoids the questions "what?" and "where?", in the sense that it is not possible for us to trace back its source or origin, is the reason why Levinas's *Saying* is described as "pre-original". Precisely because he wants to avoid the transcendental or *a priori* connotations that "original" has. It is not the fundamental origin of meaning. Meaning in the Said depends on other Said, as Levinas puts it: "In the said, to have a meaning is for an element to be in such a way as to turn into references to other elements, and for the others to be evoked by it" (Levinas 1998: 69). In this sense the Said as the sign in Derrida, would come to depend on other elements that are not present in the moment of the Said. Thus, any Said cannot be completely present, and we cannot determine completely the context in which a Said means something. Levinas's *Saying* has a similar, if not the same, dissemination that *writing* has for Derrida. The *Saying* as the constant renovation of the Said, implies the open possibility of new meanings and new interpretations. There is nothing such as a perfect or complete Said. *Saying* never amounts to communication as the exchange of ideas from one consciousness to another, precisely because meaning is not originated in consciousness:

To say is to approach a neighbor, "dealing him signifyingness." This is not exhausted in "ascriptions of meaning," which are inscribed, as tales, in the said. *Saying* taken strictly is a "signifyingness dealt the other," prior to all objectification; it does not consist in giving signs. The "giving out of signs" would amount to a prior representation of these signs, as though speaking consisted in translating thoughts into words and consequently in having been first for-oneseif and at home with oneself, like a substantial consistency [...] *Saying* is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication, as exposure. Communication is not reducible to the phenomenon of truth and the manifestation of truth conceived as a combination of psychological elements: thought in an ego - will or intention to make this thought pass into another ego - message by a sign designating this thought - perception of the sign by another ego - deciphering of the sign. The elements of this mosaic are already in place in the antecedent exposure of the ego to the other, the non-indifference to another, which is not a simple "intention to address a message". (Levinas 1998: 48)

The pre-originality and anarchy of the *Saying* carry with them the impossibility of a pure synthesis in a pure present. The account of consciousness as it is presented in Husserl's phenomenology is rejected in this sense. That leads us to accept that responsibility is not originated in consciousness but vice versa.

Levinas has different ideas about writing and writing in opposition to oral speech. A careful analysis of the development of his Talmudic readings and thesis about hermeneutics and exegesis would help us regarding this issue. However, that could be reserved for another study. The only thing I consider worth mentioning here is that: “one can read his reduction of phenomenological discourse as a displacement and reinscription of a classical understanding of writing” (Riera 2004: 27).

In sum, both Levinas’s *Saying* and Derrida’s *Writing* challenge the philosophical idea of presence as the possibility of exhausting any meaning or experience whatsoever.

Conclusion

Levinas philosophical project in *Totality and Infinity* attacks traditional philosophy because it has been too focused on ontology. Ontology, according to Levinas, carries with it an inherent violence that has been expressed in parallel in the history of Western civilization leading to the Holocaust. Levinas wants to present a new understanding of ethics as the relationship between subjectivity and otherness. However, Levinas wants to avoid traditional philosophical language because it appears as inadequate to capture this idea of otherness due to its too ontological approach.

Then, we have that Derrida deconstructs Levinas's early philosophical project in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics" and raises this main question: How can Levinas attack traditional philosophy if when he is doing philosophy, by using philosophical language, this language carries the same ontological presuppositions and premises that Levinas tries to avoid. Levinas in his criticism of traditional philosophy includes phenomenology, the philosophy of both Husserl and Heidegger. Derrida argues that Levinas would succeed more regarding his philosophical goals if he accepted the language of Husserl and Heidegger because they seem to have a better approach towards philosophical tradition and that gives them an advantage to attack this tradition. According to Derrida, even if Levinas tries to avoid ontological language as much as possible he cannot avoid using certain metaphors that carry with them some ontological presuppositions. This problem rises questions such as: how can an infinite Other encounter subjectivity? and should we suspend philosophical speech if it is impossible to avoid the inherent violence that the ontological language carries with it?

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Levinas presents partly a response to Derrida's criticism. It is a response because Levinas addresses the question of his own philosophical language for the first time. Levinas asks himself if it is possible to talk about the Other, what is beyond being, in terms of being. If it is licit to philosophize about that which exceeds philosophical language, if it is not a treason to its own project. He compares himself with skepticism in the sense that the contradiction inherent to skeptical philosophy (mainly claiming that there is no truth and trying to say something true at the same time), is similar to his effort of criticizing philosophy using philosophical language. The essential contradictions of both his project and skepticism present in any case major philosophical problems that must be traded. With some new notions, but specially the

notions of *Saying*, *trace*, and subjectivity as *substitution*; Levinas is able to justify his philosophical project and respond to Derrida's critiques.

In the end I have also added that Levinas's notion of the *Saying* is in opposition with the idea of meaning and experience as fully graspable by a transcendental consciousness, and, in this sense, it supposes an agreement with Derrida's notion of *writing* against what Derrida calls "metaphysics of presence". Therefore, *In Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas is not just responding to Derrida but getting closer to his philosophy.

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Abstract

Saying Beyond Phenomenology: Levinas's Response to Derrida

This thesis presents a study of Emmanuel Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* as a response to the main philosophical problems and criticism that Jacques Derrida presents to Emmanuel Levinas's earlier philosophy in his essay "Violence and Metaphysics". The main philosophical question is: How can Emmanuel Levinas criticize ontology while using ontological language if ontological language carries with it the ontological presuppositions that he wants to avoid? This same question is treated in a way that leads us to deal with other major philosophical topics, mainly: ethics, subjectivity and tradition. In the last chapter of this thesis I claim that *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* makes it easier to present Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy as a critique of "metaphysics of presence", and thus much closer to Jacques Derrida than it may seem.

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