Emmanuel Levinas on Ethics as the First Truth

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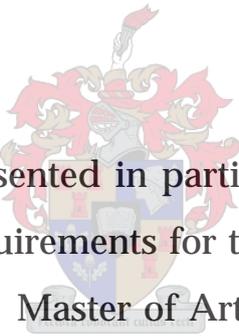
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of the requirements for the degree of
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Supervisor: Prof W L van der Merwe

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Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

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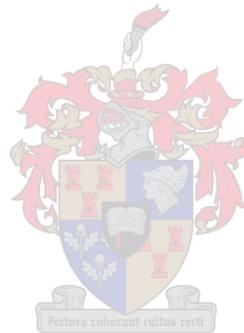
Summary

Emmanuel Levinas on Ethics as the First Truth

Article I
A brief introduction to the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas' ethics is based on the Other/other. He argues that we are in an asymmetrical relationship with our neighbour that pre-destines us with ethical responsibility even before consciousness or choice. In the face-to-face encounter an infinity and alterity about our neighbour is revealed, which is irreducible to my ontological grasp – and thereby compels me to respond to him. It is also through this relation that our humanity is released as our solipsistic *all-for-myself* becomes a *being-for-the-other.* Furthermore, the *I* is irreplaceable, thereby making each of us ethically responsible for our neighbour to the point of responsibility for his material misery. This paper introduces this stance with the aim to underscore it.

Article II
A brief discussion on the priority of ethics before ontology in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

The incessant theme of Levinas' writing over 25 years has been "Ethics as First Philosophy," which is synonymous with "The Subject's Ethical Responsibility for his Neighbour." This paper is a short discussion of this theme of the origin of ethics. Levinas' arguments on pre-original time, the Infinite, language and human corporeality by which he establishes a subjectivity that is not fundamentally determined by intentionality and self-sameness, but by the proximity of our neighbour, will be considered. For Levinas it is this relation to the Other that answers the question of the meaning of being and is also the first word of words. First Philosophy is accordingly to be found in the face-to-face which is a subordination of knowledge to a mode of meaning beyond totality.

Opsomming

Emmanuel Levinas en Etiek as die Eerste Waarheid

Artikel I
'n Kort inleiding tot die etiese filosofie van Emmanuel Levinas

Die etiek van Emmanuel Levinas is gegrond in die Ander/ander. Hy argumenteer dat ons in 'n asymmetriese verhouding staan tot ons naaste wat ons uitverkies vir etiese verantwoordelikheid selfs voor keuse of bewussyn. In die gesig-tot-gesig ontmoeting word 'n infiniteit and alteriteit aan die Ander ontbloot, wat nie reduseerbaar is tot my ontologiese greep – en daardeur word ek gedwing om tot hom te respondeer. Hierdie verhouding maak ons mensheid vry wanneer ons solipsistiese *alles-vir-myself* 'n *alles-vir-die-ander* word. Verdermeer is die *ek* onvervangbaar, sodat elkeen van ons eties verantwoordelik is vir ons naaste tot selfs die punt van sy materiële ellende. Hierdie artikel introduseer hierdie posisie met die doel om dit te onderskraag.
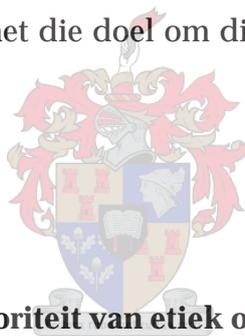
Artikel II
'n Kort bespreking oor die prioriteit van etiek oor ontologie in die filosofie van Emmanuel Levinas

Die konstante tema van Levinas se geskrifte oor 25 jaar was "Etiek as Eerste Filsosofie" wat sinoniem is met "Die Subjek se Etiese verantwoordelikheid vir sy Medemens." 'n Kort bespreking van hierdie tema – van die oorsprong van etiek - gaan volg. Ter behandeling is Levinas se argumente oor voor-oorspronklike tyd, die Oneindige, taal en menslike liggaamlikheid, waarby hy 'n subjektiviteit begrond wat nie fundamenteel bepaal word deur intensionaliteit and sig-selfheid, maar deur die proksimiteit (nabyheid) van die medemens. Dit is hierdie verhouding tot die Ander wat die antwoord is tot die vraag na die betekenis van die syn, en ook die eerste woord van taal is. Eerste Filosofie is gevolglik te vinde in hierdie gesig-tot-gesig wat kennis ondergeskik stel aan 'n modus van betekenis anderkant totaliteit.

Acknowledgments

Jesus Christ, I praise and honour You for the strength and courage You have blessed me with during this course. When I was at my lowest and You carried me through, I thought of this day when I will be able to thank You for Your grace that helped me produce this work. Thank You, thank You, thank You. To Nick and Anne, my parents, thank you for allowing me my indulgence. Prof Willie, thank you for your expert guidance. To my sisters and friends – thank you so very much for your prayers, your encouragement and the good times.

Index

Foreword

This work is written in partial fulfilment to satisfy the thesis-requirements for a M A degree in Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch. Both papers are explorations of the ethical philosophy of Emmnuel Levinas. In Levinasian style the second paper becomes a *resaying* of the first paper for it goes beyond the first paper – backtracking Levinas' ideas to its most primordial level. Levinas, a scholar of Husserl and Heidegger, considers the *Da* of our *Dasein* and judges it as "the usurpation of the whole world" in the phrase of Pascal. He however discovers in the Other a possibility that exceeds this totalizing and egoistic ontology. He consequently argues that the Other person is the first intelligibility and that the subject is therefor straightaway in an ethical relationship with his neighbour.

The first paper is a short study of Levinas' ethics as he bases it on the Other. Understanding and campaigning for Otherness, in contrast to self-sameness and its implications, is the driving-force behind Levinas' work. He argues that we are in an asymmetrical relationship with our neighbour that pre-destines us with ethical responsibility even before consciousness or choice. In the face-to-face encounter an infinity and alterity about our neighbour is revealed, which is irreducible to my ontological grasp – and thereby compels me to respond to him. It is also through this relation that our humanity is released as our solipsistic *all-for-myself* becomes a *being-for-the-other.* Moreover, the *I* is irreplaceable, thereby making each of us ethiclly responsible for our neighbour to the point of responsibility for his material misery. This paper introduces this stance with the aim to underscore it.

The second paper continues to reflect on the incessant theme of Levinas' writing – that ethics is the first intelligibility, the first truth, which is synonymous with the subject's ethical responsibility for his neighbour. I consider Levinas' arguments on pre-original time, the Infinite, language and human corporeality by which he establishes that subjectivity and knowledge is not fundamentally determined by intentionality and self-sameness but by the proximity of our neighbour. For Levinas it is this relation to the Other that answers the question of the meaning of being and is also the first word of words. First Philosophy is accordingly to be found in the face-to-face which is a subordination of knowledge to a mode of meaning beyond totality.

To a certain degree Levinas' ethics (encompassing his writing and the arguments he advocates) is comparable to the work of Derrida in terms of the cautious writing, yet revolutionary impact thereof. Notions such as truth, intelligibility, meaning and ethics are dealt with as traces, evenmore, betrayals, of that which cannot be expressed. Levinas is, metaphorically speaking, forced to speak of silence in sound, an endeavour to which he succeeds to a mind-boggling extent. Both papers are therefore attempts to understand and expound on that which there can actually not be knowledge of. Evenmore, both papers are written in recognition of the call that "the world is hungry for action, not words" as expressed amongst others by Nelson Mandela, Mother Theresa, Mahatma Ghandi and Emmanuel Levinas.

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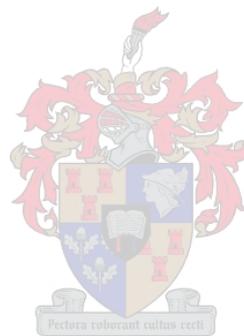
The Ethics of Responsibility

- A brief introduction to the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas -

"Every one of us is responsible for everyone else in every way, and I most of all."

Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

1. Introduction

Throughout his philosophy, demanding since its inception to its mature complexity, Levinas argues consistently and relentlessly that "ethics" is the original relationship of absolute responsibility in which the I[1] finds itself as *being-for* its neighbour[2]. The self, it must be noted, is simultaneously in a symmetrical political relation and an asymmetrical ethical relation with the Other/other (OB 158). It is the latter relation that this study explores. The sole aim of Levinas' oeuvre is to break through the indifference and naïveté of our everyday life to reveal our humanity – a humanity, which despite its potential to cause suffering and pain, even to commit murder, is foremost and ultimately a being human for-the-other. To a certain extent, this revelation of our being as a *being-for-the-other* is both the premise and the conclusion of Levinas' thought. This should become clear if we follow the logical, and not necessarily chronological, trajectory of his thinking from his ontological analysis of the subject's egoistic effort to be, its being riveted to its own self, through to this solipsistic subjectivity being redeemed by its openness towards Time and Infinity, to its unique ethical election to exist *for-the-other* (EN xii; GDT 162). This is the event of the human overwhelming the inhuman in being (RB 106). The Other/other[3] is the "very force and fact of the human" (RB 113).

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[1]Levinas uses the terms 'I,' 'subject,' 'individual,' and 'existent' interchangeably to refer to the individual. His distinctions between the 'self' and the 'ego' however make it clear that the subject is not only an undiffirentiated mass. The paper is gender inclusive, though the masculine is used.

[2] In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas shifts to using the term *prochain* (the neighbour) more often than the abstract *Autrui;* also preferring *les autres* (others) to *l' Autre* (the Other) in an attempt to move away from the ontological distinction between the same and the other. Cf. Colin Davis in *Levinas: an Introduction* (1996: 82).

[3]According to Bloechl, who refers to the discord among Levinas' translators and interpreters, there is no clear rule for when to capitalize certain key concepts – such as the Other/ other, for Levinas himself is not consistent in this practice (2000: ix). In general though, "Other" refers to the irreducible alterity of the other person, who is however sometimes simply referred to as the "other"."Other" reveals infinity and "other" confirms totality (Davis 1996: 43).

"The other concerns me in all his material misery. It is a matter eventually, of nourishing him, of clothing him" (RB 52), says Levinas. In the same vein his notion of *substitution* aims to disclose our capacity to feel the other's pain in our own flesh (OB 117). In fact, my responsibility for the other can be likened to my devotion to myself (LR 83). Levinas' understanding of "ethics" does not provide for responsibility as a psychological event of pity or compassion (OB 125). It is not an appeal to emotion, nor an act of freedom by which responsibility for the other is willingly chosen, but a phenomenology of a pre-contracted passivity, which destines the subject for inescapable responsibility for the other. The passivity of this preoriginary vulnerability transcends the limits of my time, electing me before initiative or choice in that immemoriable past (GDT 177).

To illuminate this phenomenology of "ethics" as "first philosophy," preceding even ontology, we will examine three works by Levinas and especially allow the titles to guide us in the unfolding of his all-encompassing idea. In *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Critchley and Bernasconi refer to Levinas' "big idea," maintaining that most original thinkers are usually obsessed by one idea (2002: 6). Derrida speaks of the thematic development of *Totality and Infinity* to proceed with "the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself" (1978: 312). This returning movement continues with deeper insistence in *Otherwise than Being* where Levinas succeeds best to break with ontology. In these three works Levinas' wave brings to our shore this ultimate idea variously as subjectivity, the meaning of ethics, responsibility, the alterity of the other and substitution.

In the earliest work in which Levinas - already an established scholar of Husserl and Heidegger - allows his own version of phenomenology to emerge, *Existence and Existents* (*De l' existence à l' existant,* 1947) his analyses shows the subject taking on the burden of its own existence as a self, the project of "existing with which it finds itself affected" (EE 10). This initial idea is then worked out extensively in his first magnum opus, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay in Exteriority* (*Totalité et Infini. Essai sur L'Exteriorité* 1961) where he focuses on the Other/other, who from his exterior face speaks from a "height" and "infinity" that breaks through the totality of the subject's selfsame existence and reminds the subject of a pre-contracted responsibility. In an even greater work of art *Otherwise than Being or*

Beyond Essence (*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de L'essence* 1974), the subject as bearer of this original ethical responsibility is the focus of analysis, showing how the structure of its very subjectivity predetermines the subject for irreplaceable substitution in responsibility. Our discussion can therefore start out from Levinas' understanding of the subject, the *existent*, in its initial self-obsessed attachment to existence, to the cumbersome burden of its own being, and proceed to its *being-for-the-other* which affords an escape from the totality of interiority, opens it up for the exteriority of alterity and infinity and thereby renders life meaningful. But to find the suitable point of entry into this trajectory, a further orientation on a more than introductory level is first needed.

2. Orientation

As indicated, Levinas departs from any traditional Aristotelian, Kantian or Millian understanding of ethics to posit a radically more demanding, transcendental sense of ethics. His "ethics" is not an advocation of virtues, or the explication of moral imperatives or universal rules of conduct, commands or prohibitions (Davis 1996: 35). Instead, he aims at a phenomenological description, a proto-phenomenology of the pre-predicative situation (or situatedness) of responsibility prior to any sort of "ethics" in the traditional sense(s) of the word. His questioning of the meaning of "ethics" is prior to what is normally considered to be the first questions of "ethics", for example "What is the good, and how can we know it?" or "What is the true source of ethical knowledge?" and least of all "How should I conduct myself" or "What should I do?" (Peperzak 1993: 223). Instead, he insists on "ethics" as referring to a pre-predicative calling to irrevocable responsibility *for-the-other.* For this reason Levinas' philosophy has been called masochistic, too extreme, even excessive in its limitlessness (LR 46).

In distinction from the ethical relation where the self is absolutely responsible for the other and unable to objectify him, there is however also a relation that is political (OB 160). It is the presence of the third that necessitates justice, knowledge, equality, politics, etc – for decisions need to be made as to how responsibility has to be divided and fulfilled (EN 168). In politics, ethics is thus played out in the morality of rules. Politics – as the reduction, the objectified, the "said" - becomes the channel through which the "saying" of ethics, which cannot be limited to rules, is expressed by betraying itself. These notions are clarified in section 6.

The third person thus enables respite from this infinite responsibility and includes the I in an equality and reciprocity. In contradistinction with this political relation it seems that the unconditional responsibility of the ethical relation is overwhelming and so all-encompassing that it renders the subject impotent, not knowing how, where and when to act ethically in the world. As is clear from his interviews[4], Levinas is not unaware of the implications due to the gravity he affords ethics, but counters it by recounting that he lives and thinks in a wounded world[5]. His philosophy, in part, is an attempt to give a voice to the unbearable guilt that the survivors - the *survived victims* of the Holocaust - feel at having survived (Peperzak 1995: 5). The focus of such a person, is not his own innocence, but instead his implicit contribution to the fact that another, with one digit differing from his own serial number, did not make it. It is the shattered innocence of a human being who knows that his usurpation of the position of survivor could only have come about by denying an-other a chance to life. The survived victim is the vivid symbol for all people – despite our own victimization or innocence we are responsible for our neighbour beyond choice and excuse. As Pascal stated in his **Pensées**, one's "being in the world" or "place in the sun" is the beginning of usurpation of the whole earth (EN 130). Thus, one is violent and murderous toward all others whom one displaces – by the simple act of taking in a place. And so it is not the suffering of the other *per se* that gives rise to the ethics of responsibility, but this *capacity* of the self to both *harm* and *be for* the other. As seen, this responsibility is already embedded in the "neutrality" of simply maintaining one's own space and merely facing the other, being exposed to his alterity and infinity. Though the other may not actually be suffering, in the nakedness of his face, I discover myself as one who can hurt him or simply choose to live only for myself. In not being-for-the-other (EI 96-7) hunger, poverty and ultimately killing result. Hence, by denying the humane within ourselves these concrete examples of the "flesh of life" are manifested and in turn point to a responsibility prior to any action or neglect on my part.

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[4]The book *Ethics and Infinity* comprises ten radio interviews with Philippe Nemo in February – March 1981, over Radio France-Culture. Richard A. Cohen translated the interviews and added a "Translator's Introduction" to the book version.
[5]Peperzak 1995: 4; Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: 126; Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 252 –267; van Hove 1993: 79.

The question par excellence in Levinas philosophy is thus: "Have I the right to be when facing the other man's suffering?" (Peperzak 1995: 6). This stance points to what Levinas regards as the highest human destiny, a holiness, which means a life wholly for-the-other (Peperzak 1995: 6).

With the often-quoted words of Dostoyevsky[6] about the "I" being more responsible than everyone else, Levinas wants to emphasise that the *I* is irreplaceable – nobody can substitute the first person, (OB 114, 126, 142; GDT 162; RB 161, 229). In Levinas' own words the pronoun "I" means to be "answerable for everyone and everything" (BPW 90). Even though I may not be the one who caused the other's suffering, I remain more responsible than the one who caused it, including the sufferer, should he have brought it upon himself (OB 112). I am responsible for him, insists Levinas, up to the point of being responsible for his responsibility towards me (OB 117; LR 226).[7] My responsibility extends beyond the people I come in contact with, extending to those I don't even know (BPW 81), including people of the past and the future (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 239) and also those currently in situations, which I can practically do nothing about. In other words, my responsibility is not limited to an act of responding, nor a state of responsiveness; my responsibility is beyond any intentionality, because it is the constitutive condition of my subjectivity.
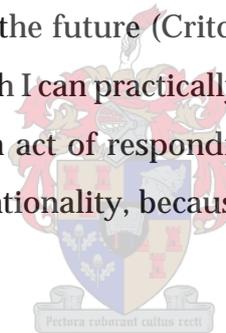
3. Existence and Existents

In *Existence and Existents* Levinas deals with the mode of the subject, the existent's existence (EE 10). According to his analysis the existent's *being* as an existent, a self, must constantly be wrested from the threat of "anonymous being", the ever present drone of undifferentiated existence which Levinas calls, with an untranslatable phrase, the *il y a* (EE 56 – 64). It is not to be confused with the Sartrean *en-soi* of inner peace, or Heidegger's generous *es gibt* (LR 29). For Levinas existence itself is an imprisonment, an oppression – for we have not chosen to be, yet here we are, burdened with our own being. The human is not thrown into existence like a rock oblivious and unable to engage with its own being here (van Hove 1993: 78). As Heidegger taught, our existence matters to us. In *Existence and Existents* Levinas introduces two means of escape or freedom from this situation,

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[6]Cf. BPW 184 for quotation. Cf. The following for usage: RB 56, 72, 100, 112, 133, 161, 229; EI 101; EN 105, 168.
[7]Levinas is not arguing that the victim take the blame for the violence committed against him, because that would be to confuse ethical responsibility with legal responsibility. He is not concerned with the question of who is to blame, but "what am I to do?" (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 240).

beginning with a measure of autonomous exertion he ultimately presents our heteronomous constitution.

Levinas' positing of the *il y a* is not based on philosophical argumentation, but on intuition, the intuition of an evidential primordial experience of our being in the world, for anonymous being precedes and is presupposed by anything that can be differentiated or known by reason (Davis 1996: 23). The *il y a* is, metaphorically speaking, the shadow of everything that is, and should everything that is disappear, it will remain as the persistence of being. For at the heart of all negation, unbearable indifference, and unceasing monotony deprived of meaning we find Being, the *il y a* (EE 61; RB 45). In examining loneliness, indolence, boredom and insomnia Levinas attempts to show that such states of suspended subjectivity reveal that the self is forced to exist, compelled to take up its own existence against this unceasing impersonal being. At these times the ego is stripped of its freedom almost to the point of being crushed as a subject: for it wants (as an autonomous subject) to sleep, but *there is* sleeplessness, it wants to escape from itself, but it remains stuck with itself, bored by its own incessant existence, it wants to erect itself in work or play, but recoils back on itself in inertia (EE 65). Unlike in the thought of Kierkegaard or Heidegger[8], for Levinas *existents* do not fear the nothingness of death, but the *there is* of brute existence (RB 46). The existent longs to escape this oppressive rivetedness to self and being (EE 84, 88). Levinas depicts this unshakable enchainment metaphorically and literally, as *horror* which is particularly felt when consciousness cannot exert itself against participating in unending nothingness. The horror of the *il y a* is the horror of being displaced as an "I" by an "it", experiencing the transfusion of one´s being from an "I am" to a "there is" (EE 65, BPW ix). Initially the I will take in the position of an enjoying one who dominates the earth, but it soon finds its true being and real freedom to be itself is in being for the other. Already in *Existence and Existents* Levinas analyses and describes the self-positing of the subject as an *existent* in distinction from the *il y a* as a "hypostasis", literally a "standing under", which is also a "standing out", an exit or "ex-sistere" from anonymous being. In *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* the initial notion of hypostasis is fleshed out as separation, interiority, psychism, atheism, enjoyment and egoism. All these headings refer in different ways to the instance, the ontological event, in which an *existent* emerges

[8] Cf. Heidegger 1962: 307.

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from the *il y a* to take up a position with regard to its own existence (EE 65; Robbins 1999: 92). At this point the *il y a* no longer bears the determinate being, but the *existent* backs its self up against the *il y a*. Thus refastening being to the existent in a passage going from *being* to a *some-thing,* a *some-one,* a *self,* an *"I"* (EI 51). In this way the existent establishes a personal sphere (EE 10) and as posited, becomes "the bearer and master of being" (RB 45). He moves from a being dominated by the anonymous, invading power of the *il y a* to exert himself and take on his own being.

Yet, the self establishes but a measure of escape in hypostasis – in positing himself in self-indulgence such as interiority and enjoyment. In enjoyment, I "exist as separated, above being" (TI 63). Here the self can recoil into itself and be at home with himself to taste the pleasures of life in exuberance (TI 110). In the understanding of substitution, which is dealt with in section 6.3, this necessity of being able to experience life in abundance and selfishness will become evident. This joyful autonomy is however but a mid-escape point, for the existent is pre-occupied with himself and his exertion stays momentary and fragile. It remains in constant risk of being sucked back into the horror of the *il y a,* so that this hypostatic effort is an infinite task (EE 84). This perpetual hypostasis, the never-to-be-completed exit from the *il y a*, which is from moment to moment also the realization of the *present*, should not be confused with someone's longing to escape a certain lifestyle - for example, the bourgeois style of existence coupled with boredom and meaninglessness or the harsh realities of a pauper's life (Llwellyn 1995: 11). It is escaping the brutal truth of the *il y a* as such that should be understood, for it is this escape that is a necessity, constitutive of subjectivity and freedom.

Ultimately the true exit unto freedom is not afforded by beings that are self-posited *existents*, but deposed in their obligation for-the-other (EI 52). The desire that lies at the bottom of existence, the longing to rise above being, is thus not quenched in the enjoyment of self-sufficiency (TI 63). Levinas locates the complete break with the *il y a* in the ethical event of facing the Other/other. The dread of the *il y a,* can ultimately only be escaped through intersubjectivity, or what Levinas calls "a relation without relation" (TI 80), the social relationship with our neighbour in a dis-inter-ested relation that is unconditional responsibility for the Other/other (EI 52). In turning to *Totality and Infinity* we can now embark upon a deeper exploration of the impact and force of the Other/other.

4.   Totality and Infinity

The title of *Totality and Infinity* points to a critique of totalizing thinking as exemplified, inter alia, by the history of Western philosophy. In *Entre Nous* (*On Thinking-of-the-Other* 1998: 198) Levinas says: "This book (*Totality and Infinity*) challenges the synthesis of knowledge, the totality of being that is embraced by the *transcendental ego,* presence grasped in the representation and concept..." Consequently he addresses the question of what lies outside of totality, the "Other" which cannot be reduced to the "Same" in the systematic construction of a totality of thought – both as critique of the closure of Western philosophy, but more importantly, to found subjectivity in the idea of infinity (TI 26). Hence we should distinguish between ethical questions and ontological concerns. As all ontological relations with that which is other are relations of comprehension, which inevitably form totalities (TI 43; Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 12), Levinas introduces the idea of the infinite into ethical relations. Notice that "infinity both includes and negates the finite: the in of infinity means both non finite and in finite" (LR 166). Notice further that in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas still employs ontological language and concepts to a great extent in his refutation thereof[9].

Totality and infinity stand in opposition to one another. Totality pointing to finite, objectifiable knowledge – by which the I dominates in a symmetrical relation. Totalizing thinking has been "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 becomes absolute thought" (EI 75). Totality thinking, held as egocentric and reductive theory (TI 13), objectifies everything, even the other person to a finite knowable object. In this way the Other is reduced to the Same (TI 43), and people become interchangeable. When conceiving the relation with the Other as understanding or even recognition he has already been totalized (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 12).

Against the synthesis of traditional Western philosophy, which destroys *real alterity*, Levinas maintains that the relation between people are non-synthesizable (EI 77) for the Other eludes thematization (TI 86). The neighbour can therefore not be another me, an *alter ego* (EI 85; TI 13) as Descartes or Husserl, for example, argued. In the totalized order

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[9] Cf. Derrida 1978: 88.

where the Other is violated to exist as part of the whole, he is reduced to specific roles afforded by life and his works (TI 178). Yet according to Levinas, the Other stands in the sign of the perfect and presents himself as interlocutor, as one whom I cannot totalize (by reducing him to specific roles) nor can I over-power him (TI 84), because my uncontracted relation with him cannot be expressed in terms of enjoyment or knowledge. It is thus this dimension of *Infinity* about the Other that escapes traditional systematic thinking. It is therefore not the characteristic of his material poverty, but the force of his irreducible infinity, which calls forth my responsibility for him. This notion of infinity affords a break with reductive totalizing thinking and in turn opens up a dimension enabling ethical responsibility.

4.1 Infinity

Descartes' "Third Meditation"[10] is of great importance to Levinas as it provides the first model of the subject existing in relation to exterior infinity, unable to reduce the Other's infinity to itself (GDT 142). In Descartes' work, subjectivity discovers itself not as self-evidently given, but in reference to the non-self of the infinite by which it is transcended (Davis 1996: 39)[11]. The infinite is discovered as an *a priori* in the Cogito, but at the same time as an idea beyond knowledge – for "the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea" (TI 49); thought of the idea of the infinite is indeed "thought behind thoughts" (OB 149). Levinas writes: "to think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object" (TI 49). The Cartesian argument proves the separate existence of the infinite and the finitude of the being who has an idea of infinity (TI 49). In this way the significance of the encounter with the infinite as something beyond knowledge, enables a relationship with that which is total exteriority and alterity, utterly irreducible to interiority (TI 50, 211; Davis 1996: 39)[12].

[10]Cf. Descartes 1993 307 -315.
[11]The infinite is God in the work of Descartes, but Levinas transforms it to be the Other (TI 211), in fact the absolute Other (TI 49). Cf Davis 1996: 40.
[12]Whereas the Cartesian subject discovers the idea of the Infinite in his interiority, the Levinasian subject discovers from the exteriority of being faced by his neighbour that a trace of the Infinite was left behind in him at creation, which predisposes him to responsiveness (TI 85-87).

4.2 Metaphysical Desire

According to his idiosyncratic interpretation/reconstruction of Descartes' argumentation, the desire for the Infinite is, for Levinas (TI 50), a metaphysical desire for the otherness of the human Other and/or the otherness of what he metaphorically calls "the Most High" (TI 34). By introducing this quasi-transcendental aspect, Levinas moves from the naïvité of the natural attitude, the attitude suspended by the *epoche* in Husserlian terms, and the veil of the empirical to the *a priori* (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 7) by which "the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives" (TI 28) is shown. Through this metaphysical dimension Levinas transcends totalizing thinking and reaches back to the motivation for infinite responsibility.

This desire is however not physical or psychological, which can in principle be satisfied, but desire for the absolutely other, for alterity, which is beyond satisfaction (TI 34). Neither the relation to the Other, nor conversation or sociality can revert this state (TI 34) as it is not a nostalgia, a longing for a return to a satisfaction that was once familiar (TI 33). These modalities may not satisfy, yet it is through them that the subject escapes meaninglessness and oppression by the *il y a.* This metaphysical desire desires beyond what can complete it, it is insatiable because the Desired does not fulfill, but rather deepens or protracts this desire (TI 33-34, 304). In *Ethics and Infinity* Levinas says: "Desire in some way nourishes itself on its own hungers" (92). The Other and the Most High are beyond totalizing, irreducible to the interiority of the self, not assimilable by the subject (TI 35). It is thus desire that surpasses the egoistic inclinations of the subject (TI 39). The subject, the *I,* discovers in metaphysical desire that he is not solipsistically enclosed within himself, because he has "always already" been open and ready to respond to the Other (Peperzak 1995: 190). Arguing thus, Levinas prepares the way for an understanding of *substitution.* In the presence of the Other an immemorial past is revealed, a pre-reflective, unintended past, prior to knowledge or choice (Peperzak 1995: 108; EI 91). In this encounter the self experiences the disruption of his supposed autonomy and discovers itself as a heteronomous subject (TI 213). In this exteriority a trace/echo of the Infinite is revealed, awakened in the face of the Other/other (TI 88) and the cloak of the subject's autonomy is ripped off to reveal his original heteronomy – whereas he used to be the law unto himself (autos + nomos), he now finds the other (heteros) has become a law unto him. Here he discovers an obligation to an immemorial debt into which he has always already been

contracted prior to his own volition. He finds himself to be responsible, held hostage by and being the substitute for the Other/other (OB 126; Peperzak 1995: 190).

4.3 The ego, the self, and the Other/other

Bringing into conversation Levinas' notions of the metaphysics and ethics of the subject's encounter with the Other/other, Peperzak (1995: 112) sheds light on the intricacies of the *ego* and the *self* in Levinas' thinking. In the presence of the Other, desire moves the self toward the Other, and in this encounter the unconscious and nonintentional affectivity of the self is revealed as preoriginally having been meant for and tied to another (GDT 175). This meeting is an event, which transcending the ego, calls forth from the self a response that dethrones the ego (Peperzak 1995: 113; Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 251). This response is a responsibility for the Other that pre-exists any self-consciousness, so that from the beginning of any face to face, the question of being involves the right to be (LR 75). And so the ego discovers here, what Levinas calls a "prehistory" where "the self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles" (OB 117). The subject's freedom and egoistic enjoyment of the world is called into question at the very origin of moral consciousness (TI 84; OB 55), which brings to remembrance the trace of Infinity; a trace left at its creation which pre-destines the subject[13] to question his own existence as an autonomous ego in favour of the existence of the Other/other (Peperzak 1995: 113). At this point the subject discovers a non-intentional, prereflective affectivity – that quickens an answer-ability and respons-ibility in him. Peperzak argues, if the event did not touch oneself "twice or in two ways or two places – or times, synchrony and diachrony" – then the commandment and authority of the face would not make sense (Peperzak 1995: 113). The reason the face has this moral force by which it occasions this awakening, is because the self is created for and like this, so that it "becomes human in these birth pains" (Peperzak 1995: 113). Desire in the presence of the Other thus brings an end to the self's egoistical modalities by awakening apology and goodness within the self (TI 40). The other in misère calls upon the subject from its unprotected and defenseless, naked face. At the same time it calls with the authority of the Infinite, though in the vulnerability of its human face (EN 198-9).

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[13]Cf. LR 173 – 175 on the passivity and obligation of the idea of the Infinite "planted within us"– Cf. Descartes1993: 313 & 314.

This duality of the face is a movement by which the Other is constantly exceeding being thematized, but at the same time bringing us to the border of his "numinosity." It is this "epiphany" and "holiness" which brings us to our ethical responsibility (TI 195, 207, 221). In section 2 it was emphasized that ethical responsibility for Levinas, is not limited or determined by the *suffering* of the other *per se.* Similarly, it is his *alterity* that demands the respect not to reduce him to his distinguishing characteristics, despite them being his literal poverty or nakedness (TI 194). Instead, so insists Levinas, it is by the phenomenological poverty and nakedness of his unmasked skin through which the epiphany of the infinite appears, that we are called to responsibility.

5. The Human Face

Levinas establishes ethics as "first philosophy" by beginning with the notion of the "face-to-face." Before there is knowledge, totalization and ontology there is the Other/other, what he also calls "the saying" (in distinction of "the said"), the infinite. Hence, *Ethics* is not a subdivision of (ontological Western) Philosophy, but should be regarded as the beginning of philosophy as truth-seeking. The relation to the face is straightaway ethical (EI 87), as it spells the first mode of "knowing", as a *facing*. It is in *speaking/saying* (which is done by its mere presence and in the nakedness of its skin) that the face renders possible and begins all discourse (EI 87; TI 66). It is discourse, and more exactly, response or *response-ability*, which begins the authentic relationship with the Other/other (EI 88). Thus, in the simple recognition of our neighbour we already respond to him. The following sections will therefore attempt to illuminate Levinas´ notions of the face and its form, what the nakedness of the face entails, the meaning that arises from the face and lastly the significance of speech – the *saying* and the *said*; all of which explain the interplay between finitude and infinite that affords an understanding of Levinas' ethics.

5.1   Face and Form

Levinas is not a discursive thinker; he doesn´t start out with argued for premises and develop his philosophy systematically through a series of arguments to a logical conclusion. Rather, as was early on indicated with reference to Derrida´s metaphor of the wave, Levinas´ thinking is rhetorical and thoroughly poetic, returning like the same current of waves to break relentlessly on the same shore. The "shore" is an appeal to what he regards as a primordial, evidential human experience, namely that we always already

find ourselves in an ethical relation of responsibility established in *facing* an Other/other. Our *being* - in the full ontological sense of the word! - *turned towards the Other/other,* which affords access to his face, should therefore also be distinguished from actually looking at another, merely noticing his features, so to speak. Levinas draws a distinction between the face and its form, i.e. its features. Unlike the form, the (Levinasian ethical) *face* is "present in a refusal to be contained" (TI 194). Its alterity does not consist in its features being different from that of other "others". The otherness which we encounter in the *face* is an alterity which cannot be reduced to a definable, perceivable difference; it bears the trace – as that which remains in its very absence - or makes manifest what is wholly *Other*, beyond this world of perception, judgment and knowledge (TI 39, 194; EI 86). It is impossible for this alterity to be contained by my vision or touch (TI 194). Hence Levinas' contention that we should not speak of a *look* turned toward the *face* as this would suggest enclosing knowledge and perception (EI 85).

At this point it may seem that the Other's alterity remains impenetrable. The part featured by his *face* certainly ever remains unknowable. Indeed, the face is meaning all by itself – *kath' auto* (TI 75). For the *face* is signification without context and thus, uncontainable. Its meaning is not determined in relation to other things sharing the same context. The *face* is constantly breaking through and overflowing the phenomenological form of its appearance (OB 89; Kuypers & Burggraeve 1998: 102), yet retrieves just as soon by its transcendence which escapes the self's gripping (TI 51). Incarnated in its form – from which it should be distinguished, but cannot be abstracted - the otherness of the Other/other makes an appearance and is present, recognizable in the world. (This idea will be taken up again in the discussion below on the *saying* and the *said.*). Though the Other appears in form, the face refuses being limited and captured by the cognitive. In the instance of its appearance in the form, it again breaks through it to supersede what we have had a brief glimpse of (TI 181, 198). Llwelyn (1995: 123) calls this interplay: the appearing-disappearing act of the Other – able to be known (TI 194), yet unable to be objectified.

The vulnerability of the skin is the most naked nudity for Levinas. In *Ethics and Infinity* (86) he states: "It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance". This is one aspect of what Levinas calls the *form.* Further aspects generating recognizable forms for the Other/other are through his physical features, manner of dressing and presenting himself, his name, title, and activities (TI 178; EI 86; EN 199; Kuypers & Burggraeve 1998: 102). This signification is containable and knowable as the other ís signified, and can only be signified, by it, although the Other does not coincide with these manifestations (TI 178).

5.2   Vulnerability

The Other/other does not only appear in unabated alterity, but also in utter vulnerability. The (skin of) the face is the most unprotected, the most destitute of its phenomenal appearance (EI 86). This vulnerability seems to invite violence and can most easily be violated, scorned even by not recognising it (EN 145). Despite this weakness however, in and through the face the Other/other calls from an authoritative height, which Levinas calls "the word of God and the verb in the human face" (EN 199), because in its presence the face is inignorable; not to heed it, is exactly **nót** to heed it, already a violation of trust. From this dimension of "height" the face projects an unavoidable command : "Thou shalt not kill" (TI 34 - 35, EN 155). This commandment: "Thou shalt not kill," is indeed the first of saying the face (TI 199).

The face's resistance to conceptualization does not mean it is invulnerable to power. Instead, by this vulnerability it transforms our power over it (Wyschogrod 2000: 94). The Other/other's vulnerability and weakness is an invitation for the pleasure- and power-seeking "I" to want to dominate him by trying to reduce him to the self, because we now have the power of life and death over him (Kuypers & Burggraeve 1998: 105; Wyschogrod 2000: 94). This desire to totalize and objectify the Other would be a violation that in its highest degree of expression, would be murder (Kuypers & Burggraeve 1998: 105). It is however at exactly this point that the self discovers in the Other/other a power beyond his frailty – a power that resists the self´s potentially "murderous" inclinations. Thus the "I" finds that his most deliberate attempts to exert his power over the other are ultimately foiled by the Other's transcendence. It is rather the Other who exerts power, yet it is not

the power of threat but of capture, of turning me into a hostage of responsibility (Davis 1996: 49). His power lies in his implicit, innocent, involuntary calling into question of my right to be, of my egoistic enjoyment of the world and ultimately of the usurpation of my freedom (TI 84). As Derrida puts it, referring to both Scheler and Hegel, the face is not only *seen* because it is naked, but it (he, she) also *sees* me (Derrida 1978: 98) and thereby I am questioned.

This relation to the face is thus straightaway ethical, owing to the *meaning* of the face, which says: "Thou shalt not kill" (EI 87). Accordingly, the face is an original language already in asking to be helped in its misére, though at the same time being imperative (EN 199). Paradoxically, it simultaneously commands not to be killed, yet begs to be assisted to live. In *Totality and Infinity* (TI 43) Levinas states that what ethics is, is the calling into question of the same and its totalizing tendencies. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas develops this *asymmetrical* relation to an even higher and more pre-original degree.

6. Otherwisely Saying and the Said of Being

In *Violence and Metaphysics*[14] Derrida points out that though Levinas attempts to dethrone ontology in *Totality and Infinity*, he still expresses the non-ontological in the language of ontology (82-83, 88, 95, 97, 111-113, 125)[15]. Levinas' subsequent work, but especially *Otherwise than Being,* is indeed maddening in its attempt to henceforth say the unsayable – what Critchley and Bernasconi call "tortuously beautiful, rhapsodic incantations" (2002: 19). With *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* Levinas introduces not only the notions of the *saying* and the *said,* but his whole text becomes a deconstructive engagement with the distinction between the effable and the ineffable. For this reason it would be a misunderstanding to deem the distinction between the *saying* and the *said* as only designating different modes of language.

As the title already suggests, Levinas wants to articulate the possibility of thinking transcendence in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*[16]. But is this possible? If "Being" is the totalizing Western philosophical tradition (Peperzak 1993: 213), how could one think or speak of the pre-linguistic, beyond Being – other than by a "doubling or multiplying"

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[14]See Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: xii-xiv. They argue that *Violence and Metaphysics* should not be understood as only a critique of Levinas, but that it is a deconstructive double reading of his work.
[15]Cf. Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 17; Davis 1996: 58-59, 65-66.

thereof (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 75) through unsaying and resaying that which strictly speaking cannot be said? For the saying is inevitably violated when its alterity and uniqueness is transformed and represented through the conceptualizing of the said. Levinas' break with ontology ultimately becomes a necessary betrayal of the non-objective, non-thematic, and non-ontological (BPW xii). This disparity is made explicit in the distinction between the *saying* and the *said*, where the unsayable is necessarily objectified and reduced to the said (OB 153-6; BPW xii; Peperzak 1993: 227), yet the unsaying persists in continuously disrupting the said in resaying it (OB 44). And so the *saying* and the *said* flow into and through each Other/other, not remaining oppositions as Same and Other. The betrayal is further exemplified in Levinas' doubling back of terms such as "more passive than all passivity" (OB 14), "denudation of denuding," (OB 49), and "infinition of the infinite" (OB 93).

Briefly moving from the ethics of language into the relational sphere - in these expressions Levinas tries to explain the subject's election for ethical responsibility, which is even before the passivity that could have held a measure of autonomous assertiveness, for the proximity of the neighbour makes it impossible for the self to abandon him (BPW 167; cf GM 167). In turn, this betraying-resaying language guarantees the impossibility of betraying the uncontainable relation in ontological terminology and subsequently ontological thinking – in terms of believing one is only responsible for that which you are guilty of. The unconditionality of this before-passivity contracted responsibility means that we are "always already beyond essence" (LR 88) in an ethical relation of responsibility. The verb 'to be' in *Otherwise than Being* should differently put, be understood as referring to the enjoying, totalising subject described in *Existence and Existents* and *Totality and Infinity* who naively existed unquestioningly only for-himself. In *Otherwise than Being* this being who is actually a being-for-the-other (EI 100) is "described" successfully when Levinas breaks with ontological language by introducing the *saying*.

Thus Levinas is forced to express his intentions in language which necessarily betrays itself (Derrida 1978: 151), since his fundamental problem is the aporia of deconstruction as found in (the) language needed to expose the strangeness of the Other (Derrida 1978:

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[16]The word "essence"refers both to Plato's *ousia* (being) and to Heidegger's being (Sein). The expressions "otherwise than being,""beyond being"and "beyond essence" are all translations of Plato's *epekeina tes ousias,*characterizes "the good"which is beyond being (BPW 109; Cf. Plato 509 b9).

88; Davis 1996: 66). In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas especially finds himself in earnest on the limits of language (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 19), for he has no choice but to travel this a-poria (no-road that cannot but be taken) of language. His transmuted (usage of) language from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being* conceals a shift in his understanding of the way in which subjectivity is established.[17] In the former text one is initially given to understand this happens at the historical moment of an encounter with the other, but in the latter this takes place at a pre-original level. The shift had already been anticipated in *Totality and Infinity*, but Levinas had not yet found the vocabulary that could express it. Yet, already in *Totality and Infinity* he does draw a distinction between the ego and the self that demonstrates this point, though, as mentioned, still in the language of ontology. Hence, he does not change perspective in *Otherwise than Being*[18] but with a sharpened deconstructive edge he now illuminates this shift from an *encounter* to a *pre-encounter*, which is vital for his argument on *substitution*. In discussing the notions of the *said* and the *saying* the question of thinking and speaking of that which is *other than Being* is dealt with next.

6.1. Saying and Said

It has been shown thus far that the relation with the Other is irreducible, i.e. uncontainable; it is moreover *linguistic* (Peperzak 1995: 62). The ethical relationship is beyond knowledge, thus beyond the containable intelligibility of total presence (EN 168; K 64). Notwithstanding this, it is authentically assumed through discourse. According to Levinas, one does not reflect or contemplate the Other/other, nor grasp him with your vision, but converses with him (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 11). Levinas distinguishes between the *saying* (*Dire:* To say) and the *said* (*Dit)* in order to point out that discourse is not a form of knowledge (EI 88). To begin with, one can explain the *saying* as the ethical and the said as the ontological, the identifiable meaning (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 17-18). Reminded of the interplay between language and the ethical relation, Peperzak writes: " 'face to face' is irreducible, because the Other is 'inexhaustible', 'reced[ing] from thematization'

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[17]I speak of an "illuminated paradigm shift," thereby referring to the shift (break with ontology in his understanding) Levinas had already begun in his earliest work on Husserl and in *Existence and Existents*. It is thus not a new way of thinking, but an old way only expressed in a new form, which has become more faithful to express it successfully.
[18]The necessity of an actual encounter would nullify the possibility of being responsible for all others whom the I never comes in contact with. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas already speaks of "a relation without relation" (TI 80) (Cf RB 2001: 52). The face-to-face instead brings together an epiphany and a pre-existing responsiveness.

just as *Dire* is not absorbed in the *Dit*, in grammar, rules, and themes of language (1995: 63). *Dire* is that which is not thematized, which is both transcendent and immanent in language". Differently put, "The saying is a non-thematizable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension, interrupts ontology and is the very enactment of the movement from the same to the other" (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 18).

Levinas' problem then, is to **say** the *saying* through the said. That the saying must become concrete in the said is as unavoidable as the fact that the *face* needs the *form* for appearance. Indeed, the saying is betrayed because its uniqueness is violated in representation and the knowledge of the said. Yet the problem is found and necessarily "resolved" when the Infinite shows itself through a finite act (TI 51; EI 92). Levinas writes: "The said in absorbing the saying does not become its master, although by an abuse of language it translates it before us in betraying it" (OB 190). In this way one's ethical exposure to the Other/other is given philosophical exposition that is not utterly undermined in incomprehensible saying, despite the continual interruption of the said by the *saying* (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 18). It is clear that the significance of the relation between the saying and the said will be misunderstood if we do not recognize that an essential and irreducible ambiguity exists between the passage from the saying to the said, and the reduction of what shows itself in the said to the signification of the saying (Chanter 1998: 505; OB 43 -5). Chanter points out that this phenomenon does not only show the malleability of language and its ability to go further than the sedimented meanings into which it nevertheless inevitably settles, but it especially registers the failure of language to contain what it would express (Chanter 1998: 505). To emphasize, in understanding (and elevating) the distinction between the saying and the said as a logically organizing distinction, we might miss the fact that it is instead an impossible distinction and in fact functions as a disordering and disruptive force (Chanter 1998: 505).

The (inexpressible) ethical significance of the *saying* lies in its compulsion to respond. Though this response passes through the *said,* which absorbs alterity into thematization, it does not culminate in the *said.* It still maintains a nontotalizing relation to the Other/

other. This obsessiveness to respond stems from the primordial awareness that the *face* is language-before-words (Robbins 2001: 5; EN 199). "As an adequate description of the subject, insofar as it escapes the order of Being, ethical language is pre- or meta-ontological. As characteristic of a situation that precedes freedom, it is also pre-or meta-ethical" (Peperzak 2003: 223). Given that the *saying* is expressed in the infinitive form, it is able to convey both the transcendent and the immanent in language, as it can convey meaning beyond the act of *saying* to include that which underlies this act (Peperzak 1995: 63). The appearing-disappearing effect of conveying meaning is also found in the very interaction, where the irreducible Other recedes from thematization – yet having delivered its message (Peperzak 1995: 167). In his *Collected Philosophical Papers* Levinas speaks of the "way the other has of seeking my recognition while preserving his incognito, ... a way of manifesting himself without manifesting himself" (Peperzak 1995: 167). We also find the saying described as an entering so subtly, that "unless we retain it, it has already withdrawn...[as it] withdraws, before entering" (BPW 70). Ultimately this primordial conversation is contentless – as such the saying is irreducible to the ontological definability of the said. Saying is what makes the self-exposure of this response and sincerity possible (K 64 – 65) for through it the *I* announces "here I am".

6.3. Substitution

Levinas describes the meaningfulness of the saying and the *unsaid* in corporeal terms as a stripping beyond nudity (OB 15; LR 88). And so intentionality is found in sensibility, which is a proximity to the Other/other of which substitution is the basis (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 21). Thus the "I", the first person, becomes a subject in the literal sense of being hostage to the Other/other (LR 88), through a "passivity more passive than all patience" (OB 15). A necessary condition for ethical subjectivity is its corporeality for it is only embodiment that renders itself possible for deprivation – such as pain, labour, decline (Peperzak 1993: 222). It is the subject's sentient capacity for hunger, his proclivity for eating and enjoying his bread and good soup, that enables him to know what it means to give up his food for the Other/other (OB 56; Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 21). According to Levinas only a being that eats can give and be for the Other/other (OB 69, 72, 74; GDT 190). Critchley and Bernasconi consider what must be the world's shortest refutation of Heidegger to be Levinas' complain that "*Dasein* is never hungry" (2002: 21). Levinas writes, "The need for food does not have existence as its goal, but food" (TI 134). Furthermore,

responsibility, as the passivity of being-for-the-other is not only expressed in the self's capacity to offer up the bread from his own mouth, but is also expressed in the giving up of his body as victim and bearer of pain (OB 51) – ultimately of giving his life for the Other/other[19].

Levinas makes it clear that we are not dealing with a free "I", who is actively able to place himself in the position of the Other/other. It is instead that he is *passively* placed in the position of the Other, prior to any commitment (OB 102) to the extent that he is unable to unburden himself from the ethical responsibility the Other/other's appeal brings about (BPW 95). This passivitity is that of a hostage, not the passiveness of a free ego who could boast in the sacrifice of his substitution (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 239) or his altruism, his "natural benevolence or love" (OB 112). Responsibility articulated as love would create the impression that substitution springs forth from empathy, compassion or benevolence within the "I" (Kuypers & Burggraeve 1998: 112). This form of egoism does not enable sacrifice, nor does it subject the subject to the position of a hostage or persecuted one (Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 235).

Facing the Other, the "I" is recalled to a responsibility he had never contracted (OB 109; EN 58). "It is an event that strips consciousness of its initiative, that undoes me and puts me before an Other in a state of guilt; an event that puts me in accusation – a persecuting indictment, for it is prior to all wrongdoing – and that leads me to the *self,* in the accusative that is not preceded by any nominative" (EN 58-9; OB 112; RB 228). The response of responsibility is a response that "answers, before any understanding, for a debt contracted before any freedom and before any consciousness and any present" (OB 12). It is this passivity of the self as hostage that ultimately enables pardon, compassion, pity and proximity in the world (OB 117; BPW 91; GDT). According to Peperzak (1993: 222), Levinas uncovers *persecution* as a necessary presupposition, for "only a persecuted subject is a subject who - without so desiring, against his will – lives for the Other".

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[19]In an interview with Poirié Levinas says: "I am responsible for the death of the other," thus I do not only die for myself (RP 2001: 53). And in *The Other, Utopia, Justice* he writes: "Dying for the other can concern me more than my own death"(RB 204).

In *Otherwise than Being* (114, 142) Levinas writes: "The word *I* means, here I am, answering for everything and everyone." Levinas introduces it as a primordial form of "response of responsibility" and continues (OB 114-5): "I exist through the other and for the other"… "as being-in-one's skin, having-the-other-in-one's-skin". "Passivity is irritability, receptivity, barenness, vulnerability" (Peperzak 1993: 232). Levinas employs "motherliness" as metaphor for the ultimate meaning of vulnerability (OB 108). For example: "On the other hand, vulnerability is found to be a pre-requisite of the relation of the One-for-the-Other – a relation that seems to coincide with the relation of the "One-in-me" and thus with motherliness" (OB 19). The mother is the perfect image for substitution as she embodies the capacity for an "echoing-in-another" (OB 108; Peperzak 1993: 232). At the same time mother and child are completely together, but also completely separate (Peperzak 1993: 223). In thus being-for-the other, I abandon "all having, all for-myself" by substituting myself for the other (GDT 176).

From this nontotalzing ethical relationship, despite the fact that the Other/other constitutes the self's identity, Levinas argues that the propensity of the subject is not so much *conatus essendi,* as he was intent on thinking in *Existence and Existents,* but that it is an inspired giving (OB 141). The subject's "originary constitution" is thus traced to this pri-mordial vocation on him (RB 22) to substitute himself for his neighbour to the point and beyond of feeding him with bread from his own lips (OB 56). In Levinas´ own mature formulation: "Substitution frees the subject from *ennui*, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity, and ceaselessly seeks after the distraction of games and sleep in a movement that never wears out" (OB 124). As mentioned earlier enjoyment is a necessary step in the selfsustainment of the ego, and similarly embodiment is a pre-requisite for substitution. But as enjoyment is the singularization of an ego in its coiling back upon itself, it is in its unwinding that it renders suffering sensible (OB 73). Whereas we can totalize and absorb the otherness of the world (food, objects, etc.) to satisfy our needs, we cannot reduce the otherness of the Other/other to our interiority. In the first and last instance, our identity and humanity is released through *substitution* for our neighbour – this is the desolate shore where the waves of Levinas´ thinking keep breaking unremittantly.

7. Conclusion

Levinas does not present us with arguments that appeal to a higher authority, not even the authority of rationality, neither does he appeal to good conscience. His ethics is not prescriptive – even when he speaks of the third party and social justice. It is a descriptive ethics with the sole intention to appeal to our most primordial intuitions. It situates us in an asymmetric relationship, where diachronic time and the proximity of my neighbour surpasses the ontological rationality and engages me *before* or *otherwise* with infinite responsibility for my neighbour (OB 89; cf GM 162-3). This discussion similarly had no prescriptive intentions, it simply wished to illuminate the *that* of our absolute responsibility, as posited by Levinas – the much forgotten fact of our *being*, if Levinas is correct - that *every individual* is responsible for his neighbour's life, which includes his material misery.

There is consensus amongst commentators that Levinas has tried to say something that could possibly not be said in philosophical terms (Bloechl 2000: 53). In *Otherwise than Being,* Levinas however does ultimately make a "theme of the unthematizable" (Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: 149).[20] He does this at the risk of undermining himself when he performs an ethical writing to deal with the necessary betrayal of the *saying* (Davis 1996: 19). In this way he does not limit his text to the *said,* despite the fact that he is talking *about* ethics (the *saying*) as in the case of *Totality Infinity*; in *Otherwise than Being* the text itself truly becomes a *saying* (ethical writing). Moreover, taking into consideration the three main texts discussed, it is clear that Levinas' work has had the effect of a *saying* even before its conscious and mature expression in *Otherwise than Being.* Since *Existence and Existents,* which he wrote in the stalag at the epitome of the failure of morality, he already argued for the absolute, irrevocable responsibility each of us has for our neighbour. Given his (personal and intellectual) context and subsequent sober arguments, his work carries an undeniable authority. Levinas' work speaks with an authority, remarkable in the history of Western philosophy, blinding in its sincerity, and irresistible in its metaphoric force to convince us of its "truth."

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[20]Cf Davis 1996: 54-57, 69, 71- 74; Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 19; Derrida with *Violence and Metaphysics.*

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[21]I have used the following abbreviations for these texts:*Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority,* 1969: **TI** *Existence and Existents,* 1978: **EE**; *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,*1981: **OB**; Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas. In Kearney, R. *Dialogues with contemporary Continental thinkers. The phenomenological heritage,*1984: **K**; *Ethics and Infinity,* 1985: **EI**; *The Levinas Reader,* 1989:**LR**; *Basic Philosophical Writings.*1996: **BPW**; *Entre Nous. On Thinking of the Other,* 1996: **EN**; *Of God who Comes to Mind,*1998: **GM**; *God, Death, and Time,* 2000: **GDT**; *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas,*2001: **RB**.

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<div align="center">**Ethics as First Philosophy**</div>

<div align="center">- A brief discussion on the priority of ethics before ontology in the philosophy of

Emmanuel Levinas -</div>

<div align="center">"Am I my brother's keeper?"

Gen 4: 9</div>

1. Introduction

Levinas himself gave the title "Ethics as First Philosophy" to a 1984 essay of his – *Éthique comme philosophie première[1]*. To the question of philosophy, to what is meant by "the intelligibility of the intelligible, the signification of meaning" this is Levinas' answer (GM 111). In relation to all other ontological investigations, which have gone to the most fundamental enquiries - including Heidegger's attempt to separate Being from beings - Levinas presents this thesis that it is ethics, which holds the position of first philosophy. This stance should however not be misunderstood for an ontological claim as Levinas employs the words "ethics", "first" and "philosophy" in a unique way. This paper will present an unfolding drama of the interplay between these three notions, which Levinas cautiously presents to us by the conjunction "as." "As" is deliberately not "is", by which Levinas rejects the critique that this argument is in fact making a claim for ontological truth, thereby annulling its intended claim to establish a Levinasian ethics. The Levinasian ethics is ultimately one of infinite responsibility.

In Derridian fashion I will briefly comment on these three key words by explaining what they are not. "Ethics" does not refer to the traditional code of prescriptive moral principles, obligations and right conduct (Peperzak 1995: xi). Levinas will yet present us with a radically more demanding and original proto-phenomenology in a diachronic dimension that precedes all other dimensions (Peperzak 1995: xi). In his own words Levinas says,

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[1]Cf. LR 75; Peperzak 1995: xi.

when he speaks of first philosophy that he is "referring to a philosophy of dialogue which cannot *not* be an ethics" (RB 211). Ultimately, Levinas' understanding of ethics is built on the human's responsibility *for* - and identity *through* the Other, his neighbour. We will learn that "philosophy" is not primarily the love of wisdom, but the wisdom of love. In short, ethics is not moral rules and philosophy is not knowledge thereof. Both notions on Levinas' reading become an openness and an embrace with infinity and the Other. Thirdly, when we consider the notion of "first" as it logically features in a calculating or rationalizing context, we would assume that it is preceded by nothingness or emptiness, but this understanding is revisited by Levinas. Instead, he ascribes to this "firstness" the notions of double origin and pre-originality that will be discussed in Section 4.

Both from a traditionally philosophical point of view and for practical reasons, it is impossible to deny the necessity for recognizable moral rules and knowledge in order to engage sensibly in this world. Levinas also refers to this dimension of ontology as knowledge, consciousness, the *said* and the political. Yet, having examined certain experiences such as insomnia, fatigue, and the event of death, Levinas discovers a relation with a beyond, with an ungraspable Other, from a dimension prior to being - even if this is not containable, nor ever present in a present. Levinas consequently questions the stance that knowledge is the only mode of the meaningful. He holds that it is instead ethics that makes ontology recognizable, for the ethical relation is both before and beyond the ontological relation. In my discussion I will therefore focus on unveiling this dimension prior to ontology (and consciousness and choice) which Levinas employs to deconstruct the understanding of "O*ntology* as First Philosophy".

The notion of "Ethics as First Philosophy" as briefly alluded to above, presents us with an aporetic problem, since this anarchy of responsibility is a challenge to the privileging of knowledge as the sole and first mode of meaning. I therefore begin exploring the problem by re-examining knowledge according to Levinas' understanding. A discussion on language follows as it is the bridge between ethics and ontology, as well as the tool by which Levinas must inevitably express the unsayable. Following this exploration, I consider various components of Infinity which Levinas uses to further this challenge, i.e. his call for the priority of ethics. I consolidate these discussions with this paper's aim – to illustrate that our relation with our neighbour is the initial form of intelligibility - by

discussing the Subject's identity since this is the point from which First Philosophy springs. The last notion discussed is that of freedom as it is closely linked to both the subject's identity and ethics as understood by Levinas.

1.1 Beginning the discussion

In Genesis 4: 9 God asks Cain where his brother is. Putting aside the fact that Cain had killed Able in verse 8, Cain's answer is revealing. He says, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" This answer not only demonstrates the ontological position, namely "I am I, and he is he" (EN 110), but also the usurpation of the ethical relation by the ontological relation.

When we look at the question *who?* it is answered with a *what* (TI 177; cf. OB 27). By the time we ask: "who is it?" the person had in fact *already* presented himself - prior to the question. The responding answer, "Vincent", follows after the person's presence had in fact already been announced by footsteps on the gravel or his knock on the door. Moreover, his name, as requested by the question, thus only refers to a system of relations, absenting him from his presence (TI 177 - 8). As it is, ontology aims to comprehend the verb "to be." In *Ethics and Infinity* (38) Levinas says "ontology would be distinguished from all the disciplines which explore *that* [the *what*] which is,"... for they forget that "in speaking of these beings they have already understood the meaning of the word being, without, however, having made it explicit." Ironically though, ontology falls prey to the same trap, though to a lesser degree. Here as well, the Other is too quickly objectified and reduced to a containable concept (LR 244). By prioritizing the Same in this way, we subordinate the Other to being, and thereby ethics to ontology (Bernasconi & Wood 1988: 18). Levinas finds the priority afforded to Being over beings; the general over the particular; the theoretical, intellectual, and political over the ethical – the *said* over the *saying,* problematic and he sets out to argue differently.

Addressing the question of the meaning of being, Levinas presents us with the face-to-face relation, which "founds and justifies being as the very being of being" (LR 75) as against the traditional philosophical understanding by which being is understood with reference to knowledge. Levinas argues instead for another form of "knowledge." He

thereby attempts to deconstruct and go beyond the logocentric tradition. Whereas Derrida overthrows the traditional stance through deconstructive reading, Levinas does this in his exposition of our relation with our neighbour.

Levinas' criticism is against the Western Philosophy (as the *cogito's* "love of wisdom") which prioritizes knowledge and so compels every other discourse to justify itself before a philosophy claiming to be all-inclusive and ultimate in comprehension (GM 55; cf BPW 129). In this spirit it argues "not to philosophize is still to philosophize" (GM 55). Yet Levinas holds, not to philosophize is indeed *not* to philosophize (BPW 148) – note, as traditionally understood. Ontology has been regarded as the First Philosophy – fundamental and originary, privileging knowledge as the only form of meaning in its relation with being (TI 46; Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: 84). Also, the autonomous subject is "privileged" at this point, as is consciousness and presence. Upon these considerations ontology is regarded as the discourse uniquely able to discover and account for the ultimate structure of reality (Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: 84). For Levinas though, "totality and the embrace of being, or ontology, do not contain the final secret of being" (TI 80), insisting that our subjectivity is broken up by a demand from the Other that comes to me from beyond philosophy (BPW 129). Levinas thus questions the view that experience is inseparable from the unity of presence and from simultaneity – as if experience is the very "mode" of presence. Levinas will yet argue and demonstrate that not all signification concludes in manifestation (GM 197). Instead he holds that knowledge characteristic of being, is not the sole mode, nor the preliminary mode of intelligibility or of meaning, because it cannot encompass all meaning. Levinas examines experiences which defy *presence to* and *consciousness of* as being the source of meaning alone (GM 197). In fact, don't we sometimes idiomatically refer to our world as being "shattered" (EE 21), thereby pointing to the limits of our conscious capacity to understand and know? Arguing thus, Levinas ultimately endeavours to say the unsayable, to present an-other mode of meaningfulness.

As mentioned, Levinas' philosophy is a reaction against this tradition in which the sovereign self has been at the centre of all undertaking and questioning. He questions a "morality founded upon the inalienable right of the *conatus*, which is also the right and the *bonne conscience* of freedom" (LR 82). These objections are derived from the unique

understanding of time, which we will explore in Section 5. So much so that we will learn that ethics is not originary, but pre-originary, taking place in a time immemorial of which we are unable to draw its past into our presence. It is also a time dimension that shows our relation with alterity – which constitutes our heteronomous subjectivity.

Though the Western philosophical tradition privileges ontology and epistemology against ethics, it also provides exceptions, which would contribute to Levinas arguing that ethics is first philosophy. The one case that I particulary focus on, is provided by Descartes' idea of the Infinite, alternatively refered to as "God" and the Other by Levinas. A further exception from the tradition is Plato's idea of the Good, also referred to as "beyond being" (*epekeina tes ousias*) (BPW 129). These two notions open a defense for matters beyond being, beyond knowledge - in particular predestining the subject for a relation with the Other, the one who appears first on the scene (OB 87). From this Levinas will eventually present us with his own notion of the face-to-face, by which he argues that the relationship of man to man is the structure upon which all others rest (TI 79).

2. Knowledge

Traditional ontology privileges knowledge and reason, whereby it assimilates otherness into sameness (TI 43). We will examine ethics in relation to the rationality of knowledge that is immanent in being. We will furthermore consider a different form of intelligibility, which Levinas portrays. Without rejecting reason, Levinas goes beyond the forms and determinations of ontology (TI 104, EN xi). Levinas himself attests to the difficulty and near impossibility of his task, because this relation that he points to cannot be reduced to understanding (objectification) (EN 4). Even so, he poses the following question: "... may we not legitimately wonder whether reason, posited as the possibility of meaningful language, necessarily precedes language, and whether language is not based on a relationship that is prior to understanding, and that it rather constitutes reason?" (EN 4)[2]. In fact, Levinas wonders whether we think that knowledge would be the meaning and the end of everything, even if everything ends being known (GM 154). He aims to express a dimension beyond words, which he can however aporetically only do *through* words. We should remember that his summersault ideas are not aimed at denouncing rationality (EN 165), though, at the same time it does not confirm the sole priority of rationality either.

[2] Cf TI 14 and GM 57, 151.

The activity behind knowledge as perception, concept and comprehension is described as a grasping, for it is an appropriation by a self that sees the world and its contents as existing for him and for his satisfaction (LR 76). The rationality of beings is accordingly understood as stemming from their presence and adequation. As such, the operations of knowledge reestablish rationality behind the diachrony of *becoming* in which presence occurs (LR 77). Knowledge is thus a return to presence as a re-present(ation) (LR 77). There also appears the notion of a reasoning will – a way of doing something which consists precisely of thinking through knowing, of seizing something and making it one's own, of reducing to presence and representing the difference of being (LR 76). As such being becomes the characteristic property of knowledge (LR 76), with nothing remaining *other* to it (LR 77). Thus understood, the activity of thought triumphs over all otherness (nothingness included), since my knowledge will gradually absorb everything that exceeds it (EN 126; TI 295). Yet, as early as *Existence and Existents* (*De l' existence à l' existant,* 1947) Levinas shows from Descartes' *Meditations,* that being is a *thing* which thinks (EE 68). This underscores the fact that had too readily been forgotten, namely, that thought must have a base/ point of departure, which is its very condition (EE 68 - 69). We see in *Existence and Existents* that this localization of consciousness is not in turn reabsorbed into consciousness, i.e. into knowing (68). This relation with a base, which affords a refuge from the *il y a³* is the body. It is from the body that consciousness comes to the world (EE 69, 71; Vasey 1981: 181). The body, as the corporeal base of existence, is a necessity to the constitution of the subject and furthermore affirms exteriority as non-constituted (TI 127). Considering body before consciousness has some serious implications, which Derrida and Levinas will shortly explain. By this argument consciousness is further dethroned.

This new (other) mode of knowledge which Levinas explores, will show that the meaningful for thought had not been exhausted in ontology (LR 78). Ontology in contemporary philosophy had assumed the knowledge of being in general – a situation of fact for the mind that knows. So much so that "nothing can, or could, smuggle itself into consciousness without having declared itself" (GM 60). Thus, consciousness is time that can be recuperated (OB 32). Upon this understanding, "consciousness is a light that illumines the world from one end to the other"; even remembering and rediscovering history (GM 60). This implies that "consciousness is identity of the Same, presence of being, presence of presence" (GM 59). The relation of knowledge to presence as being accordingly

becomes the original "locus or homeland" of meaning, having the schema of return and union (EN 137). To quote Levinas, it is "as if knowledge, concreteness of presence, were the psychic structure of all thought" (EN 138.) Thought as knowing thus focuses on the thinkable; the thinkable called being – as if *to live* and *to be* were transitive verbs, and *this* and *that* their objects (EN 125). In disagreeing with this understanding, Levinas explores time from a different angle, thereby dethroning presence – and consciousness.

Based on the traditional understanding, the world exists for the enjoying, egocentric and free self; the existent lives as though he were at the centre of the world. The existent approaches objects from himself, illuminating objects as though this 'light' emanated from himself (TO 64). This synchronising activity of representation is a "return to self as much as an issuing forth from self" (EN 161). Phenomenology in particular relies upon light as the very condition of the appearance of phenomena. Through light, what is hidden is illuminated (LR 75). The world, as the phenomenologists encounter it, is lit up – illuminated by the self, and thereby understood, known and possessed as a property of the subject (EE 48; Davis 1996: 24). The Husserlian Ego finds the world made bright by its own intentional meaning; Heideggerian *Dasein* is the being from which Being is always already illumined, always already comprehended (Davis 1996: 24).

Though, as we have seen, traditional philosophy holds that everything that occurs in the human psyche ends up being known, because it locates the origin or natural place of the meaningful there (EN 124), Levinas rediscovers elements in this very tradition to break with it. Beginning with the modern age, Descartes' interpretation of the concept of *cogito*

founded knowing as the psyche or pneumatic force of thought. Husserl, building on Kant who argued knowledge can only be explained in terms of objects as they appear within human experience (in reaction against Descartes' concern with things outside the self) reinterpreted this understanding and described this consciousness as intentionality, which is understood as 'consciousness of something', inseparable from its 'intentional object' (LR 77; TI 122). Representation or objectivization thus became the incontestable model in

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[3]The *il y a* is the fact that there is – even if we think (of the possibility) that there could be nothing. It is the noise that exists after every negation thereof, and not the emptiness we would think would be an absolute silence (EI 48). In insomnia one experiences the *il y a* is an undifferentiating, droning, inescapability,which strips the subject of selfhood and holds one riveted to being. Consciousness as a hypostasis, as a refastening of being to the existent, where the self dominates existence – by taking refuge in its body, is a breaking loose from the *il y a* (EE 57 – 64; Pepperzak 1993: 18, 19).

this noetic-noematic[4] structure (LR 77). Heidegger however reacted against Husserl's phenomenology that redefined the world in terms of the self only. He showed that knowledge does not unfold in isolation from lived experience, for knowledge is but one of many modes of human being. Prior to knowing, we are already-in-the-world, being connected with everything else by way of functions. Yet, while this forms a totality, which surpasses the limits of rational subjectivity, Heidegger's argument does not surpass consciousness. Building on Husserl and Heidegger, Levinas will return to Descartes to present us with his own version of intentionality. He will argue that there are indeed levels of consciousness more primordial than the level of function and that the primal relation with being is not constituted by representation (TI 48).

For Levinas language demonstrates this primal relation with our neighbour as it is the difficult vehicle by which different levels of consciousness – stretching beyond function, are revealed. The issue of language is indeed Levinas' greatest obstacle for he aims to convey a message from a beyond where there are no words.

3. Language

In the Introduction I refered to Levinas who holds that first philosophy is "a philosophy of dialogue which cannot *not* be an ethics" (RB 211). He continues by saying that "even the philosophy that questions the meaning of being does so starting from the encounter with the Other, which would amount to a manner of subordinating knowledge and objectivization to the encounter with the other that is presupposed in all language" (RB 211). The simple act of addressing oneself to someone already expresses the ethical disturbance that the *contatus essendi*[5] provokes in me, so that all thinking is subordinated to the ethical relation (RB 211).

Language traditionally functions as an objectification of the other, reducing that which is strange and unknown to a containable concept (TI 128). That which is Levinas' focus – the irreducible - is ignored or suppressed. More than having been ignored is the fact that the other escapes thematization in its refusal to be contained (TI 194). Traditionally, to be meaningful, Otherness received its meaning from its equivalence to the concept, which,

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[4]Husserl argues that the noesis and noema are not two elements placed side by side; they are correlative (Vasey 1981: 179). Thinking is thus always *this* or *that*. In this way, consciousness, as lender of meaning, is intentional, and always articulated as a *noesis* of a noema, *where* the noema is concrete within the intention of the noesis (GM 154).

in turn, received its meaning from its overall place in a system of thought. To seemingly comprehend and represent the Other in a concept is to prevent, pre-empt and precede its disruptive force on the totality of the same (TI 124; OB 25). It is important to understand that ethical language does not reach any definitive formulation (sedimentation); it calls rather for a transcendence which becomes an endless thinking back from the said to the saying (BC 1991: 97), a constant resaying and unsaying of the said. As such this movement is always frustrated by the medium in which it is set and on which it depends, namely, language (BC 1991: 96). It should be understood that the said is not a translation of the saying, the two are in different spheres and a total paradigm shift is requiered when moving between the two. This is however not an either-or situation. In their mutual dependence it is only by way of a betrayal that anything at all can be said about the saying, the ethical.

The essence of discourse, as already noted, is ethical for Levinas (TI 216). By arguing thus he further problematizes his methodological predicament of saying the unsayable (Keenan 1999: 22). In order to somehow express this unsayable he has to say it in the said. This is pure betrayal (Keenan 1999: 22). Yet the term "betray" is not limited to a negative connotation only, there is an ambiguity to it as it is both a misleading and a revealing (Keenan 1999: 22). Though the Philosophical task is inevitably performed in the said, it is moreover responsibile to reduce the said to the signification of the saying that precedes it (BC 1991: 97), hence the disruption of the said by a continuous unsaying and resaying of it.

The subject of this saying, the Other, our neighbour, says himself not by offering information, but simply by exposing himself, by announcing himself, that is, by *expressing* himself in his saying (BC 1991: 97). Hence the otherness which we encounter in the *face* of an Other, is an alterity which cannot be reduced to a definable, perceivable difference – it bears the trace - of what is wholly *Other,* beyond this world of perception, judgment and knowledge (TI 39, 194; EI 86).

[5]Formula for the essence of being in Spinoza (RB 211).

About his thought on language Levinas says that it
> "does not push the original modalities of the *significant* into
> the knowledge where Being is given and grasped, but into
> the relation-of-*myself*-to-the-*Other.* The signification of meaning
> (*sens)*, the *for-the-other* by which the significant given overflows
> the limits of its proper definition, does not reduce itself to the
> intended meaning of the sign which lives within it and which
> is worth less than the presence of the signified 'in person'; nor
> does it reduce itself to finality, poorer than the contentment of
> the obtained and realized end (BC 1991: 85).

Hence language, words, concepts as the betraying said are overflown by the saying, the said being unable to contain or reduce the saying.

Perhaps in Levinasian style, let us procede to consider the distinction between the *saying* and the *said* which Levinas makes, that we may in retrospect better comprehend the preceding arguments. Levinas makes this distinction to point out that discourse is not a form of knowledge (EI 88), but is instead ethical (TI 216). The saying bespeaks the ethical world, the sphere of the unobjectifiable - beyond knowledge. There is a paradoxical immediacy to the saying, a sort of unthinkable immediacy which escapes the present. In the words of Blanchot, "one must manage somehow to understand the immediate in the past tense". Bernasconi and Critchley considers this paradox "unbearable" (1991: 98). If the time of the said is always the present (and its recollection is re-presentation), it means that the time of (the) preorginary saying arises from an immemorial past which is even prior to understanding (Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: 98). Hence, the ethical relationship, established as the primordial relation, is being beyond presence and even beyond knowledge. From this Levinas' dilemma remains evident. He aims to express that which cannot be expressed, nor be objectified, nor made intelligible.

In fact, every time I, as the writer, use the word "is" I am betraying Levinas' project, just as he had no other recourse but to implicitly argue that *Ethics as First Philosophy,* **is***.* The necessity of the *said* is illustrated in the distinction already mentioned – that of the political and the ethical. The political signifies our dependence on and inevitable need for knowledge and theorization in order to engage in moral, just and practical matters. The other person is both the (ethical) Other and the other other – or the (political) third (OB 160). In a world of many others we need knowledge to execute justice, we need to have

means to divide the subject's responsibility, we need concreteness for engaging in life, in existence. For Levinas, human subjectivity cannot most fundamentally be characterized by intentionality, it is instead intentionality that appears as a function of something else. It appears at that political point when comparison and thematization become *necessary,* at the point when the diachronic responsibility of proximity demands that a synchronic order of manifestation exist, so that justice can become a real possibility (Vasey 1981: 191). In other words, the political and ethical are mutually dependent, as is the *saying* and the *said.*

According to Levinas the face is the first intelligibility and meaning of all speech (EI 87). The reason behind this is not simply because it is impossible to speak without a face, but rather because one speaks to someone (Bernasconi & Wood 1988: 174). For Levinas that with which one is in relation in proximity is firstly the Other, the neighbor, one who has "meaning immediately, before any meaning is given to it" (Vasey 1981: 186). Since proximity is a relation which pre-exists the relations that consciousness of... establishes, it pre-exists the noetico-noematic structure of intentionality (Vasey 1981: 186). In this that it pre-exists knowledge, intentionality and thematization, it makes possible a relation with someone that is already significant in himself (Vasey 1981: 186 -7).

Proximity can be understood as saying, contact, the sincerity of being exposed, a saying pre-ceeding all language but without which language (understood as the transmission of messages) would be impossible (Vasey 1981: 187). Speaking is already to have accepted the Other's existence, as such I find myself incapable of not responding – even if it is in refusing to respond (EN7). Thus, one is inescapably called upon to respond in speech. It is this response or *response-ability*, which is for Levinas the first language (Bernasconi & Wood 1988: 174). This relation with the Other as interlocutor precedes all ontology and is for Levinas the ultimate relation in Being (TI 48). The Other is not first an object of understanding and then an interlocutor, not first a *what*. Language leads us from consciousness of... to proximity in leading us to the Other. The relation of proximity is described as "original language, language without words or propositions, pure communication" (Vasey 1981: 186). This relation is presented as the condition of any and all intentional relations (Vasey 1981: 186).

In considering the face's representation of the Other, Derrida explains Levinas' position: speech must not only translate thought, instead thought must already be speech. Above all the body must also be a language. The essence of language is the relation with the Other, because of the signification that arises through the Other facing me - which puts me in question and obliges me by his essence qua infinity (TI 207). Hence, rational knowledge is not the "first word of words" (Derrida 1978: 103), since the language of the *face* conditions the functioning of rational thought (TI 204). On this point Levinas agrees with Blanchot that meaning is before and not after language (Peperzak 1995: 145). For this reason Levinas can argue that the saying is before the said – straight from the proximity of the Other (OB 89). Traditionally, language was subordinated to thought, and body to language. The themes of one's body as language thus implied that thought could not *first* be language unless it is acknowledged that thought is *first* and irreducibly a relation to the Other (Derrida 1978: 104). This relation is irreducible to "a consciousness of..." (TI 204). Derrida continues, "this relation is to an irreducible Other who summons me without possibility of return from without, for in this order is presented the infinity which no thought can enclose and which forbids all monologue" (Derrida 1978: 104). With the primordial event of signification being the face-to-face (TI 206) Levinas holds that it has the structure of *speech* and *language-as-discourse* (Peperzak 1983: 125). This argument moreover underscores the point that the ethical relation cannot but be before the ontological (TI 216).

Levinas is not denying that a great part of our speaking and thinking is systematic and bound by logic of some kind. What he is interested in showing is that prior to these systems, which are required to meet most needs, and presupposed by them, is the existing individual and his ethical choice to welcome the stranger and to share his world by speaking to him. In other words, we do not become social by first being systematic. We become systematic and orderly in our thinking by first making a choice for generosity and communication, i.e. for the social (TI 14).

4. Beyond intentionality
4. 1. Infinity

Levinas moves away from the teaching that intentionality of consciousness - as concrete grasp and perception (EN 139) - justifies the perpetuation by which totalizing thinking ontologically reduces the Other to the Same. Discussions on our relation with infinity, especially as revealed in death and insomnia, will follow to illustrate the point that we are in relationships beyond intentionality and consciousness. Based on Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Levinas unlocks the paradox of the first evidence, which he will use as a cornerstone in his argument for ethics as first philosophy.

Upon "discovering" the *cogito,* or consciousness, Descartes considered a vital notion – that of Infinity. Infinity affords for Levinas the break-up of totality. The Infinite has an objectivity which rests in itself; an objectivity "more objective than objectivity" (TO 26). Descartes' God, by his infinite incomprehensibility, becomes the Other in Levinas, by sharing a similar transcendence (TI 211). As God escapes the structure of the *cogito cogitatum* and signifies thereby what cannot be contained (GDT 216), so too the Other escapes objectification by the subject. Also, to think the infinite is not to think an object (TI 49). Levinas will hereby argue the point that there is something beyond and prior to (self-)consciousness, which causes a breakup of the self's enclosing return to presence (GM 63). This understanding is opposed to his reading of Husserl's closed and solipsistic self-consciousness that leaves no room for a relationship with the Other (LR 75). Thus, prior to the knowing subject, prior even to subjectivity, we find the Infinite which holds us hostage in an ethical relationship with our neighbour.

To backtrack: the discovery of the I and the Infinite reveals what can be termed a double origin (Keenan 1999: 7). This thesis, completed upon Descartes' Third Meditation in the recognition of the Infinite, is pivotal in the work of Levinas. Even so, Descartes' work shows that despite the revolutionary nature of this discovery, he (Descartes) did not realize its significance, nor did most philosophers after him - for they settled with the certitude of the *cogito,* forgetting about the irreducible nature of the Infinite. Whereas Descartes understood that the *cogito* cannot be its own source, he neglected to give this discovery in terms of the Infinite more consideration – something Levinas did not fail to do. To return

to the argument; the *Meditations* is characterized by "two times" (TI 58) or two "movements" (TI 210) - the chronological order (in which the *cogito* is the cause of the idea of the Infinite) and the "logical" order (in which the Infinite is the cause of the *cogito*) (TI 54). On the one hand it seems that my thinking "produces" or "discovers and thus brings to consciousness" the Infinite, but on the other hand, if we consent that the Infinite precedes the *cogito,* then it indeed gives rise to the *cogito.* In this way separation is produced by thought since the *"After* or the *Effect* conditions the *Before* or the *Cause"* (TI 54). I will briefly consider Levinas' distinction between knowledge and critique to begin my explanation of this argument on the double origin. Following this discussion I will consider Descartes' influence which lead to this thinking.

Knowing, Levinas argues, is not the grasping of an object, but the capacity to be called into question (TI 85). Since knowing can take charge of the very condition that supports it, namely the world, by making the world its object (TI 85), it seems therefore to be characterized by two distinct movements: comprehension and critique. The ambiguity of these movements lies in the fact that although opposed, they call for being thought at the same time (Keenan 1999: 7). In this unnatural movement of critique, knowledge goes back beyond its *own* origin, that is, back beyond an origin in which it is justified by itself (TI 82; Keenan 1999: 7). According to Levinas, "knowledge as a critique, as a tracking back to what precedes freedom, can arise only in a being that has an origin prior to its origin – that is created" (TI 85). The critical essence of knowing therefore leads beyond the knowledge of the *cogito* (TI 85). It penetrates beneath knowledge understood as comprehension, beneath knowledge which takes itself to be indubitable of itself by itself (Keenan 1999: 7). This moment when comprehension (the Same) is called into question by critique (the Other) is what Levinas calls "ethics" (TI 43).

In Descartes' *Meditations*, Levinas discovers hidden treasure, keys that will help unlock that which he wishes to bring to us from the beyond. In the first movement Descartes takes consciousness to be indubitable of itself by itself; here the subject fully conceives his doubt (TI 210). In a second movement – the reflection on reflection - he recognizes conditions for the certitude of the *cogito,* based on these doubts (TI 210). That is, he concludes that the certainty of his doubt leads to the certitude of the *cogito,* confirming its

own existence by the fact that it cannot doubt that it is doubting. Though he doubts the reliability of his senses, he has no doubt that he doubts. But this argument is not justified of itself since it can likewise be doubted (TI 92 – 3). This argument inevitably leads to an infinite negation which cannot alone affirm the *cogito* (TI 93). Descartes does however come upon affirmative proof for the *cogito:* in the *Third Meditation* he unveils a pre-originary origin – the Infinite, which is that of an idea already in him of a more perfect being than himself of absolute origin (TI 210; Keenan 1999: 7, 8). Here we see that the finite would be unable to be certain of its own doubt and its own finitude and imperfection without the infinite's presence/ interjection (TI 210). Thus it is the Infinite - though undefinable, that becomes the first affirmed certitude.

Due to the infinite negation of doubt it is as if every attempt to actualize the certitude of the *cogito* were interrupted in the very attempt, as if the *cogito* finds itself at a distance from itself (Keenan 1999: 22). At this moment, if only for a moment, what is doubted retains all of its value in this very negation, just as the paradox of death lies in the fact of death's impossibility. Yet we see that the clarity and distinction of the *cogito* is affirmed by the discovery of the Infinite. With this discovery of a condition of what was otherwise taken in a first movement as indubitable of itself by itself, there is an inversion of order – the constituted becomes the condition of the constituting – which produces an irreducibly enigmatic double origin (TI 48; Keenan 1999: 34).

Descartes writes, "... I should not have the idea of an infinite substance – since I am finite" (1993: 12). It is in the nature of the Infinite that it cannot be contained by the finite, because the Infinite has an "*ideatum* that supersedes the idea thereof" (TI 49, 25). And so, thought itself could not have produced *something* which exceeded it (Descartes 1993: 311). It is rather that this idea beyond knowledge has been planted in us (EI 91; Descartes 1993: 314). This confirms the Infinite's independence in terms of the subject. It is for this reason, that the ontological claim of consciousness to objectifying thought is frustrated. As Levinas argues, the first consciousness of my immorality is not my subordination to facts, but to the infinite, hence to ethics (TI 83). In addition, this passivity of the infinite having been *placed in me,* reveals an unassumable vulnerability or "being-seized," which reverses in me the presence to self that is consciousness (GDT 216-7). The significance of the ontological proof of God then, is that it points to the fact that the objectifying consciousness rests on

something which brings the movement thereof to disintegration (GM 62 – 63). As mentioned, Descartes argues that the *cogito* would be ignorant of its own finitude if not for the infinite in its finite thought (TI 210). Hence, my perception of the infinite is in some way prior to my perception of the finite that is myself (TI 211), which means that I somehow have in me an idea, before there is an I that is capable of receiving it (Keenan 1999: 13). This therefore shows that the subject ultimately depends on that which is exterior to it (TI 86, 210) and correspondingly a relation with this infinite exteriority precedes the subject's relation with facts, i.e. ontology.

The infinite, we find, is necessarily yet impossibly in the finite – as reflected in the prefix *in-* of the word *infinite.* The *in* of the infinite signifies both the *non* and the *within,* signifying both negation and inclusion (LR 166). Our incomplete understanding of the Infinite shows that objectification and thematization alone do not render things knowable and meaningful (Peperzak 1993: 66). In other words, the Infinite shows we can know that we cannot know it all. To illustrate further, "the not-able-to-comprehend-the-Infinite-by-thought" would signify the condition – or noncondition - of thought, as though to say the incomprehension of the Infinite by the finite did not amount merely to saying that the infinite is not finite" (GM 65). For Levinas our encounter with the Other reveals this infinity, an epiphany we are unable to grasp, unable to make the object of our intentionality – yet it is this which affirms our finity and individuality. We should begin to see where Levinas is going with this: consciousness and presence are not the foundational blocks of the first philosophy. Consciousness and presence are instead exceeded by that which is Other and beyond – as will be illustrated in brief discussions on death and insomnia.

4.2. Death

The philosophical and religious tradition interprets death either as the doorway to nothingness or a new way of being (TI 235). For Levinas though, it is "a relation with an instant whose exceptional character is due to the fact that it is the impossibility of every possibility" (TI 235), for death's very existence is made of alterity (TO 74). Death - as the unknown – Derida emphasizes, is not the negative limit of knowledge (1999: 8).

Levinas criticizes Heidegger's authentic existence in terms of being toward death, which he understands as "a supreme lucidity and hence a supreme virility" (TO 70). He disagrees

with "*Dasein's* assumption of the uttermost possibility of existence, which precisely makes possible all other possibilities, and consequently makes possible the very feat of grasping a possibility – that is, it makes possible the activity and freedom" (TO 70). Jean Wahl points to this vital distinction between Levinas and Heidegger: the former argues that death is the "impossibility of possibility", whilst the latter argues it to be the "possibility of impossibility" (TO 70, fn 43). The paradox of death is that it is never a present (TO 71; LR 41). Being an absolutely unknowable it renders every assumption of possibility impossible, despite the fact that we are seized by it (TO 71). As death is unknowable it is also ungraspable, marking the end of the subject's virility. Whereas the subject is master of the now and the possible it is stripped of its mastery when death arrives (TO 72; LR 43). In contrast to Heidegger, Levinas argues that at the moment of death we are no longer *able to be able* (Levinas' emphasis) (TO 74). More noteworthy, the power of death is only realized when we understand that it is impossible to die. It is what can be called the unworking of the work (Keenan 1999: 49). Hence, by life's most inevitable certainty I am in a sure relation with an impossibility.

Unlike Heidegger who argues that I can only die for myself and that my individuation is dependent on my immanent, undeniable death (LR 3, 37), Levinas argues it is my fear for the Other's death and this un-being-presentness-to and ungraspableness of death that individuates me (LR 5, 41).

4.3. Insomnia

Levinas writes, "insomnia is an obedience to wakefulness, it is the Other in the Same, that does not alienate the Same, but precisely wakes him" (GM 58-59). In insomnia, the *il y a* invades the self's ability to evade the *il y a* and posit itself. The *il y a,* as I explained in the footnote above, is the fact that there is – even if we think (of the possibility) that there is (can be or could be) nothing. It is the noise that exists after every negation thereof, a fullness compared to the emptiness we would think should characterize an absolute silence (EI 48). In insomnia this obtrusive *being* manifests itself, resulting, on the part of the subject, in a wakefulness without intentionality (GM 59); the condition of a subject without subjectivity since the self becomes depersonalized in this state (GM 190, 65; EE 66 - 67). As Levinas puts it, "the ego is swept away by the fatality of being," stripped of the capacity to direct its own consciousness, yet held to be (EE 65). The vigilance of insomnia is

suspended on nothing, devoid of objects, devoid of both inside and outside, just one meaningless monotony. The subject instead becomes the object of this anonymous presence (EE 65 – 66) and not the subject of this vigilance, but its object. The darkness of this endless night swallows the ego and keeps it pinned in vigilance, fastened to its absent presence. It is like the unwelcome visit of an uninvited non-stranger.

In *Existence and Existents* (*De l' existence à l' existant,* 1947) Levinas describes insomnia in distinction to consciousness as a moment of non-sense. Consciousness as a hypostasis, as a breaking loose from the *il y a,* is a refastening of being to the existent, where the self dominates existence – by taking refuge in its body (EE 67; Pepperzak 1993: 18, 19). By retreating into the body, the subject retreats into unconsciousness – as a conscious choice. It chooses and thereby exercises the ability to suspend wakefulness, by reclining into its body in sleep.

We thus see that the subject is in a very real relation beyond intentionality with irreducible Others. Let us furthermore, yet briefly, consider the relation of truth to consciousness as it will later in the paper shed light on our intentional and non-intentional relations. In his essay *Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,* Levinas answers the question of how one arrives at the truth, as the traditional philosophy understands it, with truth as the "self-manifestation of being to consciousness, a representational or gathering disclosure of being for which human subjectivity is only a means" (BPW 97). Upon this understanding we therefore find that meaning can be found only in the dis-covering or un-veiling of being in its synchronic presence to the mind – being, knocking on consciousness' door and given permission to enter in. In this way knowledge is considered to be a theoretical relation and thus the foundation as well as the perfection of all contact with beings. Levinas, as already indicated, differs from this understanding, having discovered a relationship more fundamental than knowledge. This more fundamental structure that shows itself in the encounter with the Other revealed this relation to be with something/ an Other, which is beyond the subject's intentionality as insomnia is, holding one against being, against one's choice. This argument finds further clarification in the discussion on time.

5. Pre-Originary Time

As has become clear with the discussion on death, Levinas has a unique understanding of time. The significance of this understanding of time is that it shows time as the possibility for a relationship with that which lies outside Being (LR 45), with that which is impossible to be grasped. In fact, proximity "does not enter into the common time of clocks" (OB 89). It also defies the sovereignty of the transcendental Ego, which attempts to derive understanding of the world only from its knowledge of itself (Davis 1996: 24). With *Time and the Other* (*Le temps et l'autre* 1947), Levinas argues that time as a relationship to *that which* is – of itself unassimilable by experience and incomprehensible in its infinity (TO 32). Levinas moreover introduces the notion of the pre-original.

Levinas regards ontology as originary and primordial, even if not fundamental (EN 13 – 24); indeed the manifestation of Being, the appearing, is "the primary event" (OB 24). Consequently, the ontological Said (philosophy as knowledge) in which everything shows itself, is regarded as the origin of philosophy (OB 192). We however find in Levinas' work that ontological notions such as origin, Being and phenomenon are always followed by notions such as pre-original, meaning or signification and enigma (Peperzak 1995: 87). This means, if the Said is the place of manifestation and therefore the origin of philosophy, signification is nevertheless articulated in the "pre-originary" (OB 192). Thus, "the very primacy of the primary" is only "in the presence of the present" (OB 24). Yet the pre-originary is not a present, it "occurs as a divergency and a past," a radical past, the past of the Other that was never present (OB 24; Peperzak 1995: 87).

Ciaramelli highlights Levinas's claim that the ethical is before ontology (Peperzak 1995: 87). According to this argument, the pre-originary is in no way a beginning, an *arche* (a foundation); it does not have the status of a principle, but comes from the dimension of the "an-archic", which must be distinguished from that of the "eternal" (OB 187-188; Peperzak 1995: 88). In *Totality and Infinity An Essay in Exteriority* (*Totalité et Infini. Essai sur L'Exteriorité* 1961) Levinas had already said that Infinity "does not first exist and *then* reveal itself" (TI 26); we should similarly not understand the pre-originary in *Otherwise than Being* as something which "is" before origin, which is more originary than origin, for instance, a more ancient origin (Peperzak 1995: 88). On the contrary, the pre-originary produces itself as the deconstruction and interruption of origin (Peperzak 1995: 88).

Therefore it *precedes* the origin only *after* the event, according to the scheme of what *Totality and Infinity* calls the "posteriority of the anterior" (TI 54), once again the idea of a kind of double origin – which somehow isn't quite an origin as traditionally understood. If the anterior only occurs *a posteriori*, it presupposes – and at the same time escapes or gets out of – origin (Peperzak 1995: 88; cf EN 170). The very enigma of the "pre-originary is the dimension of meaning that is irreducible to the dimension of manifestation and in this sense, to the order of ontology" (Peperzak 1995: 88; cf EN 171). Hence, the pre-origin's enigma is its nonphenomenality interrupting the phenomenal order of appearing, which is in its turn originary (Peperzak 1995: 88).

Correctly understood, the enigma of the pre-original is not a phenonomenon, neither does it occur in a present, nor is it the activity of a consciousness, but it insinuates itself within phenomena, as both their condition and their limit (Peperzak 1995: 89). The pre-original ethics is revealed in the face-to-face encounter, and at this point egoistic enjoyment of the world is called into question. And revealed here we discover a pre-original commitment and relationship with the infinite in which solipsism had been shed and individuation afforded (TI 80). The enigma of the pre-originary serves as the deconstruction of the ontological identity of origin (Peperzak 1995: 89). This is highlighted in the ambiguity of Descartes' first evidence, which reveals that the I and God, which are two distinct moments of evidence, mutually founds each other - despite never merging (TI 48). This ambiguous duality for Levinas characterizes the very meaning of separation as the knowing being remains separated from the known being (TI 48).

Levinas, we see, points to the existence of an inner duality (a duality within the immanence of origin) that can however not be expressed other than in ontological terms (Peperzak 1995: 89). Though the pre-originary refers to origin's opening to a radical alterity, it is irreducible to the circle of origin. Instead, it is its deconstruction. As such, this radical alterity disturbing the immanence of origin is the very complication of human plurality. Perhaps paradoxical, but the value of this plurality lies in this that it breaks the originary identity of ontological totality (Peperzak 1995: 89). Breaking with ontology is however by means of ontological tools, yet by using them in a deconstructive way. The title *Totality and Infinity* is an illustration of this paradoxical situation Levinas finds himself caught in.

Descartes, as appropriated by Levinas, points out that there is not a simple step beyond totality, not thereby saying there is *not* a step beyond - simple being the operative word. For we are somehow always already caught in the graspable, the re-present-able to consciousness. In other words, "beyond" the totality and objective experiences is still "reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience" (TI 23, Keenan 1999: 12). We therefore find that alterity is possible only starting from *me,* as is separation, which is *produced* in me (TI 40) (See the discussion on the double origin as considered above). Thus, the key word in the title *Totality and Infinity*, is not *infinity*, but *and*. This shows that the production of separation is not beyond the totality, but produced in the interplay between the two. As we have seen: it is a duality in which the posteriority of the anteriority is the origin of the before-gone. It can be likened to a kind of inversion that affords the exit. Similarly, the relation between the *cogito* and the Infinite has a double origin. We have learned that it is the second movement of consciousness that bears what the first movement claimed to bear (Keenan 1999: 12 – 13), the *I think* which reveals itself first, becomes confirmed in the second movement in the discovery of the Infinite, the unthinkable.

As has been discussed: origin implies a sort of paradoxical duality, an inner articulation. Levinas evokes this in *Existence and Existents,* in his analysis of the instant that, in its ontological sense, is not instantaneous (EE 75-77). As has also been illustrated, death is possible only by its impossibility – or at the very moment of its impossibility. Origin can arise from itself only if it originarily implies a reference to itself as to its own alterity, from which it emerges (Peperzak 1995: 89). The self-originating origin thus implies the alterity of itself with regard to itself, an immanent alterity coming to Being in the same movement of the primordial leap (Peperzak 1995: 89). This point is taken further in our discussion on identity.

6. The Subject's Identity

6.1 The Ego and the Self

Before I expound on the subject's identity under the heading "Freedom", I want to clear up a possible point of contradiction. *Levinas may at one stage be read to* present us with two different accounts on when and how the subject becomes a subject. The point of contradiction is suggested in his dealing with subjectivity and enjoyment in *Totality and Infinity.* On the one hand he says, "subjectivity originates in the independence and sovereignty of enjoyment" (TI 114). Yet in the rest of *Totality and Infinity* and throughout his oevre we learn that it is to give to the Other, to be for the Other that essentially constitutes subjectivity for Levinas (EI 96-7; OB 78-9). Resolving this seeming inconsistency hinges on understanding Levinas' distinction between the self and the ego.

The meeting between the self and the Other is an event, which transcending the ego, calls forth from the self a response that dethrones the ego (Peperzak 1995: 113; Critchley & Bernasconi 2002: 251). In this response is unveiled a responsibility for the Other that pre-exists any self-consciousness (LR 75). This responsibility effected by what Levinas calls a "metaphysical desire", brings an end to the self's egoistical modalities by awakening apology and goodness within the self (TI 40). At this point the ego discovers a "prehistory" where "the self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles" (OB 117). The subject's freedom and egoistic enjoyment of the world is called into question at this point which is the very origin of moral consciousness (TI 84; OB 55). Here the subject's assumed right to be is challenged (LR 75) pre-destining him to question his own existence as an autonomous ego in favour of the existence of the Other (Peperzak 1995: 113).

Furthermore, already in the beginning of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas writes that "this book does present itself as a defense of subjectivity, but it will apprehend the subjectivity not at the level of its purely egoist protestation against totality, nor in its anguish before death, but as founded in the idea of infinity" (TI 26). Where the egoist I considers the world as exclusively its possession, the encounter with the Other, puts this in question (TI 173). The reason for this enjoyment is closely linked to the fundamental role the body plays in the subject's capacity to be constituted ethically.

Levinas not only shares Descartes' concern with exteriority, but also with sensibility as an undeniable component of the human experience. He characterizes sensual life as enjoyment and possession. Brief references will be made to key notions from before and after *Totality and Infinity* that illustrate the ethical dimension of the body. In *Existence and Existents* he speaks of sleep – of a taking refuge – in the body as a means of escape from the *il y a* (EE 65). Hence, the body is the subject's base or point of position, for the *cogito* is a some*thing* that thinks (EE 68, my emphasis). The pivotal point in *Otherwise than Being* is chapter four, dealing with substitution. Levinas argues that a necessary condition for ethical subjectivity is its corporeality. It is by our capacity for enjoying our good soup and bread, and consequently for hunger that the subject is able to know what it means to give his nourishment up for another (OB 56). The self's capacity to give up his body as bearer of pain for the Other (OB 51) further exemplifies substitution. My point? The body constitutes a vital part in the subject's identity as an ethical being. It affords ethical *saying* to be expressed in the corporeal *said.* The body announces the "here I am" of the one the self faces. Yet what is hereby most distinctly recognized is not necessarily the first reality. Let us therefore momentarily consider the issue of enjoyment, which seems to confirm the identity and independence of the ego (TI 112), keeping in mind the more originary self.

We have noted the significance of the body and we shall see, as it is closely linked to enjoyment, how misunderstanding can easily slip in if one is not sensitive to the distinction between the self and the ego. Levinas speaks of us living from: "good soup, air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep" etc... (TI 110). He calls this living from..., enjoyment, "the egoism of life", an entering into relation with something other, which makes the world fully available to the self, ready to meet his needs and to fulfill his desires (TI 112; Davis 1996: 43). To illustrate, in food energy to be found in something outside the self is transformed into the self's own energy, reducing/ converting the other to the same, which is what Levinas calls "the essence of enjoyment" (TI 111). We should understand though, only the other, not the Other, can be taken into the Same as a source of enjoyment (Davis 1996: 43). The other may initially appear alien to the empirical self, but it does not fundamentally challenge its supremacy; the Other though is utterly resistant to the transcendental Ego and cannot be assimilated to the world the Ego creates for itself (Davis 1996: 43). Whereas the subject finds itself in an alien environment, surrounded by objects which comply with or oppose its needs, it does not feel itself to be in exile, but instead it

feels entirely at home (Davis 1996: 43). It is in fact the world's strangeness that is its charm. Enjoyment names the process by which the ego makes itself at home in an environment where otherness is not a threat to be overcome, but a pleasure to be experienced (Davis 1996: 43). Need should therefore not be defined negatively; it reveals the dependence of the self on the non-self, but also the ability of the self to find satisfaction and happiness in the encounter with that which is other (TI 115). Need and *living from...* are a dependence which the subject can master; they affirm its sovereignty and confirm its essentially egotistical happiness (TI 114). This enjoying life is however limited to a life of the same, locked in solipsism (TI 117). Need is material and capable of satisfaction (TI 116, TI 117). Desire however, promises an unchartered future of no satiety, since it is for the Other, the spiritual (TI 117), the infinite. It is also this relation of desire that is more primordial in the subject's constitution.

Although the ego may feel that its separation ensures mastery and freedom in the world, that mastery and freedom, that naieve *right to be,* is questioned in the face of the Other. In fact, the self is not yet separated while it operates in this mode of self-sameness, for it still reduces the Other to the Same – by which everything is therefore an undifferentiated totality. Though it may have seemed that the identity of the I comes to it from its egoism whose isolated sufficiency is accomplished in enjoyment, we have already discovered a different explanation. In the face to face, the epiphany of the Other's face teaches that it is infinity that affords separation and individuation (TI 216). Thus, we find that separateness depends upon the possibility of alterity; a self/ identity exists because the Other is irreconcilable with it. The text furthermore implies that the subject only exists as a separate subject, because of the presence of the Other as "there would be no separated being if the time of the One could fall into the time of the other" (TI 57). Having addressed this matter, which seemed on the face of it as an inconsistency in Levinas, let us return to the issue of the subject's identity constituted in partnership with Infinity.

When considering, from the perspective of the chronological order, the interval between the self and the ego when the actualization of the *cogito* is yet to come, we have found that the cogito is already assumed to be an actual entity (Keenan 1999: 8). Let us therefore turn to the notion of God. Even God is not yet, but still to come. Levinas writes that even the *cogito's* cause, older than itself, is still to come. God, the cause of being, is thought or

known by its effect *as though* it were posterior to its effect – the *cogito* (TI 54). Levinas describes that moment in comprehension when comprehension finds itself at a distance from itself as "dead time". It is the point at which the 'not yet' collides with the 'yet now', it is the point where a relation without relation by an impossibility and a possibility is somehow one in this that they determine each other, for it is at this interval where the *cogito* and the infinite meet (Keenan 1999: 12). Similarly the ego and the self's tango may have caused the reader to mistakenly conclude that Levinas is either confused or contradicting himself. Instead, as has become clear, he is referring to two distinct elements that constitute the subject.

Levinas coins the term "ipseity", which refers to the precognitive, preconative self that is not taken up in the force of persevering in being, which characterizes "essence" (GDT 249). It is instead the dynamic of "the Other in the Same" or the "oneself that does not bear its identity as entitites...thematized and appear[ing] to consciousness" (OB 111; Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: 87). I will take the theme of the constitution of the subject's identity further under the heading of "freedom". Here I look at Levinas' description of subjectivity as a radical passivity, that is, as being "subject to" the Other in an ethical relation that precedes the ontological constitution of subjectivity in any familiar sense (Cf. OB 145; Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: 87).
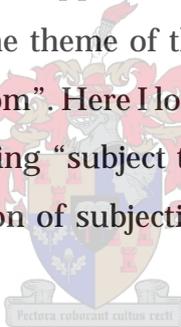
6.2. Freedom

The relations of the self with the Other and with time affect its freedom. This freedom is intrinsically connected to the subject's identity and in turn give rise to ethics. It goes without saying that Levinas and traditional ontology will understand freedom differently. The latter considers freedom of will as a necessary component (Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: 87) and that morally correct answers can be determined (EN 3). This consequently means that I am only responsible for that which I have chosen – i.e. that which I am directly responsible for. 'Correct' decisions can therefore leave the subject both guiltless and with a clear conscience (EN 3). This clear or good conscience is furthermore afforded, because I can correct my wrongs and thus undo my guilt. In contrast to the self who takes "up a position with regard to its goodness, know[s] itself to be good, and thus lose[s] its goodness" (OB 57), in facing the Other it is rather a case of "the more I am just, the more

I am guilty" – an inability to rest in good conscience (BPW 21).

The difference between bad and good conscience, is although the former is guiltless, it is accused (EN 143) and the subject is therefore always already responsible beyond what he has done or intended. I am similarly in relation with my own death. Despite my intentions it is always going to be premature, out of reach for me to control it. Our relation with death – both our own and that of the Other, puts a check on being and the morality of the *bonne conscience* and the *conatus essendi* (LR 82). It is moreover in the passivity of the non-intentional, that one's *right to be,* right to take in a position, is called into question. It is this *mauvaise conscience* that renders an openness to be called into question, but more so – to respond to that challenge (LR 82). Whereas the *bonne conscience* of ontology implies a presence to choice, ethical freedom bespeaks a prior time in which our guilt is contracted before choice, in our *usurpation of the world and consequent displacement of the Other.*

Levinasian ethics speaks of a radical asymmetry, a responsibility before freedom, a past before origin - not in a present. This proximity of our relation with the Other is a resistance to time – a disturbance of memorable time for it opens up a diachrony without a common present (OB 89). Whereas the presence is the site of initiative and choice (GDT 177), it becomes clear that the Good selects us before choice (OB 57). Plato argues that the Good is on the other side of being (*Republic* 508-9). The title and discussed content of *Otherwise than Being* refers to "essence" as both Plato's *ousia* (being) and Heidegger's being (Sein). The expressions "otherwise than being," " beyond being" and "beyond essence" are all translations of Plato's *epekeina tes ousias,* by which he argues that the Good is beyond being (BPW 109; Cf. Plato 509 b9). The Good thus enjoys superiority not only above knowledge and truth but also above being and essence (*Republic* 508-9). Levinas understands this to mean that ethical questions are separate from ontological concerns; since the Good transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power, not belonging to Being or totality (Davis 1996: 35; *Republic* 509). According to Plato then, knowledge and being pull on the Good as the ultimate goal of being strives toward the Good (Peperzak 1995: 52) - for the reason that it is made possible by the Good. Yet it is itself not the Good since the Good rises above it, remaining transcendent to it. The Good is therefore also not its foundation, despite making it possible. Similarly Descartes' appropriated God – renamed as the Infinite and the Other, is not the foundation of the self.

As the Good is thus before being, it also chooses me in that time before time (GDT 177). As already explained, the subjectivity of the subject is subjected to the Other, because subjectivity is before freedom, consciousness and even identity. Levinas argues that the meaning and origin of ethics is tied to a subjectivity that is just beginning to exist, that is still before origin and *arche*. This means that one is responsible for the Other, even before the *I am (*Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: 88) and the *I think* (GM 71). For I am constituted in substitution as a hostage – what Levinas also calls "an election in persecution" (OB 56). According to Célan, "I am I when I am you "(Peperzak 1995: 71). Once again we see that this responsibility leaves me no time, no present for recollection or return into the self (GM 71). This diachronic time spoken of has variously been described as "irreversable" (EN 143); "immemorial and unrepresentable"(LR 84; OB 11); "the past that bypasses the present" (OB 11); "untraceable," "prior," "not even in time preceding the present," (LR 84); "before the event," "more ancient than consciousness and every origin," (OB 9); and "more ancient than any present, a past which was never present" (OB 24). It is however not due to its remoteness that this pluperfect past can not be recuperated, but because of its *incommensurability* with the present (OB 11). Thus, this freedom is immemorial, even older than being, or decisions, or deeds (LR 84). For this reason freedom as Levinas understands it is a responsibility which only I can respond to, despite not having agreed to it (EN 170). To be free is to do what no one else can do in my place, for I am the unique and chosen one (GDT 181). As Vasey puts it, "the sickness of identity is having to respond" (1981: 189).

7. Conclusion

To face the world, to respond, to speak, to know – these modes have one thing in common: the Other, our neighbour. We have understood the paradox that thought can think an exteriority that transcends it (TI 25, 49). This means that the Other's otherness can both be revealed in the ethical relation by betrayal and be described within the rules of philosophical discourse. To quote Mosés (1998: 3*): "Ethics then does not constitute for Levinas a separate domain for theoretical reflection; on the contary, the relation to another forms the primary horizon of any speculative philosophy, since any philosophy is a discourse, and there exists no discourse – even implicitly - which does not address itself

to another person. From this point of view, all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, derives its possibility of being from a prior ethical attitude."

There is a kind of checkmate to this argument that our neighbour renders meaningful, not only the knowledge we have of the world, but also the very possibility of our ascribing intelligibility to existence. It is however in the contraction of this relationship – beyond totality and in an unrecollectable time – that criticism mounts.

Derrida has pointed out in *Violence and Metahpysics* that when the idea of absolute exteriority becomes the theme of philosophical discourse, it is *ipso facto* absorbed by the logic of identity which governs this discourse. The question is, is it possible to speak of transcendence without reducing it to immanence? Should an immemoriable time precisely not be that – irreducible to presence? Moreover, should and do these arguments of pre-originality - of a time ever non-present refute the logic of a foundation - despite the obscurity thereof suffice to confirm Levinas' break with ontology? In other words, isn't a pre-originality *still* an originality, a foundation, an ontological assertion? Should Levinas not rather have followed the advice of Wittgenstein and remained silent about that which cannot be spoken of?

Indeed, Levinas' intention is not to deliver a water-tight theory. To imply foundations in the venture to discredit the priority of presence and the knowing subject is not to say that Levinas denies the validity of ontology, rationality or intelligibility. He is compelled to use the resources of reason and the language of ontology not to invent another rationality or to eradicate a new ontology, but to indicate the "hither side of the said," from which the order of reason arises (Chanter 1998: 506). Levinas instead aimed to show the derivative status of ontology.

We have learned from Levinas that language is more than the communication of information; it is impossible to even limit it to the said only, for language is a constant interplay between what can be articulated and what cannot. Hence, there is "fundamentally" a surplus to language. Even so, Levinas himself pointed out that the "beyond" of totality and objective experiences is still "reflected *within* the totality and

history, *within* experience" (TI 23; Keenan 1999: 12); the surplus of language is still reflected on by means of limiting totalized words. Instead of offering another look at Levinas' understanding of (double) time and his analyses of presence-defying experiences, I want to offer Derridean arguments to address this aporetic problem of Levinas.

Derrida himself is confined to express: "There is nothing outside the text". By this he however means, "there is nothing outside context" or alternatively, "there is nothing but context" (Royle 2003: 65). Looking at these expressions one can also conclude that Derrida cannot escape the totality of context. Whereas Derrida transforms totalizing context to become flowing context that uses the key of time to open up presence to include diachronic time, so too Levinas opened up the dimension of time that used to be confining to either-or situations of absolute presence. In criticising Levinas for making absolute exteriority the theme of his philosophy, critici have lost out of mind the deliberate use and meaningfulness of the interplay between *and* in *Totality* and *Infinity,* as well as between the *saying* and the *said* - as to both avoid the "metaphysics of presence" and generate the alterior beyond which cannot but become part of the totality when absolutized.

When critics focus on either one aspect of Levinas' work or overlook the interplay and generating power of the various components it is possible to excuse oneself from the ethical call, due to the fallacious arguments. Considering his personal experience, in addition to these impeccable arguments the question is: can we deny that our neighbour is the first intelligibility?

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[6]I have used the following abbreviations for these texts: *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority,* 1969: **TI**; *Existence and Existents,* 1978: **EE**; *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence,* 1981: **OB**; *Ethics and Infinity,* 1985: **EI**; *The Levinas Reader,* 1989: **LR**; *Basic Philosophical Writings.*1996: **BPW**; *Entre Nous. On Thinking of the Other,* 1996: **EN**; *Of God who Comes to Mind,* 1998: GM; *God, Death, and Time,* 2000: **GDT**; *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas,* 2001: **RB**.

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