

by turning it to such issues. Dr. Thomas' expertise in public policy, especially the area of child welfare, and mine in political philosophy, allow this joint focus that makes our program unique. By bringing together the study of traditional texts with a concern for gender issues we will demonstrate the relevance of traditional political theory for contemporary politics. We also hope to clarify the theoretical foundations of contemporary feminist theory.

Specifically, we are developing courses at the undergraduate level and training graduate students to teach them by serving as teaching assistants for them. The program was inaugurated in the Fall, with Dr. Baumgarth's "Gender, Religion, and Politics." This semester, Dr. Thomas is teaching "Liberalism and its Critics." The grant also affords us the opportunity to bring distinguished professors to Fordham from other institutions to teach graduate courses in their areas of expertise.

Unlike many women's studies programs that reject the Western tradition on the ground that it was created by and for males, our program will show that a traditional liberal arts curriculum makes a positive contribution to women's studies. Instead of rejecting the Western tradition, we shall explore the ways in which that tradition can shed light on current philosophical and policy questions. Instead of viewing women as merely oppressed by the past and as victims of men, we shall ask what positive contributions women can make to a liberal, democratic society.

CP: We should probably close with this and let you get back to your work. Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with us. ♣

Reluctant Transcendence: The Face to Face in Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*

Christopher Philip Long



Peace, like silence, is the strange vocation of a language called outside itself by itself. But since finite silence is also the medium of violence, language can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it. Violence against violence. Economy of violence. An economy irreducible to what Levinas envisions in the word. If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse.

—Jacques Derrida¹

If it is true, as Levinas asserts, that western philosophy has "no option but to employ the language and concepts of Greek philosophy, even in [its] attempts to go beyond them,"² then it would seem appropriate to inquire into the particular way in which Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*,³ both goes beyond and remains within the framework of Greek, that is, traditional western philosophy. Throughout *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas sets the primacy of the transcendental relation with the absolute Other against what he understands to be the totalizing tendency of traditional philosophy. By means of a notion of transcendence in which the "face to face" emerges as the primary category of my relation with the Other, Levinas both challenges the categories of traditional philosophy and attempts to point to a more original expression of philosophy as ethics. For Levinas, philosophy, as ethics, may finally abandon its violent attempts to absorb all otherness into some identity; by basing the possibility of philosophy upon the face to face encounter with the Other, Levinas posits difference itself as the very condition for philosophy. Ironically, this positing is itself a sort of violence. Its violence is, in fact, twofold. First, the very method employed by Levinas to establish the primacy of the face to face relation involves the *appropriation* of traditional philosophical language. It is by speaking Greek, that is, by employing the language of traditional philosophy *against* itself, that Levinas attempts to wrest the Other from the grips of that totalizing tradition. Second, the gesture towards grounding philosophy more originally in the face to face encounter with the Other itself amounts to the establishment of another principle of hegemony. Thus, although Levinas attempts to transcend the structure of traditional philosophy by affirming the radical otherness of the Other, the gesture towards grounding marks a reluctance to break decisively with this tradition and undermines the strength of his entire critique. This will become evident in the discussion which follows. By investigating Levinas' notion of the transcendence of the face to face against the backdrop of his own conception of traditional western philosophy the extent to which Levinas himself fails to transcend the very structure of western philosophy will be elucidated.

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The Logic of Things: Objective vs. Transcendental Intentionality

In *Totality and Infinity*, the vocabulary of the "face to face" is employed in opposition to the categories of traditional philosophy which may be understood in terms of a "logic of things," that is, in terms of a cognition and thematization of entities objectively present. The general model for this sort of critique may be found in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, a book which Levinas himself read with enthusiasm during the period in which he studied with both Husserl and Heidegger in Freiburg.⁴ Indeed, the impact of *Being and Time* is palpable throughout *Totality and Infinity*; for although Levinas takes issue with much of Heidegger's fundamental ontology, he remains profoundly influenced by it, often developing his arguments against the backdrop of the Heideggerian project.⁵ Indeed, the Heideggerian conception that Being has traditionally been thematized in terms of beings and has thus come to be reified into something objectively present (*vorhanden*)⁶ seems to underlie Levinas' critique of the traditional understanding of "objectivity." However, for Levinas, Heideggerian ontology itself fails to escape the totalizing tradition of western philosophy insofar as it attempts to subordinate the existent to Being.⁷ Therefore, the vocabulary of the face to face must be understood as an attempt to move beyond the "logic of things" without subordinating the individual "someone" who is an "existent" to the amorphous, impersonal understanding of the Being of existents. Levinas himself refers to this project as a "reversal"⁸ of terms where priority is given to "the idea of infinity" as encountered in the face to face relation rather than to any notion of totality under which everything may be subordinated. However, the idea of infinity manifests itself in a peculiar way; it requires transcendence. Here, Levinas establishes the essential distinction between the idea of infinity and the idea of things, objects:

...the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea, whereas for the things the total coincidence of their "objective" and "formal" realities is not precluded; we could conceivably have accounted for all the ideas, other than that of Infinity, by ourselves.⁹

The idea of infinity requires the absolute Other; for its very presence as an idea cannot be accounted for within the same. Infinity, therefore, does not present itself to us in the way objects do. It is significant that Levinas himself addresses this distinction in terms of the traditional notion of *intentionality*. Indeed, the underlying direction of *Totality and Infinity* may be apprehended in this distinction:

The distance of transcendence is not equivalent to that which separates the mental act from its object in all our representations, since the distance at which the object stands does not exclude, and in reality implies, the possession of the

object, that is, the suspension of its being. The 'intentionality' of transcendence is unique in its kind; the difference between objectivity and transcendence will serve as a general guideline for all the analyses of this work.¹⁰

Here, Levinas' method is particularly evident—by placing the traditional notion of intentionality within quotation marks, he simultaneously calls traditional intentionality into question while employing it in an attempt to establish a distinction between objectivity and transcendence. He thus exploits the traditional connotations of intentionality in the very attempt to move beyond such a conception. How much of the traditional connotation of intentionality is to be retained in the notion of transcendental "intentionality?" Indeed, how much of the violent tradition of western philosophy is, in fact, smuggled in by way of this notion? These questions will gain focus through an investigation into the nature of the distinction between objective and transcendental "intentionality."

In *Totality and Infinity*, the term "objectifying intentionality" points to the way in which traditional philosophy has approached the notion of cognition; that is, cognition has been primarily the cognition of entities, things, the givenness of which may be grasped conceptually. Here the Cartesian notion of "clear and distinct ideas" is invoked as exemplary of traditional objectivity. Levinas writes:

In clarity the exterior being is *given* that is, is delivered over to him who encounters it as though it had been entirely determined by him. In clarity the exterior being presents itself as the work of the thought that receives it.¹¹

Objective thought appropriates the thing thought to the thinker; the object is determined by thought entirely. This determination allows for thematization as entities may be categorized in terms of genus and species, that is, placed within a hierarchy. For Levinas, this form of thinking results from the affirmation of the primacy of subjective freedom and is manifest in terms of representation. Objectifying intentionality assigns a position of privilege to representation precisely because representation allows for the determination of objects without impinging on the freedom of the subject:

The intentional relation of representation is to be distinguished from every other relation...in that in it the same is in relation with the other but in such a way that the other does not determine the same: it is always the same that determines the other.¹²

It is both within and against this understanding of intentionality that Levinas wants to suggest the peculiar "intentionality" of transcendence.

The "intentionality" of transcendence marks the movement to another thinking, a thinking of the infinite: "To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is...not to think an object. But to think what does not have the lineaments of an object is in reality to do more or better than think."¹³ A hint

of this other thinking may be discerned throughout the history of philosophy. Levinas is fond of pointing to the idea of infinity in Descartes and to the notion of the "Good beyond Being" in Plato as traces of this more-than-thought.¹⁴ However, on Levinas' view, these glimpses of infinity already present throughout the history of western philosophy have been overshadowed by objective, conceptual thinking which has reduced all authentic otherness to the same. Thus, to break this hegemony of the same, Levinas attempts to rigorously think the infinite. Traditional intentionality must be transcended, and the vocabulary of the face to face is the vehicle for this transcendence. The face to face points to a peculiar sort of "intentionality," one which is determined not by the conceptions of subjectivity and objectivity, but by the personal relationship with the face of the Other. This is not "an object-cognition."¹⁵ The Other is not the species of a genus; the Other may not be thematized.

The Other's designs do not present themselves to me as do the laws of things... Whatever be the extension of my thoughts, limited by nothing, the Other cannot be contained by me: he is unthinkable—he is infinite and recognized as such.¹⁶

The face to face relation affirms this irreducibility of the Other to the same; it overflows any idea the same may employ in an attempt to comprehend it. Formally, that Levinas speaks of the "idea" of infinity suggests the applicability of the notion a sort of "intentionality." However, because the idea of infinity is an idea in a very peculiar sense, that is, it is an idea that infinitely overflows its own *ideatum*,¹⁷ it is an "intentionality" of transcendence. Yet, the formal distinction between the intentionality of objectivity and that of transcendence is insufficient. Levinas writes, "...the infinite distance of the Stranger despite the proximity achieved by the idea of infinity, the complex structure of the unparalleled relation designated by this idea, has to be described; it is not enough to distinguish it formally from objectification."¹⁸ With this turn towards description, Levinas attempts to distance himself from the traditional connotations of the notion of intentionality; for the mere formal distinction between objectifying and transcendental intentionality fails to affirm the radical heteronomy Levinas wants to establish between these two notions. However, by developing a conception of intentionality against the traditional notion, Levinas has already determined transcendental "intentionality" (even if in a strictly negative sense) in terms of the very tradition he is attempting to surmount. Indeed, transcendental "intentionality" plays the same *structural* role in Levinas' ethics as objectifying intentionality plays in traditional totalizing philosophy; for whereas objectifying intentionality determines the specific comportment appropriate to the idea of entities objectively present, transcendental "intentionality" determines the comportment appropriate to the idea of infinity. Therefore, the turn towards description is vital to the

attempt to eschew this formal affinity. The idea of infinity must not be formalized; it must in fact be deformed by description in order that its irreducibility be maintained. This must be held in mind; for, in what follows, Levinas' description of the face to face will be thematized in order that its structure may be apprehended. However, such a thematization already embraces Levinas' own underlying methodology; for the attempt will be to *elucidate* that which is strictly speaking beyond the horizon of light. Indeed, the paradoxical nature of this methodology is already manifest in the expression "idea of infinity," which itself simultaneously carries all the traditional connotations of the term "idea" along with the distinctive gesture towards the transcendence of this tradition in the term "infinity." Levinas indeed makes no attempt to avoid such phraseology, thus suggesting that the specific connotations endemic to the traditional understanding of "idea" lends something vital to the apprehension of what he means by "infinity."

The Visual Model: Sight vs. Language

Levinas begins the third section of *Totality and Infinity*, "Exteriority and the Face," by juxtaposing the Greek affirmation of the primacy of vision in understanding with the primacy of language endemic to what may be named "facial logic."¹⁹ The attempt is not, however, to deny the validity of vision; for, indeed, the face to face itself establishes a visual relation as well. According to Levinas, vision occupied a privileged position among the senses for the Greeks. Indeed, in the *Timaeus* Plato writes:

The sight in my opinion is the source of the greatest benefit to us, for had we never seen the stars and the sun and the heaven, none of the words which we have spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered... God invented and gave us sight to the end that we might behold the courses of intelligence in the heaven, and apply them to the courses of our own intelligence which are akin to them...²⁰

Furthermore, following Plato, Aristotle writes in the first paragraph of the *Metaphysics*, "seeing makes us know in the highest degree and makes clear many differences in things."²¹ Of all the senses, it is sight which accomplishes knowledge most excellently. The primacy of sight throughout the history of western philosophy, as Levinas asserts, from "Aristotle to Heidegger,"²² may be understood in terms of two basic characteristics which seem to distinguish sight from the other senses: neutralization and simultaneity.²³ The term "neutralization" is meant to indicate the dynamic of vision which allows the subject to perceive the object without the relation between the two being determined in any significant manner. Indeed, Levinas writes:

The eye does not see the light, but the object in the light. Vision is therefore a

relation with a "something" established within a relation with what is not a "something."...Thus appears the structure of vision, where the relation of the subject with the object is subordinated to the relation of the object with the void of openness, which is not an object.²⁴

The structure of vision remains privileged over that of, say, touch; for touch establishes an actual, physical relationship between subject and object. Indeed, the touching of the object determines it, thus already altering the relation. Vision, on the other hand, allows the object to present itself in such a way as to be determined not by the subject, but "in itself." It is in this manner that the notion of objectivity, "of the thing as it is in itself as distinct from the thing as it affects me,"²⁵ emerges as preeminent. The second feature of the structure of vision which has traditionally accounted for its privileged position is that of simultaneity. Vision allows for the simultaneous presentation of a variety of data; it allows for the apprehension of a "co-presence of things in one being which embraces them all as their common present."²⁶ Vision's temporality is essentially static, it itself admits of no coming to presence and passing away, it rather, remains constantly open to the presenting and passing of objects within its purview. This allows, however, for the emergence of the distinction between being and becoming; for sight, itself unmoved, is able to perceive change and development in objects. Thus, sight "provides the sensual basis from which the mind may conceive of eternity, that which never changes and is always present."²⁷ This other senses cannot accomplish, for they rely always on the registration of change themselves. For example, hearing is completely governed by succession and is thus essentially temporal. Sound establishes a transient flow in which each "now" vanishes into the past as the sound continues. This flow of sound cannot be halted, or "viewed in snapshot," rather it must be synthesized by the mind into a coherent unity of perception.²⁸

For Levinas, the historical privilege of these two characteristics of vision, are precisely what have obscured the "idea of infinity," an idea which vision itself cannot comprehend. First, vision, as essentially static, remains oblivious to the inherent temporality of the independent being who enters into relation with the Other.

A being independent of and yet at the same time exposed to the other is a temporal being: to the inevitable violence of death it opposes its time, which is postponement itself...Time is precisely that fact that the whole existence of the mortal being—exposed to violence—is not being for death, but the "not yet" which is a way of being against death, a retreat before death in the very midst of its inexorable approach.²⁹

This temporality, though it escapes the vision of thought, is accessible in the face to face relation. Indeed, time as the postponement of death is the very "mode of existence" of an independent being who has entered into relation with the Other. This temporality is determined precisely by the opposition to

the indeterminate certainty of death which transcends the powers of vision. The unforeseeable character of death, established by the fact that it does not lie within a horizon, points to the very transcendental character of the absolutely Other. "The Other, inseparable from the very event of transcendence, is situated in the region from which death, possibly murder, comes."³⁰ Vision, which by nature establishes a horizon within which to see, is inherently incapable of conceptualizing the transcendence of the Other, for absolute alterity transcends all possible horizons. Levinas writes:

Vision opens upon a perspective, upon a horizon, and describes a traversable distance, invites the hand to movement and contact, and ensures them...Empty space is the condition of [the visual] relationship; it is not a breach of the horizon. Vision is not transcendence.³¹

Here Levinas calls into question the privilege of that character of vision which we have called "neutralization." For him, vision is determined by light which conditions the relations between data. Light opens a horizon in which objects are seen; this space already determines the relation.

Light...makes possible the signification of objects that border one another. It does not enable one to approach them face to face. Intuition, taken in this very general sense, is not opposed to the thought of relations. It is already relationship, since it is vision; it catches sight of the space across which things are transported toward one another.³²

Vision, far from being neutral, already moves into grasp; it conceptualizes things in a determinate manner. Indeed, in *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida suggests that for Levinas, "Violence...would be the solitude of a mute glance, of a face without speech, the abstraction of seeing. According to Levinas the glance by itself, contrary to what one might believe, does not respect the other."³³ Against the affirmation of the primacy of vision, Levinas presents the face to face relation which cuts across vision. The face is not first revealed in vision, but in speech. Language transcends vision.³⁴

With the shift to the vocabulary of "language" over that of "vision," Levinas attempts to break with the categories of traditional philosophy. In "facial logic" the traditional categories of "conceptualization," "reasoning," "vision," and "representation," are transcended by means of the vocabulary of "revelation," "epiphany," "language," "teaching," and "command." However, the "categories" of "facial logic" are strictly non-categories; for they elude all categorization. It would, in fact, be inappropriate to establish a simple dichotomy between, for example, "vision" on the one side, and "language" on the other; for the very notion of the "face to face" is meant to undermine such simple distinctions. However, even here, in the peculiar relation Levinas names the "face to face" is not the underlying methodology we have sought to indicate manifest? The very face of the Other expresses the twofold structure

of this methodology; for it is *not* that the face to face denies the validity of vision, but rather, more *primordially*, it speaks. The unity of glance and speech endemic to the face to face relation indicates the nature of Levinas' methodology throughout *Totality and Infinity*. For although this relation may be thematized on the basis of the traditional visual model of cognition, it attempts to move beyond such a conceptualization through the affirmation of speech as the primary mode by which the transcendence of the Other is expressed. However, the extent to which Levinas himself moves beyond the traditional *structure* of philosophy with this affirmation of the primacy of language over vision remains questionable; for by developing of the idea of infinity in terms of a type of "intentionality," Levinas actually affirms the traditional structure of cognition. This may be seen more concretely in his argument for the primacy of language; for the very notion of *primacy* seems to indicate a *principle* according to which something is subsumed. Thus, if Levinas is to successfully escape the hegemony of the principle, he must develop an understanding of language with moves beyond the very structure of traditional philosophy. A simple change in vocabulary will not suffice. Therefore, an investigation into the role of language in "facial logic" is imperative, for it is by affirming the primacy of language that Levinas attempts to move beyond traditional philosophy.

Language as original ground

For Levinas, language allows relation without assimilation. A relation with the Other, if it is to be truly a relation with that which strictly transcends the same, must be established outside the boundaries of formal logic, beyond the hierarchy determined by genus and species. Language accomplishes this:

Absolute difference, inconceivable in terms of formal logic, is established only by language. Language accomplishes a relation between terms that breaks up the unity of a genus. The terms, the interlocutors, absolve themselves from the relation, or remain absolute within relationship.³⁵

It is language which enables the face to face relation to remain an absolute relation in which the terms involved are not reduced to some thematizable unity. Language grounds speech through which absolute difference is established.³⁶ In speaking, the Other is solicited, called upon to respond. Here, again the influence of Heidegger is manifest, for Levinas distinguishes such solicitation from the Heideggerian conception of "letting be." The Other is not simply revealed, but sought. However, this solicitation, as speech, does not determine the Other by appropriating her to the same. Such an appropriation would be characteristic of knowledge based upon vision.

Speech cuts across vision. In knowledge or vision the object seen can indeed determine an act, but it is an act that in some way appropriates the "seen" to itself, integrates it into a world by endowing it with signification, and, in the last analysis, constitutes it.³⁷

In speech the I and the Other solicit each other without appropriation. Levinas elucidates the peculiar manner in which this is possible through the analysis of "expression." Expression is the way in which a being presents itself. However, this presentation is irreducible to the presentation of something simply given. The face of the Other expresses itself to me out of its irreducible alterity. In reality, I am not *given* anything. The Other retains her absolute independence. The expression of the Other, therefore, in no way limits my power, but rather, is itself incommensurate with the exercise of power. "The event proper to expression," Levinas tells us, "consists in bearing witness to oneself, and guaranteeing this witness."³⁸ Thus, expression accomplishes the epiphany of infinity. I only know the Other insofar as she expresses herself to me. Faced with this expression, however, I must respond.

The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity—its hunger—without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus, in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness.³⁹

Expression, therefore, is ineluctably bound up with responsibility. The expression of the Other calls for a response; it calls me to responsibility. It is this bond between expression and responsibility which accounts for the "ethical condition or essence of language."⁴⁰ Here the primacy of the ethical over even the ontological is manifest. For Levinas, the expression of the face is prior to the disclosure of being, for no third term reduces the urgency of the Other's expression:

The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation, which no "interiority" permits avoiding...Preexisting the disclosure of being in general taken as basis of knowledge and as meaning of being is the relation with the existent that expresses himself; preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane.⁴¹

Indeed, for Levinas, the priority of ethics is based upon the primordially of language. Before all thematization, there is expression; ethics is based upon expression and the responsibility it enjoins. However, expression seems to gain its ethical determination as "command," which at bottom is the ultimate respect for the Other. According to Levinas, the face of the Other expresses the "first word:" the command, "you shall not commit murder."⁴² It is the immediacy of this command which accounts for its specifically ethical character; for, as the command is expressed directly to *someone* rather than

through the mediation of any neutral element or law, it brings with it the ultimate respect for the Other in her naked alterity. Derrida puts it this way:

The ethical relation is a religious relation (*Difficile liberté*). Not a religion, but the religion, the religiosity of the religious. This transcendence beyond negativity is not accomplished by an intuition of a positive presence; it 'only institutes language at the point where neither no nor yes is the first word' (TI) but an interrogation. Not a theoretical interrogation, however, but a total question, a distress and denuding, a supplication, a demanding prayer addressed to a freedom, that is, to a commandment: *the only possible ethical imperative, the only incarnated nonviolence in that it is respect for the other. An immediate respect for the other himself...because it does not pass through the neutral element of the universal, and through respect—in the Kantian sense—for the law.*⁴³

This immediate respect for the Other as transcendent is accomplished verbally rather than visually. Vision, though it may seem respectful of the Other's strict alterity insofar as it is as neutral a third party as is possible, remains precisely a third party, and thus a mediation already forcing itself upon the relation.⁴⁴ Expressed immediately in the face of the Other, only the command can respect strict alterity. Indeed, it is the shift in emphasis from the visual to the verbal that allows Levinas to establish the primacy of the ethical over the ontological as he understands it. For, as we have seen, Levinas not only reads Heideggerian ontology within the scope of the schema of vision, but he also sees in ontology the totalizing function which has so dominated the history of western philosophy. It is this primary shift in emphasis which determines Levinas' essential re-working of another traditional notion, that of "truth." Once again, the methodology of the intentionally equivocal employment of traditional terms is manifest.

Strictly speaking, the face to face relation is beyond the distinction between truth and falsity. It is beyond all attempts at verification, for there is nothing to compare it with. Levinas writes:

...deceit and veracity already presuppose the absolute authenticity of the face—the privileged case of a presentation of being foreign to the alternative of truth and non-truth, circumventing the ambiguity of the true and the false which every truth risks...What we call the face is precisely this exceptional presentation of self by self, incommensurable with the presentation of realities simply given, always suspect of some swindle, always possibly dreamt up.⁴⁵

Therefore, the very possibility of truth or falsity as understood in their traditional sense is based already upon the face to face relation. However, this essentially negative definition of the "truth" inherent to the face to face obscures its primordial basis as found in expression: "Truth arises where a being separated from the other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him."⁴⁶ Language is here the basis for truth. The development of truth based upon language must be understood in opposition to the traditional, visual

conception of truth. Levinas opposes the understanding of truth which corresponds to the temporality of vision, that is, truth as co-presence. In his discussion with Richard Kearney he asserts,

According to the Greek model, intelligibility is what can be rendered present, what can be represented in some eternal here and now, exposed and disclosed in pure light. To equate truth thus with presence is to presume that however different the two terms of a relation might appear...they can ultimately be rendered commensurate and simultaneous, the same...⁴⁷

Levinas attempts to escape the totalizing function of the visual conception of truth by grounding truth in language. Truth, therefore, is to be found in the transcendence of the face to face in which the absolute exteriority of the Other is expressed. By affirming a notion of truth essentially bound up with the inviolable expression of the Other, Levinas is able to develop an understanding of justice which dovetails with truth. Justice, like truth, is grounded in expression, it is the face to face approach in conversation.⁴⁸ However, justice is not based upon the traditional notion of equality, but rather on the understanding of the Other as my master.

Society does not proceed from the contemplation of the true; truth is made possible by relation with the Other our master. Truth is thus bound up with the social relation, which is justice. Justice consists in recognizing in the Other my master. Equality among persons means nothing of itself; it has an economic meaning and presupposes money, and already rests upon justice.⁴⁹

Injustice is manifest when the Other is not recognized as my master, that is, when I deny her absolute transcendence. The affirmation of the Other as master is an affirmation of her radical alterity and a recognition that all "knowledge" of her must be learned through her *teaching*. Justice, then proves to be the condition for all knowing, and yet, "knowledge" strictly speaking is here meaningless. Levinas wants to affirm *not* the radical impossibility of knowing the Other, but rather, that the distinction between knowledge and ignorance is in no way applicable to justice interpreted transcendently, and furthermore, that the very distinction between knowledge and ignorance already presupposes justice, the verbal relation with the Other.⁵⁰ Here, the emphasis is on a shift of priority rather than a denial of the knowledge determined by vision. Thus, a double movement of transcendence and more original grounding can be apprehended in Levinas' discussion of truth and justice; for while it seems as if these conceptions transcend the traditional visual model of cognition, there is a sense in which Levinas points to the verbal as its more original ground.

This double movement may be apprehended more clearly in Levinas' discussion of teaching. The asymmetry of the face to face relation has already been pointed in the notion of the mastery of the Other. It is a relation precisely insofar as the terms involved absolve themselves from relation; this

is accomplished through speech. "To be in relationship while absolving oneself from this relation is to speak."⁵¹ In such a relation, the only way in which the interiority of the one may be in some sense "reconciled"⁵² with the absolute alterity of the Other is through an openness to teaching. Levinas puts it thus:

Teaching is a discourse in which the master can bring to the student what the student does not yet know. It does not operate as maieutics, infinity implies a soul capable of containing more than it can draw from itself.⁵³

For Levinas, the presentation of the Other's face and the recognition of her as my master does *not* imply violence, but, on the contrary, is the very source of non-violence, insofar as the integrity of the radical alterity of the Other is maintained. In Levinas' transcendental ethics, teaching is the original source of knowledge; for in teaching the Other gives what the same is incapable of giving itself—the idea of infinity. Thus, the pure autonomy of the same is called into question:

The relation with the Other as a relation with his transcendence—the relation with the Other who puts into question the *brutal* spontaneity of one's immanent destiny—introduces into me what was not in me. But this "action" upon my freedom precisely puts an end to violence and contingency, and, in this sense also, founds Reason.⁵⁴

Therefore, in teaching there is a double movement; on the one hand, the affirmation of absolute transcendence calls the pure autonomy of the same into question and rescues it from the violence endemic to its own contingency, and, on the other hand, this very relation with the Other grounds reason itself more originally. In teaching, the world becomes an object for language: "to thematize is to offer the world to the Other in speech."⁵⁵ Objectification is once again made possible, but only on the basis of teaching which has as its condition the revelation of the Other through speech. Thus, teaching, grounded in language, opens up the possibility for reasoning. Language grounds reason:

If...reason lives in language, if the first rationality gleams forth in the opposition of the face to face, if the first intelligible, the first signification, is the infinity of the intelligence that presents itself (that is, speaks to me) in the face...and if, finally, we recall that this look appeals to my responsibility and consecrates my freedom as responsibility and gift of self—then the pluralism of society could not disappear in the elevation to reason, but would be its *condition*.⁵⁶

The face to face, then, affirms the transcendence of the personal beyond the tyranny of rationality. This transcendence, therefore, is also a grounding and rationality, along with representation and objectivity—it does not lose all validity, rather, it finds a new source: the idea of infinity.

However, in the end, such a conception of the idea of infinity as original ground itself fails to escape the tyrannical structure of western philosophy. For, in Levinas' transcendental ethics, language replaces vision as the principle according to which all knowledge is determined. Thus, the idea of infinity as that which grounds all reason and objectivity itself may be understood as a more primordial source of oppression. Ironically, it is just such oppressive thinking which Levinas has attempted to transcend through the employment of what I have called the methodology of violence. Indeed, with this methodology in mind, Levinas' use of traditional terms like "ground," "condition," and "primacy" may be understood as ways in which a certain status may be ascribed to the anarchical. Traditional terms are thus turned against themselves. The command of the Other, as highest "principle" and as "primary," calls us to respond willy-nilly. The absolute Other, strictly speaking, is without principle. However, if this is Levinas' intention—to affirm the anarchical—it is strange and, in fact, inappropriate that he attempts to *ground* an ethics, and, indeed, traditional objectifying thinking itself, with this conception of the absolute transcendence of the Other. Derrida puts it this way:

The notion of *primacy*, employed so frequently by Levinas, well translates the gesture of his entire critique. According to the indication present in the notion of *archia*, the philosophical beginning is immediately transposed into an ethical or philosophical command. From the very first, *primacy* indicates principle and chief. All the classical concepts interrogated by Levinas are thus dragged towards the *agora*, summoned to justify themselves in an ethico-political language that they have not always sought—or believed that they sought—to speak, summoned to transpose themselves into this language by confessing their violent aims.⁵⁷

And yet this very dragging to the *agora* is itself an act of violence. Levinas coerces these classical concepts by speaking to them in a language which they thought they understood, all the while transforming the very meaning of these once familiar terms. This, it seems, Levinas would not deny, but would recognize as an essential aspect of his critique. Indeed, he makes no attempt to be subversive about this, nor does he eschew the use of traditional terminology in the attempt to move beyond. Ultimately, however, Levinas fails to escape the structure of the very tradition he is criticizing. By establishing the transcendental relation with the absolute Other as ground, in however ironic a manner, and by elucidating the transcendence of the face-to-face in terms of the "intentionality" endemic to the idea of infinity, as well as through the categories of speech, language and expression, Levinas remains decisively within the *structure* of traditional thought. In the end, the critique is not radical enough; for if Levinas had rigorously adhered to his argument for the *absolute* transcendence of the Other, there would remain an unbridgeable gulf between the Other and any principle whatsoever—there would be no possibility of more primordial grounding. As we have seen,

Levinas is moving in this direction; for his talk of "grounding," "conditions" and "primacy," when understood within the context of the methodology of violence, may be seen as an attempt to affirm the anarchical—the absolute transcendence of the Other. However, within the scope of the development of the transcendence of the face to face found in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas himself retreats in the face of the absolute Other and the affirmation of anarchy it enjoins by attempting to ground the very violent tradition he wants to transcend. *z*

Notes

- ¹ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p.117.
- ² Richard Cohen, ed. "Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas" conducted by Richard Kearney in *Face to Face with Levinas* (Albany, New York: 1986), p. 28.
- ³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: an Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
- ⁴ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 550.
- ⁵ Jay cites a quotation from a conversation between Levinas and Philippe Nemo in which Levinas calls *Being and Time* "one of the most beautiful books in the history of philosophy." See page 550. The influence of *Being and Time* must be kept in mind throughout this essay; for it will often be the case that the full impact of Levinas' arguments will only be felt when juxtaposed with the Heideggerian position.
- ⁶ For a discussion of *vorhandenheit* as the mode of being of things within the world, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1962), pages 102-ff. For two examples of the development of the notion that Being has traditionally been understood in terms of beings, see *On Time and Being*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 6-ff. and *Being and Time*, p.25-ff.
- ⁷ Levinas, 45. See too, 89. This reading, however, seems quite unfounded and indeed contrary to the project of *Being and Time*. As Derrida writes, "Being, since it is nothing outside the existent, a theme which Levinas had commented upon so well previously, could in no way precede the existent, whether in time, or in dignity, etc. Nothing is more clear, as concerns this, in Heidegger's thought. Henceforth, one cannot legitimately speak of the 'subordination' of the existent to Being, or, for example, of the ethical relation to the ontological relation." (Derrida, p.136)
- ⁸ Levinas, p. 47.
- ⁹ Levinas, 49.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ Levinas, 123. It is not surprising that we find a visual model for the conception of "clarity" in Descartes; he writes, "I call a perception 'clear' when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind—just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility." (Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. 1 Principles of Philosophy*, trans. Cottingham, Stoolhoff, and Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), page 207.) As we will see, Levinas develops the

- notion of the face to face against this visual model.
- ¹² Levinas, 124.
 - ¹³ Levinas, 49.
 - ¹⁴ Levinas, 48; for example.
 - ¹⁵ Levinas, 76.
 - ¹⁶ Levinas, 230.
 - ¹⁷ Levinas, 49.
 - ¹⁸ Levinas, 50.
 - ¹⁹ This coinage ought not to be understood in terms of traditional notions of logic, nor as an attempt to formalize the face to face relation, but as a comprehensive way of referring to the peculiar categories endemic to the discussion of the face to face; i.e., "truth," "language," "teaching," "command" etc. Levinas himself makes reference to the "categories of the idea of infinity or metaphysics" on page 62.
 - ²⁰ Plato, *The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 1174-5. (47a-b)
 - ²¹ 980a25. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, Iowa: The Poripaletic Press, 1966).
 - ²² As with many of Levinas' historical claims, this seems excessively broad and sweeping. Indeed, the "schema of vision" does manifest itself throughout the history of philosophy, however, to include Heidegger among those who blindly held to the primacy of vision is quite unjustified; for, if anything, Heidegger insisted upon the privilege of hearing, with its essential temporal (futural) nature, over sight. See *Sein und Zeit*, 155, 163-165. See too *The Letter on Humanism*, where Heidegger himself affirms the importance of language—"the house of the truth of Being." (Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1977), p. 199). For a discussion of the primacy of sight from Plato to Descartes, see Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 21-82.
 - ²³ These are two of the basic characteristics that Hans Jonas discusses in his article "The Nobility of Sight: A Study in the Phenomenology of the Senses" in Stuart F. Spicker, ed. *The Philosophy of the Body: Rejections of Cartesian Dualism* (New York: New York Times Book Co. 1970), pp.812-ff.
 - ²⁴ Levinas, 189-90.
 - ²⁵ Jonas, 322.
 - ²⁶ Jonas, 321.
 - ²⁷ *Ibid.*
 - ²⁸ *Ibid.* Jonas develops this line of argument for hearing, touch and sight.
 - ²⁹ Levinas, 224. Again we see both the influence of and the attempt to move beyond Heidegger: here there is an affinity with the Heideggerian analysis of time insofar as time, as primarily futural, is first revealed in the disfunction of death—that is, it is death which reveals Dasein's being as temporal. The affinity simply lies in the profound connection that time has with death in both cases. Levinas seems to accept some of the analysis of *Being and Time* especially with regard to the notion of the peculiar indeterminate certainty of death. Cf. *Being and Time*, Section 53 and affirmed—for Heidegger death is never ontologically understood in the death of the Other; for Levinas, it is the death of the Other which makes the very apprehension of death possible.
 - ³⁰ Levinas, 233.

³¹ Levinas, 191.³² Levinas, 191.³³ Derrida, 99.³⁴ Contrary to what Levinas would have us believe, there is actually an affinity between he and Heidegger on this point. Not only do we find Heidegger affirming the primacy of language in *The Letter on Humanism*, see footnote 22 above, but also, the entire development of "care" as the being of Dasein is established in terms of speech, language and discourse. Indeed, *curiosity*—the *everyday* mode of Being-in-the-world which, due to its basic character of always moving from one thing to the next and never dwelling anywhere, designates merely an ontic mode of *care*—is developed precisely as the result of the traditional tendency towards sight. *Being and Time*, Section 36, pp. 214-7.³⁵ Levinas, 195.³⁶ Here, Levinas does not explicitly distinguish between "language," "speech," and "discourse."³⁷ Levinas, 195.³⁸ Levinas, 201.³⁹ Levinas, 200.⁴⁰ *Ibid.*⁴¹ Levinas, 201.⁴² Levinas, 199.⁴³ Derrida, 96. (My emphasis)⁴⁴ See *ibid.*⁴⁵ Levinas, 202. (My emphasis)⁴⁶ Levinas, 62.⁴⁷ Cohen, 28. Beyond the critique of Greek philosophy, there seems to be an implicit reference to the Heideggerian notion of truth as *aletheia*, or disclosedness. (See *Sein und Zeit*, Section 44 for one example of this in Heidegger). Furthermore, at page 99 in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas once again sequesters Heidegger with the tradition of the hegemony of vision, writing: "To put speech at the origin of truth is to abandon the thesis that *disclosure*, which implies the solitude of vision, is the first work of truth." This, as we have seen—notes 22 and 34 above—is a misreading of the Heideggerian understanding of truth as *aletheia*.⁴⁸ Levinas, 71.⁴⁹ Levinas, 72.⁵⁰ Levinas, 89-90.⁵¹ Levinas, 215.⁵² Levinas, 180.⁵³ *Ibid.*⁵⁴ Levinas, 203-4. (My emphasis)⁵⁵ Levinas, 209.⁵⁶ Levinas, 208. (My emphasis)⁵⁷ Derrida, 97.

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On the Leveling of the Genre Distinction Between Theory and Fiction

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Introduction

The leveling of the genre distinction between philosophy and literature is considered by some to be mere intellectual banter. However, it is the very type of debate that elicits a host of striking concrete ramifications. At face value, the distinction seems academic: asking whether literature and theory could or should be judged by the same standards. On a deeper level it leads us to investigate the very core of our communicative existence.

Perhaps the Italian author Italo Calvino stated best the focus of this paper when he so boldly asserted that "[p]hilosophy and literature are embattled adversaries."¹ He goes on to claim that philosophers narrowly order a generalized world while writers describe narrow details that can be generalized and thus thrown out of order. In a likely fashion, Calvino regards this circuitous conflict as necessary to the advancement of both disciplines. It is the dispute itself that provides material for the philosophers to debate which in turn spurs on the writers who then offer more fuel for the philosophers and so on.

But where does the debate begin? Habermas maintains that the origin is the impact of the philosophical shift from consciousness to language in the analysis of literature. This shift forces us to look at literature with the goal of eradicating the importance of the author and intention and putting more emphasis on the language of the text itself. With this in mind we witness the devaluation of the prioritization of the transcendental subject and the advancement of "analysis directed to an anonymous occurring of language."²

To Habermas, the problem with those who advocate the leveling of the genre distinction is that their theories free language from an attachment to a system of reference, hence allowing the levels of reality within a fictional work to become obscured. To Habermas, however, they are overlooking a key point: namely, that communicative action has embedded in it validity claims that are not taken into account when genre distinctions are so easily dismissed. We will see this theory laid out in more detail later.

Calvino, in a seemingly incredible attempt, conceived of his novel *If On a Winter's Night a Traveler* as a practical experiment of this very debate. Its success in this domain is controversial. I would like to contend that the only failure of the novel to achieve this objective is the very undertaking itself. It will hopefully be clear by the end of this essay that Calvino's venture, nothing more than futile, at best, was more likely an attempt to ridicule the very idea of, and theories behind the leveling of the genres.