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Levinas: a 'Phenomenology First' Approach: Restructuring Levinas's Philosophy of Alterity

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Citation

Haan, B. de. (2025). *Levinas: a 'Phenomenology First' Approach: Restructuring Levinas's Philosophy of Alterity*.

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Levinas: a 'Phenomenology First' Approach
Restructuring Levinas's Philosophy of Alterity

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S2530619

MA Philosophy

Modern European Philosophy

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30 April 2025

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1. Introduction

Emmanuel Levinas, a twentieth century Jewish scholar and philosopher, argued that the Western philosophical tradition had one major blind spot: the Other. Therefore, he dedicated his life's project to argue for an 'ethics first' approach to philosophy and pointing out the dangers of the dismissal of the Other in the history of Western philosophy. However, Levinas's radical turn to an 'ethics as first philosophy' is not without issues. There are major philosophical ambiguities at the heart of this work. Does this necessarily mean that we must not study his work? Why would one engage in a philosophical project that is ambiguous at its core? What can one learn from a philosophical work such as Levinas's? Having studied Levinas work, it was question like this that provoked the need for provide a restructuring of Levinas's philosophy, with the aim to preserve and reintroduce the novel arguments and important critiques his philosophy contain. In my experience, Levinas is often overlooked in phenomenological debates despite his relevant contributions to the field. I want to reintroduce Levinas to those debates by addressing the ambiguities that lie at the heart of Levinas's philosophy.

To provide such a restructured Levinasian philosophy, I will first introduce Levinas's philosophy by presenting his general philosophical project. Second, I will argue what ambiguities are present in his philosophy through a discussion of secondary literature. Third, I will argue that these ambivalences result in an unsustainable philosophy. Finally, I will consider how parts of Levinas's oeuvre might be restructured in such a way as to preserve part of his project yet do away with the ambivalences the thesis has discussed. Although this restructured version of Levinas's work – which I call a 'phenomenology first' approach – will vastly differ from Levinas's original project, this thesis will first and foremost be devoted to rethinking Levinas in such a way to make his work available to and relevant for philosophical debates that it would otherwise not be. Therefore, this thesis aims to answer the question of how Levinas' philosophy can be reimagined to avoid the ambivalences following from his notion of radical alterity.

My interest in Levinas stems from an agreement concerning the worrisome tendencies in the Western philosophical tradition in relation to the other. He is one of the first and only philosophers who recognise alterity as primary. To me, the idea of not being able to comprehend, or fully 'have' the other is enlightening yet recognizable. Levinas was a breath of fresh air in contrast to all that I had encountered before even though he positions himself

quite firmly within the philosophical tradition – especially the phenomenological branch. He managed to radically revitalise the phenomenological tradition.

2. Meeting Levinas

This chapter introduces Levinas's metaphysical ethics, with the focus on certain notions that are either especially ambiguous or are part of what I deem to be relevant contributions to the phenomenological field. Because Levinas's philosophy is so intricately woven into a narrative, this chapter aims to present Levinas's philosophy as given by Levinas in order to establish a theoretical basis for further discussion. This chapter therefore contains the relevant passages and ideas from the primary texts written by Levinas for the following chapters discussing the ambiguities present in his work and the restructuring of his philosophy. Since there is a significant change in Levinas's project, I have chosen to use primary texts that were published around the same period (the 1950s and 60s). Those primary texts are *Totality and Infinity (TI)*, *Humanism of the Other (HO)*, and *Het Menselijk Gelaat (MG, trans. The Human Face)*¹.

2.1 Levinas's Objective

Emmanuel Levinas takes a radical turn from his predecessors by arguing that the first philosophy is ethics. He argues that metaphysics – which he identified as ethical domain – comes from a Same, an “at home”, and is turned to the elsewhere, to a metaphysical Other, a radical alterity. The Other cannot be reduced to the same for it to be a lack in the same. It is not something for myself as it would be absorbed into my identity or my thinking. The idea of this other is inadequate to the Other. The Other is absolutely Other, who is Desired. There is no goal or end to this desire – the Desire is not equal to a need. Instead, the metaphysical desire is “like Goodness” in that the Desired deepens the desire rather than fulfil it (*TI*, 34). The relation between the Desire and the Desired is one where the distance between the two is never and can never be bridged. It is a desire without satisfaction, without return, that tends toward the remoteness, alterity, and exteriority of the Other. The absolute Other cannot be anticipated, as we do with death. Levinas therefore says that: “To die for the invisible – this is metaphysics” (35).

¹Unfortunately, *Het Menselijk Gelaat* was only available in the Dutch translation at the time of writing. Any quotes from this work are therefore translated from Dutch to English by me. Direct quotes from *Het Menselijk Gelaat* should be handled with care and reasonable criticism. The original Dutch quotes will be provided in the footnotes for substantial quotations. For *Totality and Infinity*, the original French and a Dutch translation were also consulted.

To describe the relation of the Same to the Other, Levinas borrows from Descartes' philosophy. In his *Meditations*, Descartes describes a relation between the self and God as a relation between something that cannot be comprehended yet is not undone by this incomprehension. It can therefore have meaning without relying on the structure of reason. It is of such a nature that it cannot be caught in the plastic form of a concept. Like Descartes' God, the Other, as infinity, overflows its *ideatum*. Levinas argues that this transcendence of the infinite as thought by a finite being "measures" its infinity (49); the distance between the idea and the *ideatum* is part of the *ideatum* itself. The Cartesian notion of the idea of the infinite is the only relation to a being that leaves the absolute exteriority of the thought intact by the one who thinks it. This complex relation must be described; terms must be given to a seemingly empty definition – the idea of the infinite. The idea presents itself as Desire. Desire is provoked by the desired, by the infinite. This Desire is wholly unselfish and therefore it is identical with goodness. This relation with the Other is not a fusing with the Same. The relation should not be seen as something positive, nor should it be seen as theological. It is primary to the negating or affirming position. Instead, the relation is where language is instituted.

Levinas argues that metaphysics precedes ontology. Ontology is theory as comprehension of being. Therefore, ontology reduces the Other to the Same and promotes the freedom, that is the identification of the Same, that does not allow itself to be alienated by the Other. Ontology cannot respect alterity because it always aims at reducing the Other to the Same. However, this Other is exactly who critiques and calls to question the "dogmatism and naïve arbitrariness of [the] spontaneity" and freedom of the knowing being (*TI* 43). This cannot take place within the "egoist spontaneity" of the Same as it needs to be provoked by the Other (43). Levinas concludes that ontology, as knowledge of Being, cannot dominate ethics, as "relationship" with the Other, because the Other is beyond being; we are always already entangled in its society:

"The relationship with a being infinitely distant [...] is such that its authority as an existent is already *invoked* in every question we could raise concerning the meaning of its Being. [...] Already the comprehension of Being is said to the existent, who again arises behind the theme in which he is presented. [...] [T]his relationship with the Other as interlocutor, this relation with an *existent* – precedes all ontology; it is the ultimate relation in Being. Ontology presupposes all metaphysics." (*TI* 47-48)

According to Levinas, the Western philosophical tradition has primarily been ontological. He takes great issue with this and argues that there must be a "great betrayal" somewhere to

make an “exterior and foreign being” surrender to a neutral middle term, like Being or comprehension (44). He described such mediation, or reduction to the Same, as a fundamental characteristic of the Western tradition. He sees it as a great betrayal because it subordinates the ethical relation to comprehension. By comprehending the Other – ontology’s aim – it maintains the freedom of the I to identify itself as Same. Comprehension therefore reduces everything to a third neutral term as it upholds the totalising power of the I’s freedom. When the I seeks to comprehend to Other, the I does not allow itself metaphysical Desire because the I is not open to the Other who calls its exact freedom into question by its impossibility to be reduced to the Same. This questioning, as will be discussed later, is exactly what constitutes the ethical relation and, subsequently, justice. When the Other is approached through comprehension, there cannot be a relation with the Other as Other since he would be understood through the third neutral term of Being. Therefore, ontology subordinates justice to freedom. As argued above, any thematization of the Other is not a ‘being-at-peace-with’ but a ‘taking-possession-of’. Ontology is thus a philosophy of power, a philosophy of “the exploitation of reality”, and a philosophy of injustice (46). Therefore, he argues that the terms should be reversed. This is the project of Levinas’s philosophy. In *Totality and Infinity*, he writes:

The effort of this book is directed toward apperceiving in discourse a non-allergic relation with alterity, toward apperceiving Desire – where power, by essence murderous of the other, becomes, faced with the other and “against all good sense[”,] the impossibility of murder, the consideration of the other, or justice. (*TI* 47)

To rephrase, his philosophy aims to maintain a “society” of the I and the Other – language and goodness – in which both terms remain radically separate and non-mediated, or anonymous (47).

2.2 The Starting point: Same, I and Enjoyment

The Same cannot identify itself simply as to opposite of the Other, as this would mean that they would be part of a totality that encapsulates both. The Other, that the I Desires as Other, is Other because of an alterity that is prior to any initiative of the Same, prior to all its imperialism. Levinas uses the metaphor of there being no shared fatherland. The Other is a Stranger, who interrupts the being at home. He is strange to and not entirely present in my site. As a result, the I cannot have power over this Stranger. When discussing the ethical

relation, we can therefore not speak of two terms that are in relation to each other. The Other, as radical alterity, cannot and must not be defined as that would deface its radical otherness. It would reduce the relation to an ontological one rather than the metaphysical relation. Instead, the ‘relation’ must be approached differently.

The movement towards the absolute Other is irreducible to an inner-play – “[...] a simple presence of self to self” (37). Otherness and alterity – the distance expressed by transcendence – are not only formal characteristics of the Other, but also the content of the Other. Therefore, the self and the Other cannot be totalised. It is impossible to situate oneself outside the radical separation between the Same and the Other; there is no neutral third term that encapsulates the Same and the Other. Necessarily, he argues, radical heterogeny can only be possible when there is a term that provides entry into the relationship, a term “[...] whose essence is to remain at the point of departure” (36). This term, which entails to be absolutely the same, can only do so as an I.

To be an I means to have its identity as content; its existence is identifying. The I imagines and thinks the alterations because of which it is identical in its alterations – it is an other for itself. The I is an other for itself in that it thinks ahead – “pensée devant elle”; “marche devant soi” (*TeI*, 36) – and discovers itself as strange to itself. Levinas refers to Hegel, who argues that the I distinguishes itself from itself by negating itself. This ‘other I’ the I discovers is no Other; the difference remains within the Same. This identification of the I within the Same must assume a concrete relation between the I and a world. The mode of the I is “sojourning” in the world, “... in *identifying oneself* in existing here *at home with oneself*” (37)². The home is a site where ‘I can,’ where I am free, yet dependent on this world. Everything is in my site; everything is at my disposal. The possibility to possess, to suspend the alterity of that which is, in first instance, only different to me, is the *mode* of the Same. The identification of the Same is what Levinas calls, “the concreteness of egoism” (38).

This subject and the world form a totality. However, there is a separation between them, nonetheless. There is an independence of the subject’s happiness and the “objects of enjoyment” (110). In fact, the mode of the subject is one of Enjoyment. Levinas defines Enjoyment as the way “[...] the act nourishes itself with its own activity” (111). The point he makes is that our relation to the world is not one of knowing or utility but one of enjoyment: “the transmutation of the other into the same” (111). Levinas opposes the Heideggerian understanding of means as tools that we use to reach a goal. They are not only there for us in

² Italicised as in the source material. Italicisation in quotations will do so for the remainder of this thesis.

a structure of consciousness as reflexivity. Alternatively, he argues that we *live from*... - we *live from* good food, *from* sleep, *from* work (110). Food, sleep and work are not first and foremost conceptions or utilitarian means. It is not utility but rather a certain *happiness* in the dependence on the content we *live from*. To enjoy without utility,” Levinas concludes, “is the human (133). Thus, we do not eat bread just to have energy to work. Instead, we live from bread; the means are the end. Therefore, he concludes that the relation between the conditions of life is the content of life. Enjoyment is not a psychological state but “[...] the very pulsation of the I” (113). Living from, Enjoyment are what is means to exist.

Enjoyment, our needs, do not “enslave us” (114). Needs can be satisfied because of the separation between the same and the other of the totality. In fact, we are happy because of our needs. He describes needs as a “happy dependency” in that it can be satisfied (115). Here, Enjoyment is finally defined as “independence through dependence” (115). On the one hand we are dependent on the world as it is what we *live from*, but on the other hand that what we live from is independent from us. Levinas also claims that the body is exactly the articulation of the dependency of what is outside itself as the work necessary to overcome the distance between the I and to other (117).

Enjoyment is not a psychological state as it should rather be understood as a kind of intentionality. According to Levinas, Husserl’s phenomenological description suggests that intentionality reduces the object of consciousness to the same because the object of consciousness is a product of consciousness (123). Consciousness is constitutive: it gives meaning to the object. The object has thereby lost all alterity. There is absolute adequation between the thinker and what is thought. The object is only the meaning that the constituting Ego gave it. This is what Levinas calls intentionality of representation (127). He introduces enjoyment as another kind of intentionality. He writes that this intentionality “[...] consists in holding on to the exteriority which the transcendental method involved in representation suspends” (127). In the *living from*, the independence of the other influences us as we influence the object. Enjoyment, like Husserl’s intentionality, is a way in which “[...] life relates to its content” (122). Levinas recognises that the other is still transmuted to the same in the satisfaction of needs, but this intentionality recognises that the world is not simply constituted by a freedom but a “conditioning and an antecedence” (129).

What comes to us – the object of our *living from* – does not reach us qua things. He argues that the things are not organised into a system, but that they “take form within a medium” as “things qua things” (130-131). Opposed to intellectualism, the mode of enjoyment, of intentionality, cannot be rational. Instead, it is sensibility. It is not thought, it is

the order of sentiment, or “[...] the affectivity wherein the egoism of the I pulsates” (135). It is the instance of enjoyment and is satisfied with the given. There is no reflection, no rationalism, no representation in the given (135). This is the original mode of relation of the I and the other within the Same.

2.3 The Ethical Relation: Interruption, Language and Responsibility

Having introduced Levinas’s general objective and the starting point of the ethical relation, the I, we can now ask how the ethical relation is delineated. The Other interrupts the totalising movement of the I within the Same. Thereby, he decentres the I and opens a space to welcome the other. This interruption positively realises itself as being able to give a world that the I possess to the Other. By being “*face to face*” with the Other our greediness is turned into generosity (39). The face, in this sense, is defined as the mode of the Other’s appearance. It destroys and overflows any plastic image it leaves in me and eventually manifests itself without mediation or dependency. It is “καθ’ αὐτό” (TI 51). The face expresses independently rather than being a revealing of an “impersonal Neuter” (51). To be in conversation with the Other means to have the idea of infinity as well as to be instructed: it comes from elsewhere and brings me more than I contain. In this “non-violent transitivity” of this relationship, the epiphany of face occurs (51).

Levinas describes the relation between the Same and the Other as language and shows that this relation is “primordially enacted as a conversation” (39) in which the Same treads outside itself. This relation can only appear as a movement from the I to the Other as a relation as a face to face. The I is not some contingent formation which allows for the Same and the Other, as logical determinations of being, to *also* be reflected in thinking. Rather, a ‘thinking’, ‘interiority’, and an ‘I’ are necessary for alterity to appear in being. Thinking and interiority are exactly the break of being, and the production of transcendence. The distance between the I and the Other is not just reflected on. The I travels this distance; we can only know the relation to the extent that we effect it. “Alterity is possible only starting from me.” (40)

Discourse retains the radical difference between me and the Other because the separation is asserted in transcendence. This means that it is impossible to reconstitute a totality from Discourse. Therefore, Discourse cannot “renounce the egoism of its existence” (40). To be in conversation is to recognize that the Other has a right over this egoism. The essence of the conversation is apology, where the I both asserts itself and ‘bows’ before the transcendent. In

that fashion, we do not ask questions *about* the Other, as that would mean we comprehend the Other. Instead, we ask *him* questions. The bond that is established between the Same and the Other is named religion; “a relation without relation” (80). This bond, or the breaking of the totality, is not an “operation of thought” (40). Rather, Levinas writes that:

The void that breaks the totality can be maintained against an inevitably totalizing and synoptic thought only if the thought finds itself *faced* with another refractory to categories. Rather than constituting a total with this other as with an object, *thought consists in speaking*. (TI 40)

Through discourse and sensibility – which are not instantiations of reason – totality is broken because of the immediacy of the epiphany of the face. The transcendence, the metaphysical Other, designates a relation with a reality that is infinitely separated from mine, without that distance nullifying it.

It is important to emphasize that the Other is not first an object of knowledge. Instead, it awakens Desire as it can be approached by a cogito that thinks more than it thinks. Desire, Levinas writes, “measures the infinity of the infinite for it is measure through the very impossibility of measure” (62). The fully autonomous, satisfied being does not have a need for the Other, it desires it. Desire demands this autonomy. This situation is language: a relation in which the terms absolve themselves from the relation. This absolution is how the terms remain absolute and anonymous within the relation. Levinas writes:

Truth is sought in the other, but by him who lacks nothing. The distance is untraversable and at the same time traversed. The separated being is satisfied, autonomous, and nonetheless searches after the other with a search that is not incited by the lack proper to need nor by the memory of a lost good. Such a situation is language. Truth arises where a being separated from the other is not engulfed in him, but speaks to him. Language, which does not touch the other, even tangentially, reaches the other by calling upon his or by commanding him or by obeying him, with all the straightforwardness of these relations. Separation and interiority, truth and language constitute the categories of the idea of infinity or metaphysics. (TI 62)

The I surpasses itself in Desire which is aroused by the presence of the Other. The direction of the movement of Desire is toward the Other, who in turn makes the I question the totalitarian movement of freedom.

In speaking, I recognise the Other as my master, as my teacher. The Other as expressing καθ' αὐτό is not a revealing but an epiphany. The movement of the Same towards the Other is the answering of a call, a turn towards the interrupting. The Other is “present before the manifestation [...] which only manifests it” (65), opposed to objects that rely on the light of

the horizon to manifest before us as a revealed being. The expressed and expressing fall together. Therefore, the face “[...] undoes the form he presents.” (66). The face is the living presence, it is the expression, it speaks. The manifestation of the face *is* discourse. The logos of the epiphany is described by Levinas as “Thou shall not kill” (*HO* xxxi). The killing refers both to the act of taking a life as the thematization or comprehension of the other as object. The Other resist the egoistic imperialism of the I.

To teach means to be absolutely foreign to us. According to Levinas, only man can be absolutely foreign. In contrast to man, he describes the face of the animal as “mute” (*MG* 160). Levinas calls the other naked in that he is only and fully by relation to himself. The face is such nudity, and it is always a positive value. It is not by its reference to a system; it is by itself. In that sense, it cannot and is not revealed by us – they are not ‘veiled’ in the first place. Instead, it faces us. The transcendence of that face is “[...] at the same time its absence from the world into which it enters” (*TI* 75). The I, who is at home in this world the Other enters, thus faces the Other, naked as it is, whose gaze begs and demands. To recognise the Other is thus recognising a “hunger”, a “deprivation of everything”, and by recognising, we give (75).

In this generosity, the I that owns a world of enjoyment gains a view of this world that is removed from its egoism. The naked Other makes me question my “joyous possession of the world” (76). The I does not absolve when its possession is turned into gift as “[...] I cannot stop being responsible for its desolation” (*HO* 32). The world is not what it was in separation. Instead, it is my gift: “the communicable, the thought, the universal” (77). It is thus in my welcoming of the Other where all things appear, which they do as gift. The face disrupts an order that the Ego had seen as primary. This challenge is the reception of the Other. The Ego can be redefined as responsibility, and its uniqueness is that no other can be responsible in the place for that Ego. Levinas definition is a responsible Ego which is ‘urgent’ and ‘primordial’ to reflectivity, which is the traditional understanding of consciousness (34).

Speaking is the production of meaning, which is done so by the Other’s speaking from its dimension of height and thereby teaching. This “frank” and “remote” presence disposes of the theme it is handed without the possibility of hiding its own frankness as interlocutor (*TI* 66). The absolute Other, as interlocutor, remains καθ’ αυτό, expresses himself without having to be revealed in “borrowed light” from a point of view (67). The mode of the interlocutor is thus such that they remain independent, unscathed by any movement the I instigates. The Other and its heterogeneity is already respected as Other when we call upon him. I do not comprehend, I speak to, I am spoken to. ‘Speaking to’, as aspiration to reach the other, is the

relation of language as vocative: a grammatical case that is used to address someone or something. What is addressed is not understood; “he is not under category” (69). This summon asks for moral responsibility. This subjectivity must think more than it has the power to or to desire to answer the summon. Here, Levinas phrases it as a reaching beyond its death, or ‘to sacrifice’ (MG 226). To answer the summon is a nobility of sacrificing; going to the infinite without trying to assimilate the summon to something that can be understood in the traditional way. To sacrifice myself, by giving my world, by “breaking through the simultaneousness of the phenomena” as to sense the face’s *καθ’ αὐτό* expression rather than attempt to comprehend it, that is what the ethical relation demands of the I.

Levinas does acknowledge that not every conversation is a relation with exteriority. He makes the distinction between rhetoric and Discourse. The I can approach the interlocuter as he would an object. To speak rhetorically would thus be cunning. Levinas describes rhetorical speaking as approaching the Other not face-to-face but from the side, trying to win his affirmation. This is injustice as it would be violence exercised on a freedom that should be unassailable. In true Discourse, the other is approached immediately where the being in no way can be an object and escapes my seize to (over)power him. This “disengagement from all objectivity” is the Other’s presentation of the face. Justice is thus this immediate approach in speaking. Levinas writes: “If truth arises in the absolute *experience* in which being gleams in its own light, then truth is produced only in veritable conversation or in justice” (TI 71). Justice, the recognition of the other as my master, the metaphysical asymmetry – this is the overcoming of rhetoric.

Levinas argues that this metaphysical asymmetry is already imposed in our concrete moral experience – “what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other” (53). Thus, Levinas argues, the separation between the I and the Other occurs in the form of an inner life, of a psychism. The original role of the psychism is therefore a mode of being. Levinas returns to Descartes argumentation where the being who infinitely overflows its own idea grounds the evidence of the cogito, the ‘I’ of the I think. However, our discovery of the metaphysical relation is, chronologically speaking, the second step as we first discover the I. This is a logical reversal of the chronological order, according to Levinas. He writes:

Separation is not reflected in thought, but produced by it. For in it the *After* or the *Effect* conditions the *Before* or the *Cause*: the *Before* appears and is only welcomed. (TI 54)

In our experience, in our mode of being, the relation to the Other only comes after our discovery of the I.

It must be stressed that, according to Levinas, language is the prerequisite for thinking. Language, here, refers to an attitude towards the Other. It is, in fact, the face-to-face that founds language, which “brings the first signification” (207). Signification comes from the Other and arises in being because we are in relation with the Other. The essence of language is exactly that relation. This signification precedes the “*Sinngebung*” as seen in Husserl. It is not constituted in being by an Ego, independent of the initiative power of a subject. This independence is why Levinas describes the face as unmediated, or immediate. Therefore, Levinas describes the face as an epiphany. This does not mean that the Other is itself captured in that first signification. The Other cannot be reduced to “transcendental thought” (207).

Nonetheless, Levinas’ account of sense production within the Same is heavily influenced by the phenomenological tradition. Both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty contribute greatly to his understanding of the constitutional production of the subject as embodied, or as a ‘sensing-sensed’ (*HO* 16). What this entails is that a body combines the ‘subjectivity of perception’ and the ‘objectivity of expression’ (16). There is no longer a subject that perceives the world. Instead, the body is the subject immanent in the world is expressed at the same time as it is thought. This notion of expressing Levinas borrows from Merleau-Ponty, who describes expression as:

To collect in a totality, that is to express, that is, to make signification possible – this is the function of the “object-cultural work or gesture.” And there a new function of expression is established with regard to the function heretofore attributed to it: either to serve as a means of communication or to transform the world according to our needs.” (*HO* 15)

Therefore, the totality or collection that gives signification to the given is operated by the same as that collection is then given to; “the spectator is the actor” (15). Totality needs to be arranged and collected.

Perception is defined as receiving and expressing simultaneously. Perception, however, is made possible by signification since signification functions as the illumination of the horizon. As a result, experience always refers to the embodied beings as subject and object. Signification arises in reference to other significations and in “the collection of being all together” around the embodied being (12). Signification, Levinas writes, is not separate from the access leading to it. The conclusion that follows is that signification precedes givens, and that the given is presented as signification. It would thus be impossible to have a genesis of

signification from being without signification. Hence, the signified and the given are not of the same order. Before expression is as described by the phenomenological tradition, it is a relation to the Other who makes it possible to produce an expression in the first place. The manifestation of the Other is produced as signification. Whereas the phenomenological, cultural signification is revealed horizontally, the Other enters the world but remains non-integrated. He writes:

Whereas the phenomenon is already, on whatever score, image, captive manifestation of its mute plastic form, the epiphany of the face is alive. Its life consists in undoing the form where every *being* [*étant*] when it enters into immanence – that is, when it exposes itself as theme – is already dissimulated. (*HO* 31)

The face, like the idea of infinity, is always in surplus on the phenomenon. Since the face speaks, the Other comes from ‘behind’ the form, is not captured by it (31). The signification the face bears, as coming from the absolute Other, is exterior to everything. This “manifesting himself without manifesting” is what Levinas termed the “enigma” (*MG* 217-218).

Because the face is not in the order of being, Levinas argues that we respond “[...] in the presence of the Other to an “order” whose significance remains irreversible derangement, absolutely completed past” (*HO* 40). The face is the trace of that absolutely completed past and thereby explains that the significance is both immanent in the order of the Same but does not have to give up its transcendence. This results in the trace functioning as a sign but not like all the others. The trace is ‘superimposed’ on the order of the world (41). By this he means that it signifies ‘outside of all intention’ in the same fashion one would still leave a trace by trying to erase a trace (41). The disruption to the order is already done. The trace does not signify by appearing but rather by disrupting the phenomenology that its significance is situated in. To return to the connection between the trace and the Other, it is the trace that disrupts the order, but its disruption cannot be deduced from the ‘Being of beings’ nor from ‘concrete duration’ or memory (42). The trace is from beyond, of an already passed past or a future that will never become present, and in that time the Other retreats. In this beyond, He, or the Other, is “[...] somehow outside the distinction between Being and beings” (43).

3. Radical Alterity Introduces Ambivalence

In the first chapter, I have shown how Levinas developed his philosophy's aim: to describe a "non-allergic relation with alterity" through the notions of the face, language and Desire and thereby developing a philosophy that argues ethics precedes ontology; that justice is primary to freedom (*TI* 47). As discussed, he argues for a relation with this radical alterity where neither term is absorbed by the relation or by one of the terms. In fact, there is even an encounter with radical alterity that is such that we are first and foremost responsible. I will argue that this construction introduces ambivalence. The ambivalence entails that radical alterity is described as absolutely separate from the Same without being reduced to a neutral third term, yet there is constant bridging between the Other and that which he is infinitely removed from.

In this chapter, I will go into more detail how this ambivalence manifests itself in Levinas's philosophy. This chapter will look at three paradoxes of Levinas's philosophy that represent the ambivalence and the difficulties that follow most adequately. They are the paradox of the transcendental-ontological link, the paradox of sense, and the paradox of relation. There are three key terms that this chapter will focus on. Those are the Other, the I as subject, and the face. These are the most fundamental and relevant notions in Levinas for this thesis as they form the foundation of the ethical relation he describes. In the first chapter, I have shown how these notions are in relation to each other. In this chapter, I will argue that the way in which these notions interact cause ambiguities. Since these are core notions in Levinas's philosophy, this chapter will show how these ambiguities bring Levinas's philosophy in jeopardy.

3.1 The Paradox of the Transcendental-Ontological Link

Newman points out that there is a difficult paradox within Levinas's work: how can ethics as first philosophy, before ontology and epistemology, and based on a relation with an Other that cannot be mediated, have any hold on the ontological (99)? What he argues is that the notion of responsibility that Levinas develops as the summoning of the subject by the Other, eventually concerns the other in the world. The metaphysical relation somehow influences the ontological relation. Newman argues that this is the question of justice and the third, who functions as the mediation between people but is itself unmediatable – which Levinas refers to as 'Ill' (99). This third, however, is also always already there. In *Totality and Infinity*,

Levinas writes that the third looks at me “in the eyes of the Other” (213). As Levinas claims, there cannot be any relation to the Other “[...] separated from the relationship with men” (78). The metaphysical relation, where justice and responsibility are based in, is therefore enacted in the social relation. From this, it must be assumed that there is at least some link between the metaphysical realm of that which is absolutely Other to the Same and the ontological. The question is thus how this link does not reduce the Other to some third neutral term by establishing a relation between the metaphysical and the ontological. To tease out this paradox even more, we must look at the notion of the face.

The epiphany of the third is both situated in the face, unavoidable, and produced through the face (305). De Boer and Bremmers express this as the third ‘returning’ within the metaphysical relation (*TO* 365). The Other, they argue, can only be approached as transcendent from the ‘inner-perspective’. Justice is a direct and personal relation rather than a relation mediated through third neutral term. The disruption and crisis that the face of the Other brings is the “doubling of discourse”, that of the ethical relation and that of social justice (366). Newman concludes this by arguing that the ethical relation that is itself an interruption, but that there never was an uninterrupted ethical relation (99). There always already was an ethical relation, just like there always already was an absolute Other. How we must then understand absolute difference. If there always already was an ethical relation, are we not back at the phenomenological project of arguing for the primacy of relationality? Levinas also argues for this primacy, but I do not think he can then claim that this relationality, as preceding the terms cannot function as a totalising element or count as a third term of the relationality.

An advantage and a disadvantage of Levinas’s conception of the Other is that what he wants to write about can never be caught in words – in the broadest sense. Any attempt to write about the absolute Other can already be used against him as a reason to critique him. One solution Levinas has for is writing about the absolute Other as in negative theology: he can describe what the absolute Other is not. However, this language issue does give him a logical retreat as well. He can always retort any critique by arguing that this critique is fair in as far it is aimed at his argumentation, but it can never be applied on this ‘non-concept’ of the Other as the critique is not applicable because the absolute Other is outside any language, thematization or conceptualisation. The metaphysical construction is in essence not logical because logic itself is part of the totality. As described by Perpich, Levinas knew that he had to put his “evidence” for his ethical claims outside the domain in which evidence holds any value as that is the domain of ontology; the domain of perception, knowledge, and

comprehension (107). Although Levinas can always retort to this logical retreat in relation to every paradox this thesis addresses, it is especially relevant for the paradox of the transcendental-ontological link because it shows that Levinas clearly separates the metaphysical domain of the Other and the ontological domain of comprehension. However, when we ask him how the metaphysical relation can manifest itself in the ontological domain as responsibility for the personal other, Levinas somehow does not emphasize this separation between the two domains. In other words, at some points in his work, he keeps the domains pure and separated whereas at other points there seems to be a grey area between the two domains that is never acknowledged or addressed.

THE FACE, SINGULARITY AND LANGUAGE

Perpich identified the notion of the face as the epitome of the tension of the notion of singularity and language in Levinas. She argues that the face has identity, is a singularity, yet at the same time has a “status as refractory to exhaustive conceptualization” (Perpich, 104). With singularity, Levinas both refers to the idea that every human is unique and irreplaceable and therefore irreducible to simple attributes and that the other had unequivocal ethical standing due to its irreducibility. In his earlier works, Levinas describes that everybody has moral worth “*as such*” and not due to a universal property (107). This notion of singularity is where Levinas develops the idea that the other cannot be in relation to us in a similar mode as object. The *as such* moral worth is outside of comprehension, power and possession – which Levinas identified as the realm of ontology – but only as the ethical relation. The important conclusion that this development contains is that the Other, who faces me, is thus indeed identified as a singularity. This is where the tension is introduced as there is no way to “say”, “state”, or “affirm” the Other as singularity but it must be for the ethical relation to be as described by Levinas (105).

Perpich argues that Levinas attempts to bypass this tension by introducing the “*non-phenomenal*” face but immediately shows this does not answer the question how singularity can be identified yet not reduced to some ontological category (103). She shows that Levinas claims that there is something as “‘straightforward’ ethical language” and ‘oblique’ rhetoric” (116). ‘Straightforward’ ethical language is concerned with discourse, where the two forms of singularity are respected. Those two forms are that of the irreplaceable self and that of the irreducible other who has “unequivocal ethical standing,” or is “simply as such” (107). Since this second singularity cannot appear according to the rules of ontology, Levinas speaks of invocation instead. This refers to the idea that the Other ‘manifests’ without mediation and is

at once the expression and the epiphany. Language as discourse, in invocation, has a performative element because the sociality of the Other and the Same in the ethical relation are eventive rather than comprehensive. This is why Levinas argues that the Other provides the orientation within thought – which was defined as Desire – as this description does not demand a definition of what it is the I desires. Therefore, Desire opens up the possibility to have Discourse between the two unabsolvable terms.

Perpich then shows that for Levinas, all discourse accomplishes the ethical relationship. It is not tied to a certain content, nor even any linguistic ground. Even a gesture to dismiss the Other is already an admission that there is an Other. Conversely, Levinas argues that rhetoric is something to be overcome, and that in rhetoric the other is not approached as a face, but in injustice. Perpich asks how there can be a difference between straightforward ethical language and this oblique rhetoric. Even more puzzling is the contrast between the face being a “hard fixed substantial point” but at the same time is said not to appear (116).

In opposition to Levinas, Perpich argues that the face *does* appear, however it has a place in Levinas philosophy as rhetoric, namely *the figure of the face*. She argues that this poses a major tension in Levinas’s work as the face, as figure and rhetorical trope, must convey the main philosophical point that is explicitly called non-figural. She argues that no evidence can be given of the other’s singularity, “[...] no principle invoked to silence the sceptic and prove that he is responsible for the other who faces him” (117). The image, she argues, fills in the impossible of Levinas’s theory. That impossible is the contradictory nature of the face as representation of the unrepresentable. It is thus a necessary claim he must make, yet it is at same time a risk to Levinas’s “system” (119).

This tension introduced by the figure of the face is reminiscent of the section above. There seems to be a bridge between the transcendental domain of the Other and of the ontological domain. Because Levinas aims to keep the Other purely situated in the transcendental domain, Perpich argues that the argument eventually depends on whether the reader agrees with Levinas that the human relationship is different than that to things or if the reader could never be convinced of comprehension and sociality are distinct and irreducible to each other (109). In other words, there seems to be a factor of belief at play. This will be further developed later in this thesis.

THE ANIMAL QUESTION

Then there is also the fact that the face does really seem to be of a personal other; of an other here in the world. When Levinas speaks of the face, Levinas seems to only refer to the

face of humans. As Plant argues, it is only the “apparition of the human” that can cause the decentring of the I (52). A big point of contention in the secondary literature on Levinas is concerned with the question of animals. As discussed, Levinas describes the face of animals as mute; they do not address us as the human face does. What logically follows from this is that either the ethical relation between human and animal is different from that between humans or that there is no ethical relation between humans and animals at all. The importance that this debate has for this thesis is that there is thus some sort of difference between the animal and the human face, which must be based on some ontological or metaphysical argument. How can we make a distinction between the animal and the human face that does not reduce radical alterity to the Same by relying on the physical face of another that we perceive as phenomenon? On what ground do we make the distinction?

We must then ask what that difference is between the two. Levinas could of course say that the difference is exactly that one face does cause that disruption of the I whereas the other face does not. However, this does seem deficient. It does not tell us why this is the case. As Perpich argues, “intuition is not sufficient support” for the claims Levinas makes regarding the face (Morgan, 250). Levinas often refers to the day-to-day experience to strengthen the arguments he makes. One example would be the metaphysical asymmetry that he argues is already visible in the commonplace moral experience (*TI* 53). Perpich even goes as far as to argue that Levinas heavily relies on common moral experience rather than a “detailed justification”, especially in relation to the face and its ethical demand (Morgan 250). In that case, we can ask Levinas: do we not experience a responsibility, at least somewhat similar, towards animals as we do towards other people? And is this responsibility not in the same realm as that toward humans, being the common moral experience? Plant provides a discussion on what Levinas has written on the matter, which can be summarized by the statement that the human face is “completely different”, that we only discover the animal “face” after the ethical relation is established, and that another analysis is required to say whether an animal has a face (Plant, 58). He does not know *if* they have a face in the ethical sense, but he does not explain why.

Plant remarks that Levinas has sometimes described the ethical relation as an “overthrowing of the natural order” in the sense that the Other is prioritized over the Same (57). In doing so, he has referred to humans as “unreasonable” or “irrational animals” as to argue for the fact that the ethical relation is not one of reason (57). Being outside of beyond reason is exactly how Levinas described the Other and the ethical relation. In that sense, Plant argues, animals are no different from humans as their acts are neither rational nor irrational.

The only difference Plant finds between animals and humans is that animals cannot interact with universal maxims, but he fairly asks why that should matter for Levinas. Most likely, that would matter in connection with justice and law but those are dependent on and secondary to the ethical relation. It should not matter for the face-to-face encounter if one has the ability to produce universal maxims. Plant also proposes that it might be a question of *what* animal is spoken of. He argues that animals that are more familiar to us, like those we share a domestic space with, might influence the meaningful interaction – a dog might have an ethical face, but a snail would not (59). This is especially interesting in relation to the fact that the absolute Other is infinitely distant yet unmediated and immanent. Distance or familiarity, therefore, should not matter. He concludes by proposing that Levinas himself might have reduced the face to its “plastic forms” because of the seemingly arbitrary distinction between animal and human face (60).

AURALITY

Another discussion that sprouts from the paradox of the transcendental-ontological link is concerned with the mode of the epiphany of the face. As discussed Levinas argues the human face to be completely different as it is unrelated to vision – which is haunted by the Western tradition of revealing. Instead, Levinas argues for aurality. Schroeder writes that the encounter with the face is a moment where “[...] theoretical vision is invertedly revealed to consciousness as discourse, as aurality” (193) In other, words, the voice is not seen but properly, heard. Marion equates this shift to the distinction of the face discovered as phenomenon and the I finding itself affected by the interruption of the face. Marion does emphasize that there is, nonetheless, something given but there is a question of identity to be asked. He writes: “how can one assign an identity to the origin of the appeal such that one can specify which face is involved each time, but without thereby reducing it to a visible phenomenon in the mode of a spectacle?” (226) This question is like the questions raised by Perpich in relation to the figure of the face but now aimed at Levinas’s notion of sensibility rather than that of language.

There is another concern pertinent to the shift from visibility to aurality. Levinas’s issue with vision is that there is an active component in the subject and that it is equal to the mode of revealing. Whereas vision is a narrative of phenomenological horizons where meaning is constituted by an intentional ego, aurality is a passive structure (Bergo, 138). The sense of the word of the Other affects the I, but is not constituted by it. I do not think that simply shifting from visuality to aurality gets rid of at least the first. Whether or not the shift from visibility

to aurality is a metaphorical one in which he can emphasize the idea that in the ethical relation, the word is received passively and that it has no relation to the ontological level of light or a literal shift from light to sound, the question remains of whether this is achieved by simply going from one kind of sense-impression to the other. There still is the issue of how something can be interrupted by something absolutely different from itself be it in any mode or form that interruption comes from or in. Then it is also still questionable if in hearing, there truly is not an active component to hearing. To put it very practically, what is the difference in activity between gamma-waves hitting the back of an eye and radio waves hitting the drum of an ear? Culturally, this question also stands: what some cultures recognise as music is just noise to those who are not familiar with it. There remains a particular horizon, whatever type of impression one is dealing with.

Although one can be sceptical of this move to aurality, there is a more fundamental issue at play regarding the encounter. That is in the bridging between the absolute other and the same. There is bridging because there is a meaningful encounter with the face, or the word, between the Same and the radical Other. However, Levinas argues that there is no bridge. What that entails is that there can somehow be meaning and understanding without any overlap between either terms. In this understanding, either the absolute Other arranges itself to the Same or the Same arranges itself to the Other. This is what Levinas describes as facing each other. If that is done, how can the 'relation without relation' Levinas argues for be upheld? Two terms are now composed such that they encounter each other in a meaningful and productive way. Productive, because it becomes, or rather *is*, the ethical relation. In both those situations, either there is a relation and the absolute difference is lost or the Same is lost within the absolute Other, similar in how classical philosophers of God argued that identity must be lost to become one with God.

Bringing together the debate on animals and vision, there is one major point of contention that they present. As I have shown, Levinas argues that the face is not a visible phenomenon but rather an aural one because the word finds the addressee as passive rather than active. As I have also shown, the distinction Levinas argues for between a mute animal face and an ethical human face seems arbitrary if one cannot rely on some kind of phenomenon after all. The issue thus remains how this ontological manifestation of the face is, first of all, not a manifestation and second of all, not a reduction of that transcendent that is supposed to be absolutely Other, never present, and beyond being to the ontological. Levinas claims that, simultaneously, there is the transcendental, unscathed Other, and the ontological, impregnated with this non-presence. He is unable to give an account that does not escape the

critique that the gap is bridged nonetheless without relying on something that itself is non-ambiguous outside of philosophy to explain this ambiguity.

This non-ambiguous something outside of philosophy is a requirement because Levinas wants to make a claim that is inherently paradoxical, namely bridging a gap between the ontological and the metaphysical domain without a bridge; the bridge would be the dreaded third neutral term. This cannot be sustained by reasonable argumentation as reason does not sustain paradox and Levinas argues that the ethical relation is not dependent or in a necessary relation with reason – or any comprehensive structure as that would reduce the ethical relation to an ontological relation. However, he does need something that can sustain a relation that is fundamental to the ethical relation that is at the heart of our being in the world as responsible human beings. He therefore needs something that itself is undisputed and can ground the ‘relation without relation’ that would otherwise fail to maintain if it were solely dependent on the grounds of ontology-oriented philosophy.

3.2 The Paradox of Sense

Although the I is absolutely different from the Other, there is a specific way this should be understood. Schroeder summarises the ethical relationship at the beginning of his essay as being “[...] founded on the visible face to face encounter between the self and the Other, while appealing to a *preoriginary* invisible relation” (Schroeder 189). De Boer and Bremmers point out that the preoriginary relation is often interpreted as there first being the Same, a prior independence, who then ‘stumbles upon’ the Other (*TO* 352). This is a result from the fact that the presupposition of the metaphysical relation Levinas recognises in the ontological domain appears to be in conflict with the narrative of the confrontation of the subject of Enjoyment, that is living from..., with absolute alterity. Levinas reply to this tension is to argue that the Other is always already there. In the I’s independence and self-sufficiency, the Other is already assumed (351-352). How then, are the subject and the Other independent and radically separate? What is this preoriginary relation?

As argued by Drabinski, the preoriginary relation is best approached through a discussion on sense. He argues that Levinas’s main issue with Husserl’s phenomenological approach is that sense-bestowal, or *Sinngebung*, can only be done by the creative subject. In other words, the Ego is the entity that constitutes sense which assumes a necessary link with sense-bestowal and thematization. Levinas opposes this by arguing that there is sense-bestowal

from outside this Ego. The origin of sense is prior to “accomplished egoic life”, coming from a forgotten horizon (Drabinski, 27). In his earlier work on Husserl, Levinas defines this forgotten horizon as the “[...] mode of relationality that does not objectivate the object to which the subject is related” (56). This sense-bestowing horizon is different from the phenomenological horizons as the bestowed sense cannot be thematised, is non-mediated or concrete, and has no relation to the creative act of the subject. Instead, the sense from this horizon come from “the other spontaneous act” (56). This sense-bestowal from that beyond is called the ‘*Sinngebung éthique*’, which goes against the intellectualist ideal of the sovereign subject in relation to sense-bestowal. Because Levinas wants to argue for a ‘relation’ with radical alterity, Levinas must “[...] rethink sense by intertwining (and not without some paradoxical difficulties) the transcendental and the empirical” (88). The transcendental is that which is outside or beyond the creative subject and its horizons, the empirical refers to Levinas’s concept of sensibility.

This notion of sensibility transforms the Husserlian notion of intentionality into an intentionality that is compatible with the logic of radical alterity. Levinas argues that the καθ’ αυτὸ manifestation of the concrete non-mediated appearance of the Other coming from a beyond the phenomenological horizons of light and revealing, signifies without being imposed on by the act of the subject. The subject is thus passive with regards to the expression of the Other, which appears in its immediacy. By using sensibility as the locus of access to the relation with the transcendental, Levinas can use concepts as phenomenology and intentionality. Drabinski argues that Levinas’s method is intentional “[...] insofar as it insists on the primacy of relation” (97). Of course, this relation cannot be one of totality, thus Levinas departs from Husserl’s phenomenology because Husserl does subscribe to a sovereign subject’s intentionality.

The transcendental is used as the limitation of the constitutional powers of the subject and the necessary condition for a thinking of radical alterity. As discussed, the movement of Desire is from the I to the Other. It is within experience that radical transcendence becomes available for discussion. Drabinski argues that Levinas reverses the priority of Husserl’s phenomenology by tracing “[...] the constituting back to the moment it is determined as constituted” (96). Levinas argues that radicality is implicit in Husserl’s analyses of the forgotten horizon. This forgotten horizon is, in turn, immanent to phenomenology. Husserl’s phenomenology gives access to the source of the content of totality. The source refers to that which conditions the totality, eventually explained as the ‘relation’ to radical alterity, to the

surplus that is beyond the totality. Put bluntly, the thought of the exterior conditions the thought of totality.

The question that must be asked is twofold: what is the relation between the subject and radical transcendence and how is this relation structured? The relation between the subject and transcendence is understood as the displacement of the I in the ethical relation, which translates to the ontological as responsibility and being-for-the-other. Drabinski argues that in desire and enjoyment, the I is already decentred. It is not until the questioning of the Other emerges, however, that this decentralisation experienced, and thus turns into responsibility. The ‘how’ question is more complicated, since there is a temporal aspect tied to it. This is especially difficult as the self and Other must not be reduced to a simultaneous time. However, that “[...] the sense that constitutes the content of subjectivity *as intentional, as already in a relation constitutive of its being and substantiality* [...]” somehow does precede the interruption of the egoic life (101). I would like to emphasize the notion that the ego’s content as intentional—that is somehow radically separated from the Other—is constituted by that Other as sense-bestowing from the “beyond being.” The sensual body, or the affective life from which the subject originates, is “caught in or by the object of its relation” (114). This relation, in turn, is upheld not by the subject, but by the “object”, the absolute Other, as an ultimate reversal of Husserl’s phenomenology. That is what the preoriginary relation is referring to: a relation prior to the active ego as sense-bestowing and reflective, constituted as intentional subject that is decentred.

Benso sees this as the “nondialectical paradox of Levinas’s philosophy” (Stauffer & Bergo, 223). The I is at the same time, already there fully independent of the Other whereas the I is ethically already “haunted by the other”, always already preceding the I in its own separation and absoluteness (224). Both Drabinski and Benso’s observations affirm that there never truly is separateness. The Other is always already there for the I, even when it is in its separated state of enjoyment, coiling in on itself. Levinas argues that this is not an issue as the I is not grounded in the Other or vice versa. This is because the narrative of the interruption of the I, of the ethical relation, is not linear, and the time of the Other is not the time of the Same (Stauffer & Bergo, 40). I would question whether there truly is no foundationalism of the I through the Other. If anything, the I needs the Other to be interrupted to be responsible. Since responsibility is our ontological mode of existence, does this interruption therefore not found the I?

Newman relates this to a development throughout Levinas’ work. At first, he writes, the subject was described as “becoming separated” after which it gets involved in the ethical

relationship – even though this relation already presumes separation (93). Whereas later, in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas moves to regarding this relationship as obtaining *before* the emergence of the subject. Newman points out that this difference in approach illustrates the need for an independent analysis of the Other since there is no way to do so without the Other being mediated by the subject (94). There are two sides to this argument, namely that Levinas' earlier work would already claim this need simply due to the nature of philosophical analysis and of the absolute Other, but also that *Totality and Infinity* does indeed raise this very question of what the Other is.

When *Otherwise than Being* was published, the Other was described as neither in- nor outside the self even though the self is only “the tension of its own division [...] something it cannot identify *as itself*” (Bergo, 119). Influenced by Derrida, Levinas later described the now-moment of lived experience itself a representation, which meant that the present is only a bridge between experience and conceptualisation. These two assumptions combined meant that Levinas could argue that the self is inhabited by something other than the self both temporally as in its intentional constructions. This “cohabitation” opens the self to a “sensuous-affective inscription” by the Other (120). It must be emphasised that this sensuous-affective inscription is immediate and unmediated. There is no reflection or conceptualisation necessary to acquire the meaning of the Other, which is the interruption of the I. This opening up of the self is therefore necessary for the ethical relation.

Newman describes the self as “primordially passive” which is necessary to “welcome the event of the Other” without reducing him to some phenomenological structure of meaning (106). Instead, the Other and its meaning are encountered through sensibility. The sensual self must precede the Husserlian intentional subject because the Husserlian intentional subject is a constituting force and therefore active, as seen in the discussion on aurality. The sensible is experienced primordially as “a vulnerability of the self to exteriority” (Doukhan, 434). It constitutes a first “awareness” of otherness and therefore it has ethical significance (435). Through sensibility we become aware of radical Otherness. The passive nature of the sensuous-affective inscription is necessary for Levinas to keep the active structure of the Husserlian subject out of play when describing the encounter. If the Other somehow can have meaning, convey sense, outside of these active ontological structures, Levinas succeeds in keeping the ontological or phenomenological and the transcendental domain separate – whose separation we have already shown to be problematic. The emphasis on passivity and different temporal structures Levinas later adds in *Otherwise than Being* that Bergo and

Doukhan describe are indicators that Levinas thought the encounter and the subject were underdeveloped or perhaps lacking in his earlier texts.

In Doukhan's description of events, can Levinas still claim that the self is passive, a necessary mode of the subject in order for the meaning conveyed to be immediate rather than mediated by active structures like reflection or comprehension that would violate radical alterity? If the I appears not to be passive at all, that would therefore mean that a meaningful encounter with radical alterity cannot occur without some form of reduction to a relation or a third neutral term. Perhaps, as the becoming aware is incited by radical alterity, which is similar to how we, for example, "become" a grandparent passively. However, it is the self that is the subject of the becoming. This brings another tension into play as we must wonder how this becoming *aware* and the structure of the intentional subject are linked. The awareness cannot rely on a form of reflection because that would reduce the epiphany of the face to the ontological level of phenomena and reason therefore assigning an active role to the intentional subject, similar to Husserl's description. Additionally, it would endanger the immediacy of the epiphany. How should this awareness then be understood? If it is simply the mode of the self, as interrupted, as opened to the other, how could the Other enter the self before it is opened? If it was already open before, then there is no need for the epiphany of the face. If the self is always already open because it is always already in relation to the Other, and thereby always already conditioned by this Other to have this *awareness*, how can Levinas then still claim that they do not form a totality in any sense of that word?

TEMPORALITY

Stauffer phrases the question of becoming a subject in relation to Levinas' notion of time. Levinas argues that there cannot be a linear narrative as it is not a becoming-subject, but rather an affective moment that is never concluded. As subject, there is a movement into the self that interrupts the sovereignty that the ego *thought* it possessed. There are thus two sides to this account. The Other as always already there and the self-sufficient ego coiling in on itself. In Stauffer's words, "Levinas will not give us an origin on which to hang our theory" concerning the self (Stauffer & Bergo, 41). He supports that by arguing that the time of the Self and that of the Other never collapse. It is rather an "interrelation" facilitated by the third, and terms like sooner and later should not be seen as linear but relating to the priority of ethics (42). Temporality is therefore an important aspect of Levinas's argument as to how radical alterity is and remains radically separated. Firstly, since beings are often described as being in space and time, to describe the Other as beyond being and time is the most

comprehensible way of stating the Other is different, not in opposition or in negation, but as outside those determination. Secondly, since the Other is not in time or in being he does not have to confirm to those determinations when discussing the ‘narrative’ of the ethical encounter. Like Stauffer points out, he will not give an origin because he argues that would be a reduction of the Other to the Same simply because of the interrelation between the Other, the I and the ethical relation. If Levinas would have given a linear narrative of the encounter with the Other, he would have reduced the Other to the Same.

However, Levinas himself collapses the temporalities of the I and the Other. Diachrony, which is the idea of the time of the Other, beyond being, does not exist in being. It has no time or place, no ontological determination. However, it must “coexist” with synchrony, the time of the Self and being, as it interrupts synchrony (43). Longneaux emphasises that Levinas defines the Other as coming from another world “*in the form of another time*” which goes against his notion of the Other as being “without common measure with the present” (Stauffer & Bergo, 63). The same issue comes back when speaking of responsibility. The onset of responsibility can equally not “exist” as it comes from the beyond being, the absolute other who interrupts the self. On the other hand, it does exist because responsibility is the very ontological definition of the self, as it is being-for-the-other. Responsibility is exactly what we are. Stauffer argues that that is the difficulty (43). This difficulty is of a similar nature as the difficulties discussed in the paradox of the transcendental-ontological link.

Marion raises a similar question: how can a non-phenomenon appear to a self that is not yet a self? He argues that the *self* that the face “shows” itself to can be phenomenologically legitimate only if it is returned to “the *self* of a *self-giving*” (Marion, 225). This is the idea of donation, which is radicalized by the idea of the face being heard rather than seen since this reflects the turn from an active seeing from the subject to a passive receiving by the subject. The mode of appearing of the face is an appeal for this very reason. This reversal still does not resolve the tension of how that passive self can receive or understand that appearance as the fact remains that its origin is absolute alterity. Likewise, Marion wonders if there is not some kind of agency to the subject who responds to the appeal by giving his world, similar to what Levinas argued was the case for Husserl’s notion of the preconscious?

To conclude this section, there appears to be a systematic ambiguity in Levinas’s account of the preoriginary relation and sense that is reflected in the changes Levinas made in his later work and in the debate among the Levinasian scholars. The systematic ambiguity is such that Levinas simultaneously claims that there is radical difference, or radical separation between

the I and the Other and that the Other is always already there – either assumed in the Self’s egoistic life or in the preoriginary ‘relation’ – somehow bestowing sense on the I whilst never falling into a relation with mediation via a third neutral term. As pointed out by Stauffer, Levinas does not give a narrative of origin as this narrative would result exactly in either the Other founding the I, thereby losing its radical separation (unless one claims that this can be solved by a figure outside of philosophy; see the next section) or there is mediation between the I and the Other through sense, therefor founding a relation of mediation. This ambiguity is not resolved, but Levinas is aware of this tension as he addresses and changes the narrative in his later works – although, I would argue, it still does not resolve this tension since the tension is a result of his core concept of having a relation with radical alterity. Additionally, the difficulties that the secondary sources mention and try to resolve by further discussing elements of Levinas’s philosophy like the preoriginary relation, passiveness, diachrony and the structure of the self can all be brought back to this fundamental tension. The difficulties that the secondary sources aim to clarify thus remain as they are a result of the core claim of Levinas’s philosophy. It thus seems that the radical separation between the I and the Other as described by Levinas is founded on an ambiguous claim, that being the possibility of a meaningful relation without relation with radical alterity.

3.3 The Paradox of Relation

What do we encounter? Levinas describes first that it is the face that we encounter, and this face is the Enigma of the Trace of the Other, but it is not the Other that we meet as the face comes from the “dimension of height”, which is the dimension of the Other (*TI* 78). On the one hand, this shift from “face” to “enigma” to “trace” to “dimension of height” to “Other” fits in Levinas’ idea that the Other, when we encounter it, is fleeting. In the discussion of the trace, he speaks of withdrawal, in the discussion of the face, he speaks of the undoing of the form. The fact that he cannot put into words this that the I encounters, that he keeps adding layers to this that is encountered reflects that inexpressibility of the Other. Like Perpich shows, the concrete experience of the face is “betrayed” the moment it is put into words (Morgan 249). The face itself is thus “utterly concrete and positive” yet impossible to fit within any structure (Cibotaru, 69). What this conundrum exposes is the fact that this experience of transcendence, of the Other, is essentially of religious structure. Cibotaru argues that it is exactly the idea of God that “crystallizes” transcendence, which is “incarnated in the face of the Other” (66). The experience of transcendence by a subject is

indeed what can be understood as religion. It relies on a God to account for a concrete ‘crystallised’ face that is simultaneously a fleeting non-phenomenon. Without this God, Levinas would not be able to explain how the face appears without being ‘betrayed’. Cibotaru argues that this demands a specific modality of access to meaning, or, a specific type of subject that can have this modality of access to the meaning of the Other. She argues that the phenomenological meaning for ethics requires the recognition of God by the subject (55). The experience of the face cannot appear concretely but can be experienced as such by a subject – a religious experience.

Levinas claims that the encounter with the Other is the foundation of the ethical relationship. This encounter is a meaningful encounter, as the Other decentralises and disrupts the I. It is meaningful in the sense that the Other somehow enters the horizon of the I, of the totality, to disrupt it. The ambiguity I am referring to here is that of the fact that Levinas keeps adding layers to what it is that is encountered. The face as Enigma as Trace as dimension of height as Other can also be seen as Levinas avoiding the fact that for something to be a break in a horizon, it still gains a meaning from that horizon it is a gap in. Formulating this within the discourse of the preoriginal relationship as described by Drabinski, the ‘gap’ within the horizon is rephrased as a ‘forgotten’ horizon which seems to escape this critique. The ontological horizons, those of light and revealing, are seen as a different kind of horizon, a different mode. However, we know that this different mode is still an interruption. Whether that interruption is a literal hole in the wall or a metaphorical hole in the ontological totality of understanding, the critique remains: is this hole not defined by its *relation to* its surroundings in which it created that hole?

As explained by Perpich, Levinas wanted to explore the possibility of meaning that is transcendent to the world, that is not constituted by an Ego, as opposed to Heidegger and Husserl (Morgan 246). For them, all intelligibility is a function of the place one holds within the totality of relations it finds itself in. The face as break in the horizon must thus not be otherworldly, but it cannot receive a meaning from this web of relations either. Instead, the face would “(somehow) simply from or out of itself” have meaning in the world without belonging to it or assimilate to it (246). The face-to-face can thus not be mediated because that would cause it to refer to a horizon. The alterity of the Other cannot be relative. To be able to claim that the Other cannot be thought in a totality, its alterity cannot be dependent on the I, or the world it has a constitutional relation with. To be absolute, one cannot have reference to something else as its foundation.

In another essay, Perpich discusses two famous contradictions of the face within Levinas' work. The first contradiction is addressed most famously by Derrida in his essay 'Violence and Metaphysics'. As summarized by Perpich, Levinas presents the face as a non-phenomenal "phenomenon" that represents "[...] the impossibility of its own representation" (Perpich 103). In response, Derrida argues that to have meaning as other, it must appear first. If there is not some sort of "evidence", how can we have a sense of the other (104)? Following from Derrida's inquiry, the face of the Other either is not what Levinas says it is, or it has to be specified in what sense the face *is*. The second contradiction is given by Marion who points out that the face is at the same time identified yet can never be conceptualised. By identification, Marion refers to the act of assigning a determinate predicate (Perpich, 104). This is then linked to the Saying-Said distinction by asking if "[...] the face in expression or Saying [can] appeal to (or even command) the ego while leaving both its own identity and the determinate nature of the appeal in suspense" (105). The distinction saying-said refers to Merleau-Ponty, who described the first as having been captured in the plasticity of the phenomenological and the second which has not been caught, is not sedimented.

THE ROLE OF GOD

As noted by Peperzak, the notion of God was left underdeveloped in *Totality and Infinity*, but some kind of religious aspect is present in his works (*MG* 9). After all, he speaks of the 'dimension of height', defines the ethical relation as "religion" and often refers to God (*TI* 78, 80). Therefore, it is necessary to discuss the topic of God and religion, since a reader of Levinas is left with two questions: Where is this God? Is the Other God, or are they separate? The importance this question has for the paradox is how the relation between radical alterity and the I is possible without mediation. In religion, it is generally accepted that belief is the foundation for a relationship and is therefore less reliant on or exempt from logical argumentation. If the Other is indeed God, we must ask whether Levinas relies, fully or partly, on belief for the burden of proof of his philosophy, and what that entails for philosophical enterprise.

Whether God and the Other are two terms for the same (non)concept is debatable. There are passages where they seem to be equated whereas in other passages Levinas seems to keep them separate. Marion argues that Levinas does this on purpose to emphasize the "indecision of the origin of the face" (227). Bergo argues that God functions as the opening to the "excess of sense whose origin is sensation," which is exactly how the Other was defined in *Totality*

and Infinity (134). Cibotaru argues that the meaning of God arises from the encounter with the Other, and that it therefore his original meaning is ethical rather than ontological (65). Therefore, the question of God's existence is secondary. More importantly, The Other is not God is not equal to God but reveals God (65). Schroeder, on the other hand, lovingly refers to the Other as "(w)ho(l)ly Other" (191). What these scholars show is that the literature is divided on this topic.

There are certain historical difficulties to confront when addressing the notion of God in Levinas. First and foremost, Levinas himself was a theologian as well as a philosopher. He always expressed the wish not to become a 'Jewish philosopher,' and repeatedly claimed that his religious and philosophical works were separate (*MG*, 20-21). Nevertheless, many scholars point out that his religious thought does shine through in his philosophy. Nicholas-Weil and Hill, for example, argue that the structure of the self, the relation to the other and the possibility of justice as described by Levinas are especially reminiscent of Jewish religious thought (8), especially of an eschatology (Stauffer & Bergo, 242). Although we should not reduce Levinas's philosophy to his religious work and his Jewish studies, we should engage in the question of what role God has in Levinas's work. Additionally, if some of his assumptions come from his religious views, it is only fair to be sceptical of them and enquire further into them for the sake of philosophical argumentation.

In this line of thought, Bergo argues that there seem to be two prevalent readings of Levinas, namely a secular and a religious reading. The first would focus on the face-to-face encounter, whereas the second would focus on the "dual meaning of the third party" as both the "enigmatic force behind the other" and the foundation for justice (118). Bergo argues that these readings are intertwined, and that one reading cannot be removed or be seen as worse than the other. She argues that Levinas opens hermeneutic possibilities *because* of the Jewish influences. His thought, like Nietzsche's, goes against the Christian history of phenomenology. The two loci of this intertwining Bergo identified are exactly the areas I raise as problematic in Levinas. The first being "the nature and place of revelation" referring to the immanence of the transcendent and what Bergo refers to as "Levinasian extroceptivity" which is the structure of the preoriginal relationship and the 'sens ethique' (121). The second is the possibility of the holy.

Bergo also sides with Levinas by arguing that one should not try to "dig" underneath the saying – *dire* – as the focus should be on the unsaying of the said and listening to the word of the Other. To dig beneath would mean that one would be trying to conceptualise or thematise the Other, as the Other's expression as *καθ' αὐτό* is a saying that can never become said.

Bergo emphasises the fact that Levinas' unsaying does not aim to show that there is being, but – paradoxically – a “transcendental affect” (123). Paradoxically, because to philosophically argue what must not be conceptualised contradicts itself. Additionally, because it is exactly digging underneath the saying that this philosophy of radical alterity is doing by proposing a radical alterity from who the saying is supposedly coming from.

Levinas argues that God is necessary for the unity of sense:

We do not think that what makes sense can do without God, nor that the idea of Being, or the Being [*l'être*] of being [*l'étant*], can substitute for God to lead signification to the unity of sense without which there is no sense. (HO 25).

Levinas wrote this in reply to the death of God. For him, the death of God is the death of a certain kind of god, namely the one reduced to the Same. However, he still relies on God for the unity of sense in the ontological sphere. What this passage shows is that there is *something* necessary to create a unity of sense. However, if Levinas wants to argue that the sense on which his ethics is built is one that comes from beyond being, from an absolute alterity, he must rely on some term to bridge the gap between absolute alterity and Same to have such unity. This means somehow the unity and origin of sense that we find in being that comes from absolute alterity, as argued by Levinas, is mediated by God in such a way that both being and radical alterity remain absolutely different. God can thus bridge a gap without a bridge, according to Levinas. He does not give an explanation how.

Kearney identified a similar problem which both shows why we cannot define the Other nor why Levinas can tell us how the unbridged bridging can be explained. He argues that the philosophers who sought to return to God after the death of God argue for a kind of “anatheism”, which would encapsulate the critiques of atheism whilst having a God. This God gets rid of theodicy and metaphysical causation. Instead, it would “return to a new” messianic or eschatological God (Kearney, 167). In Levinas, the God that is, is replaced by a God that is coming. This is what the I does in the ethical relationship, the atheist I that is without a God of being opens its home for absolute Other. Judaism, Kearney argues, gave Levinas the gift of atheism, of absolute separation (168). This new messianic idea of God, however, can still not account for the unbridged bridging. Kearney identifies a similar point of contention that this chapter has repeatedly encountered: “[...] the best an anatheist philosopher can do is to disclose a site where the freedom of our will is rooted in a listening to a "word" of which one is neither source nor master” (176). Concretely, God is the final word when we ask Levinas how.

The ‘how’, for example, of the transcendental-ontological link addressed in this chapter can be answered in a similar fashion. The issue that was encountered is that Levinas cannot fully explain how the transcendental relation can influence the ontological if it is claimed to be radically different from the ontological. Either it would form a totality, a relation with relation, or there is no way to affirm that there is radical alterity at all as there cannot be an encounter of any form of understanding at all. Sirovatka argues that for Levinas, the metaphysical relation is always at the same time the relation to the neighbour as man is “the place through which transcendence passes” (32). The personal other would always refer to the otherness of the infinite, of God. Our moral, ethical relation would thus be a parallel to our relation to the Other. The relation the I has with God must be understood, not as strictly between the I and God, but as something that happens in the ethical relationship to other human beings.

3.4 Bringing the Paradoxes Together

In this chapter, I have discussed three paradoxes: that of the transcendental-ontological link, that of sense, and that of relation. The questions that these paradoxes discussed are how the transcendental and the ontological can have a meaningful and productive interaction if they are radically separated, how the Other can be meaningful for the I, and how the relation between the Other and the I can be unmediated yet sustained. Although I have presented these paradoxes as separate problems, they all stem from the core claim Levinas makes about the nature of the ethical relation. That is, according to Levinas, there is a meaningful encounter between radical alterity and the Same without the reduction to a third natural term, or to a mediated relation. The paradoxes that have been discussed all show that it could either be questioned whether there truly was no reduction to a third term – such as ontology, phenomenology, meaning or time – or that there is an issue of how the encounter is possible at all if the Other and the I are as Levinas argues they are. It appears that these paradoxes can therefore only be resolved by either addressing this core claim of having a meaningful encounter with radical alterity without mediation or, as Levinas himself does, introduce a theological aspect to explain how the relation can remain unmediated.

4. Beyond the Ambivalence

So far, we have discussed Levinas's overall project and the major ambivalences that are present in his work. Although Levinas's counterarguments might address some of these issues, they are resolved in such a manner that cause another type of philosophical tension – that is, they rely on a God-like figure. This is an undesirable dependency because it replaces the burden of proof with the necessity of belief. The question that now stands is: if the tensions laid out in chapter three mean that we cannot sustain his philosophy without relying on a God-like figure, what value does Levinas's philosophy hold? How can Levinas's philosophy be restructured so that it no longer relies on belief to solve its paradoxes? What of his philosophy remains after a departure from God?

4.1 Can the Gap be Bridged?

We have established that, according to Levinas, there can be radical alterity that somehow remains radical in its alterity even when it is in relation with the Same. This relation is then described as absorbing the two terms, and that which is encountered to establish this relationship is either encountered through a break, a transcendence or a metaphor of fleeting. The *καθ' αὐτό* expression of the Other is not reduced to the empiric-ontological structure of the constituting ego. Neither is the fact that that ego, which is at the same time constituted by the Other, ontologically determined by the Other an incrimination on the radical difference of Same and the Other. For Levinas, they remain absolutely different. He also denies that the relation between the Same and the Other can in any way be seen as a totality. It would be a mistake on the reader's side to argue that it is.

There are two major paths that follow from Levinas's philosophy. Those two paths are to either read this philosophy as a philosophy of encounter or to read this philosophy as a mystical story. In the third chapter, a few tensions were laid bare. The two major results were that, either it seemed like there was a relation after all or it seemed impossible for a meaningful encounter to occur if you stay true to Levinas' description of the Other. Therefore, I argue that Levinas walks the second path, that of mysticism. His philosophy relies on the assumption that there is a radical alterity that can be encountered without forming a totality; that the paradox of the immanence of non-reduced radical alterity in the Same is allowed. This ambivalence is solved in mysticism—and in mysticism only—because the notion of radical alterity is somehow beyond or outside of this ambivalence and is

therefore a certainty that can uphold the ambivalence. This is problematic because this radical alterity escapes philosophical critiques due to its mystical nature. As a result, an ambiguous philosophy is sustained as it relies on something (a mystical principle) that justifies this ambiguity which itself cannot be philosophically examined. The ambiguous philosophy is resolved by proxy, having delegated the burden of proof to a ‘beyond’.

Levinas is well aware that, in the history of the philosophical tradition, relation and radical alterity cannot co-occur. In fact, Levinas himself points out that what he does is a paradox if one holds to a philosophy of epistemology or ontology (*MG* 211-212). Here, Levinas and I find ourselves at an impasse. We both recognize that there is a paradox at the heart of this debate. For Levinas, this is because his philosophy goes against what the history of Western philosophy has always done. He writes:

“Philosophy is said to be a reasonable argumentation, that proceeds from the one evident [argument] to the next, appointed, as she is, to that which is visible and reveals itself, and thus also appointed to presence.” (*MG*, 211)³

He continues to argue – by proceeding from one evident argument to the next – for a philosophy that goes beyond this “said to be.” However, following his line of argumentation, I argue that one must ask whether philosophy can have a paradox at its core. Is that still philosophy?

To lose the paradox at the heart of Levinas’ philosophy, there are two possibilities (besides mysticism). Either there is radical alterity, but no meaningful encounter, or there is only non-radical alterity and a meaningful encounter. The first option would result in a meaningless discussion about radical alterity. How could one speak of something that cannot be encountered or known? It would lead to a senseless, non-debate. Therefore, we move to the second option which calls for a meaningful encounter with alterity that is not absolute. It is this line of argumentation that I will further develop in this chapter.

4.2 What Remains on this Side of the Riverbank?

There can either be radical alterity or a meaningful encounter, but they are not mutually compatible. As the gap cannot be bridged the following question comes to mind: should we

³ Original Dutch quote: “De filosofie zou een redelijk betoog zijn, dat van de ene evidentie naar de andere voortgaat, aangewezen als ze is op dat wat te zien is en zich vertoont, en dus ook aangewezen op tegenwoordigheid.”

disregard Levinas's philosophy as there is an unsustainable ambivalence at its core? What is Levinas without radical alterity? Although a drastic departure must be done from Levinas, his philosophy can be restructured so that many core critiques and theses can be sustained. In this section, I will discuss what value Levinas's restructured philosophy retains of his philosophical work and which new questions arise from the restructured philosophy.

Most central in Levinas's philosophy is the fundamental status of the other, in the ethical "relation" to the I. A major tension comes from the notion of a non-relation with radical alterity. One possible solution to this tension is to argue for non-radical alterity. This would solve the issue of simultaneously bridging a gap and claiming that this gap is never bridged. The phenomenological tradition already has produced theories that support some idea of alterity but not to the degree of radical difference. Parts of these theories can be presented in a 'Levinasian flavour', by which I mean that we can put the debate of the phenomenological tradition into Levinasian terms and lay emphasis on the particular notions of Otherness and ethics as first philosophy so that they take precedence in the existing phenomenological discourse. It is here that we find the first hurdle for a reimagining of Levinas without radical alterity. What licenses the need to stress, for example, responsibility when there is no longer a radical Other that demands the I to find itself as having responsibility as the very mode of being-in-the-world? This is the question I aim to answer by overlaying the phenomenological tradition with Levinas to extract and preserve the 'Levinasian flavour' that this thesis is aiming to support. In that sense, I am presenting a 'phenomenology first' approach rather than a 'ethics first' approach.

One argument against Levinas that can provide a starting point is given by Derrida. He argued that the Western philosophical tradition was much more open to the Other than Levinas made it out to be. Derrida already found a particular openness toward alterity that Levinas, in his eyes, unnecessarily titled as totalisation. Rather than an "all-or-nothing" approach that argues all interaction between the Same and the Other would corrupt the cleanliness of radical alterity, we should accept that alterity reveals itself in language and that discourse can never fully grasp the Other (Morgan, 140). As such, Derrida argues that there can be a relation *with* relation without fully reducing the Other to the same. In line with Levinas, the relation with the other is in discourse, in sense, where there always remains a certain difference and distance between the I and the other, but there is no necessity for radical alterity to explain that inexpressibility. The encounter with this other can therefore follow a similar narrative to what Levinas presented.

It is on this particular fact, that there is indeed some kind of ungraspable alterity, that we must try to relocate the necessity of a Levinasian flavour of phenomenology. If we agree with Levinas that there can only be total difference or total subsumption, this notion of alterity cannot be sustained. A philosophy that would not accept the ambiguities of his philosophy would thus fall to a philosophy that has no alterity whatsoever. The danger of a philosophy like that is, amongst other things, is the elimination of any possibility of learning. The important task is therefore to describe a philosophy that, as Derrida argues, has some idea of alterity that can encounter an I without falling completely into the same. Additionally, this restructuring must approach this question as a debate of meaning, of *sens*. This is necessary because the relation between the I and alterity is indeed understood as one of language and meaning – not just by Levinas, but by the phenomenological tradition.

In absolute opposition to Levinas, I argue that the emphasis should instead be on relationality, more specifically the primordial relation with the self and the world as terms. In this sense, both terms can remain separate and remain experienced from a particular point of view. The alterity remains, to a certain extent, ungraspable without the need for a bridged yet unbridgeable gap as it will always be the other term of the relation. In that sense, this reimagining is more in line with Derrida and the traditional phenomenology as presented by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as it has traded in the radical Other that is, at least, reminiscent of a theological deity for what I call non-radical or soft alterity. Another aspect of Levinas that can be cherished in this ‘phenomenology first’ approach is the idea that the I remains, as it were, a point of departure. The lived experience is still of an I; we can never step outside our lived experience as I to view our relation with the world, with the other, as omnipotent being. The I is always I, yet it is not the centre of the ontological even if it always finds itself as point of departure of lived experience.

In this decentring of the self by stating the primacy of relationality two prominent Levinasian notions can be reintroduced. Those are the dethroning of intentionality as sovereign power of sense and the always-already-there other. How this dethroning comes about could still possibly be described as an interruption. After all, we experience the world as a subject-object, or subject-world duality, where the subject is the point of departure of that lived experience. This is exactly the paradoxical fact of perception, Merleau-Ponty argues (Lorelle, 196). This can be rephrased in Levinas’s narrative of interruption as to discover that lived experience is paradoxical, to find yourself immanent to the world and the world equally as immanent in you is interrupting in the sense that you find yourself as a semi-permeable being rather than a fast, well-defined isolation of being. You are no longer the

centre as the fundamental relation has taken that position. As for the second notion, because there is no world without an I and no I without a world, they are both ‘already there’ – independent of the discovery of the relation being primary to the terms by a subject. There is never an I without the alterity of the world. The difference is that this world is not a radical alterity. This account can maintain a certain degree of alterity without ambiguity when there is an encounter or interaction between the two terms.

An important project Merleau-Ponty had taken upon himself is to argue against a harsh distinction between inside and outside, subject and object. He repeated Husserl’s idea of the touching-touched – you are both the hand touching your other hand as the hand that is touched – to exemplify how you are never just subject or object, but always both. The distinction between active and passive, phrased as the distinction between the subject and the object is blurred. A conclusion he draws is that this blurring of the duality, in addition to relation primary to its terms, means that there is never a pure subject, clear-cut from the object or the outside. The world is immanent in the subject and vice versa – they are necessary conditions for each other. His notion of sensibility reflects this, as “[s]ensibility is reversed indeed, from the experience of the *exteriority* of the world, to the experience of its *interiority*” (Lorelle, 192). When this is phrased in terms of the Levinasian dualism of self-other, we find a very similar idea of ‘the other in me’ that is present in Levinas. There is immanence of alterity within the same without relying on an idea of radical alterity. The immanence, however, is this the immanence of alterity as one term of the relation and the self as the other term, where the relation is primary to its terms.

Additionally, as Longneaux phrased it, another one of Levinas’s biggest issues with the Western tradition was its description of the relation to alterity as a “one-way street, governed fully by the cogito (Stauffer & Bergo, 66). This issue is also addressed when the emphasis is shifted from radical alterity to a primordial relationality as there is not first or more important term because both the world and the subject are secondary to the relation. With the loss of absolutely demarcated subject-object or inside-outside, an immanent relation with alterity plays a part in the constitution of the self but does not fully absorb alterity in the Same. Although this is quite the opposite to Levinas’s ‘relation without relation’ it does reflect a certain sense of the immanence of alterity within the same. In this construction between alterity and the self, there is appeal on a radical Other – or rather a radical Other that has an appeal on the self both in confrontation and from *within* the self in the constitution of subjecthood. Because I have argued that the relation between self and other is primary to its terms, we can ask the question is that primary relation itself can be called ethics. The issue

with this argument, however, is that this primary relationship does not necessarily entail responsibility, or any other normative power.

That is the biggest departure the ‘phenomenology first’ approach does from Levinas. This line of argumentation has essentially ‘demoted’ the ethical question from a metaphysical one to an ontological one. The comprehension of being as a relation prior to its terms is what founds the possibility of ethics rather than ethics being the primary and therefore necessary relation that informs ontology. We would have turned Levinas on his head only to return to what he critiqued: philosophy as ontology first. This is not done without dangers. What Levinas’s narrative allowed him to do, is argue for a necessity of ethics in which alterity and the other, as far as that translates to the personal other, has a sovereign and protected position within the ethical relation. The ‘phenomenology first’ approach, although respecting somewhat the idea of inexpressibility and inviolability of alterity, the question of mediation, light, epistemology, time and presence are now relevant again in ways that Levinas could bypass due to the nature and primacy of the Other and the ethical relation.

Is responsibility then a purely cultural and socio-political law or an empirical phenomenon? Is ethics an afterthought of being rather than a fundamental mode of being? Perhaps it is. That would, at least, explain why we are able to do so many immoral things, or ignore our responsibility with such ease. One glance at any news channel or flipping through any newspaper can function as an example of that statement. However, this does not necessarily mean that ethics is futile or unimportant. In fact, when we argue for an embodied world, are we not arguing for a world where alterity is as fundamental, as primary is the self? Must we then not acknowledge that there is a fundamental need for something like an ethics, even if this is only a result from the ontological state of being? We cannot ignore ethics just because it is not necessary in the way Levinas argued it was. We must just redefine where and how ethics is situated if we argue against a relation with a radical Other. I argue we can here turn to the ‘soft other’ and the idea of a fundamental relationality. Borrowing Levinas’s strategy, it is possible to argue that ethics should be understood as an interrupting of an other of the I, of understanding the self as decentred rather than a normative list of laws, we could possibly argue for the fact that this relation prior to its terms is the ethical relation. We would be back at an argument that states ethics is fundamental and necessary. Whether or not this relationship is necessarily experienced as responsibility is questionable since this relation is first and foremost a relationship of meaning, sense, and significance.

A related question that follows is: how can this “new” ethical relation then distinguish between the human other and the non-human? Is this distinction still necessary? In the third

chapter, I showed that Levinas has an issue when it comes to explaining why we do have an ethical relation with other people but not with animals, based on the notion of the face. Describing the relation as being between the self and the world rather than just between the self the (personal) other would also address the animal question and the additional question of the responsibility we experience across from non-human beings in general. The relation is one between the self and alterity in general. A danger that the distinction self-world as opposed to self-other holds, is the fact that it is easy to see how the other person becomes an object among objects in the world. This is part of the violent tendency Levinas had identified, in which we turn the other into an object for us, a site of enjoyment of the egoistic I. In my opinion, Levinas is right to claim it is a danger to reduce the other to 'only' an object since this goes against our day-to-day moral experience. It appears to be desirable to have criterium to distil or establish a privileged position for human other when we speak of an ethical relationship.

When we allow some sort of overlap between the self and the other without that necessarily being a violation of alterity in general – be that mediation by perception or sensibility – we would also be able to argue for a criterium that could explain why the relation to human others is different, more critical perhaps, than our relation to non-human beings. One possibility could indeed be something like the phenomenon of the face, which would ground the argument for separation between humans and non-humans. However, I do think that there are two important issues that Levinas has already raised that are still applicable here. Those issues are that of vision and of presence. If it is just purely vision that dictates the ethical relationship, are the blind then unable to have an ethical relation? Are we only partaking in an ethical relation when we are in the presence of the phenomenon of the face? Instinctively, the answer to both these questions is no. In that case, should there be a notion of the face? Or must people not receive a privileged position when we speak of an ethical relation simply because the only reason to do so is arbitrary? In any case, the question of responsibility has expanded to a greater domain than just the human without thereby relying on an arbitrary distinction between a face and a non-face, for example.

In relation to the meaning of the face, there remains a question of meaning and sense in general. Can and should Levinas's critiques on Husserl remain in this reimagining of Levinas? As discussed in the second part of the third chapter, Levinas argues that there is a forgotten horizon at play that can endow meaning and sense from outside of a subject's intentional structure, its own horizons. Although there are ambiguities brought forward by

Levinas's description of that forgotten horizon, there are parts of his critique that are still relevant even though I have argued against a notion of radical alterity. As argued by Perpich:

“Not everything can be defined by its use value in some human plan or project of the whole of human being may not be adequately portrayed in terms of the intentional structure of consciousness – even when the account is brilliantly extended, as it was in Heidegger's work.” (Perpich, 245)

Levinas' philosophy can account for meaning in the world that is beyond the intentional structure of the subject. Levinas clarified the distinction between himself and Heidegger by describing the moving of a chair. For Heidegger, he says, one moves a chair to sit on it, and that is the meaning of this situation. However, when one moves a chair, one makes noise, one scrapes the floor, etc. (Morgan, 245). There is a lot more “value” – to borrow Perpich's words – than there originally was in the intentional plan of this subject. In relation to the idea of a forgotten horizon, I think there is indeed a critique present here that needs to be directed at the notion of intentionality. How does one deal with meaning “imposed” on an intentional subject, as is done by alterity? Levinas's philosophy is extremely potent in exploring these limitations of the phenomenological tradition.

Moreover, there is another important critique Levinas addresses to the philosophies of being. A famous quote of Levinas is that *Dasein* does not get hungry (*TI* 134). What Levinas tries to convey is that, before a subject has this utilitarian relation to the world, there is first one of enjoyment and a living-from (Morgan, 755). We do not just eat food to nourish and energize our body, we also enjoy eating good food. Levinas colours being, not as this distilled mode of existence, but incorporates very fundamental human experience into the narrative. He describes enjoyment as this independent dependency of the other – small letter o. What I find important in this critique is the fact that, even in an abstract narrative, Levinas manages to incorporate lived experience in such a way that he can retain these experiences in the most basic and most fundamental ontological descriptions. In Cibotaru's words, Levinas's I of that *lives from...* is not desubjectified like *Dasein* (69). Although viewing the world as tools versus viewing the world as a place of enjoyment, of something to live from, might not seem that important, I think it does manage to prioritise the ethical question, even without a notion of radical alterity. Namely, if the world, if otherness is just a tool for the self, how would one go on from this point to create an ethics? It would almost necessarily be some sort of utilitarian description. If our relation to otherness is one of enjoyment rather than utility, what would that mean for ethics? I do think Levinas points out a significant difference between people and non-people as the other person is not and should not be just a site of enjoyment in

the same manner as, for example, food is. Again, this is already reflected in our day-to-day moral experience. In that sense, the ethical question makes a distinction between people and non-people. To close of this argument, although this ‘phenomenology approach’ has indeed prioritized ontology over ethics, this does not mean that it has immediately fallen back to Heidegger. Understanding that our way of being in relation to otherness is one of enjoyment rather than utility reflects the departure this approach has from the phenomenological tradition.

To conclude on this ‘phenomenology first’ approach, I return to the question of why we would want to have this rewritten, softened version of Levinas at all. What this thesis has shown is that there are quite a few ambiguities present in Levinas’s philosophy but that these can be solved by replacing radical alterity with an alterity as found in phenomenological approaches who view the relation between the self and the other as primary to its terms. I think it is important to see how well many of Levinas’s crucial notions fit into this more classic phenomenological narrative because I think his critique – that the Western tradition of philosophy tends to forget or violate the notion of alterity – is just and important. The classic phenomenological narratives are not concerned with ethics primarily. By showing how well many of Levinas’s arguments that are central to his ethics fit within the other narratives, my aim was to reintroduce ethics back into the phenomenological debate from perhaps an earlier point within the philosophical narrative than that the classic phenomenologists have done, or at least, ask the question whether certain steps should already be considered as ethical rather than ontological or purely phenomenological. Even if the answer to that question may turn out to be negative, the Levinasian flavour is particularly productive for that debate.

5. Concluding Remarks

There is one crucial point where Levinas and I seem to meet that has so far not been mentioned because it asks you to take a step back and place the debate this thesis contains into the bigger picture. That crucial point is that there is a limit to what philosophy can do. Although the demarcation of philosophy might not be as clear-cut, the discussion that is brought about stems from one point of contention: what can philosophy account for? I agree with Levinas that philosophy “is said to be” something, because I believe that philosophy is limited. What Levinas’s philosophy, and the issue that I have taken with it in this thesis shows is that some assumptions simply cannot be welcomed into a philosophical approach.

Does this mean that Levinas is not a philosopher? Of course not. It would be an extreme loss to the philosophical tradition to think so. First of all, Levinas is truly situated in the Greek tradition and his critique of phenomenology, ontology, theology, empiricism, idealism and so on are what fuels philosophy to develop. I cannot understate the importance of Levinas’s work in the philosophical field. Marion, for example, ends his essay with “[b]ut the appearance of this very question we owe to Levinas”, reflecting on the fact that Levinas arouses many philosophically relevant questions that could otherwise not have been raised (240). Second, if we were to draw a hard line around what philosophy is, we would eventually come to a place where philosophy is finished, game over. It is necessary to keep testing the limits and reshape what has always been assumed. It is projects like Levinas’s that show us the limited nature of philosophy and challenge those limits at the same time. I think Derrida puts it best, when he asks if the death of philosophy is a philosophical question. If it is, then philosophy is not dead; if it isn’t, then philosophy cannot answer the question.

My point is that the parts that I have argued are unsustainable in Levinas all result from notions that go beyond what is accepted as philosophical by the Western tradition. This is an iffy argument to make as it is Levinas’s aim to break loose from the Western tradition as he argues it is violent. Additionally, it could lead to the conclusion that philosophy *should be* as the Western tradition demands. You could either argue that these are issues specifically related to Levinas, or that it is an issue of philosophy as a tradition in general. I wonder if we should describe it as an issue at all. You would generally not resent an orange for not being a rock. It just simply is not. What this thesis shows is exactly how philosophy limits Levinas’s project. However, it also shows that there is not an impermeable border between Levinas and philosophy. In that sense, we could argue that philosophy can develop with relation to that which is outside of philosophy but is at the same time limited to certain aspects of itself as

well. Perhaps we must disappoint Levinas and say that we cannot escape totality. However, I will not wave that white flag. Instead, we should focus on relationality and celebrate the other we encounter that way.

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