

EMMANUEL LEVINAS

EMMANUEL LEVINAS:
ETHICS, JUSTICE, AND THE WISDOM OF LOVE

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Abstract

This paper is a discussion of the relation between ethics and politics in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. Generally speaking, I will examine how justice emerges out of a prior relation of infinite responsibility. Levinas points to a tension that arises between ethics and politics. We are always in a paradoxical situation where we are pulled in two opposing directions. On the one hand, we are drawn toward a responsibility for each unique individual. On the other hand, we are always compelled to act justly, to treat everyone equally. Instead of trying to ease this tension, it is my belief that Levinas attempts to heighten it. While a perfect balance between responsibility and politics can never be attained, justice can only arise where there is recognition of, and engagement with the tension that is unavoidable.

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Introduction

“Peace, peace to the neighbour and the one far-off” *Isaiah 57:19*¹

In the first lines of Totality and Infinity Levinas states that “it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality.”² Because of the consequences of traditional ethical theory, as he conceives it, Levinas seeks to offer a new way of thinking about ethics. He claims in “Signature” that his thought is “dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror.” The Second World War is always in the background of his writings. How could the atrocities of the early half of this century happen unless our view of morality is seriously flawed? One of the key concerns of Levinas is peace, but he is critical of the traditional views of peace as being based on truth, knowledge and rationality, where “the other is reconciled with the identity of the identical in everyone.”³ Levinas opposes this view with a picture of the Other as that which cannot be reconciled with the Same. The peace that Levinas seeks to describe is a peace that is not founded in rationality. For him peace and justice arise out of the pre-rational ethical responsibility that I have in any encounter with an Other. Levinas claims that “politics is opposed to morality.”⁴ It seems though that peace occurs

¹ Levinas, Emmanuel. Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers. 1974. Hereafter cited as OB. p.157

² Levinas. Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press. 1961. Hereafter cited as TI. p.21

³ Levinas. “Peace and Proximity,” in Basic Philosophical Writings. Ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. IN: Indiana University Press. 1996. p.162

⁴ Levinas. TI. p.21

only in the political realm. What is meant by this statement is the central concern of this paper. How can we achieve peace in the political realm when it is opposed to morality?

Much of Levinas's writings are spent describing the ethical encounter between one and an Other. What is curious in this account is that he will go on to claim that we are never in a situation where there is only one person and one Other. In any encounter with an Other we see all Others. In the face of the Other we see all of humanity. The reason that Levinas spends such a great deal of time giving a phenomenological account of the ethical relation between one and an Other is to show that justice emerges from this encounter. It seems to me that Levinas's primary aim is to offer a view of justice and politics that is founded, not on reason, but on something prior to reason, on the ethical encounter between one person and another person. In thinking about what Levinas calls the ethical crisis of Europe one can ask oneself if peace does not primarily respond to a call other than that of truth and knowledge. "One can ask oneself if knowledge itself and the politics ruling history do not come into their high office when they already respond to the demand of peace and let themselves be guided by this demand."⁵ Only a politics that recognizes this foundation can be just. On the one hand Levinas describes a radical ethical individualism, a radical responsibility of the one-for-the-Other. On the other hand, he describes a universal justice. Each of these situations are opposed to the other, and yet, each of these situations are necessary in order to suppress violence. It is a paradox of our situation and one that Levinas calls a hypocrisy. There is, and always will be, a tension between politics and ethics, but it is a necessary tension. Only through this

⁵ Levinas. "Peace and Proximity," in Basic Philosophical Writings. p. 165

tension can a just State be established. It is a paradox that calls, not for resolution, but for justice.

Levinas has been interpreted as offering an impossible ethics. He has been seen as demanding an infinite responsibility from finite creatures. While there is this dimension to his thinking, what must not be forgotten is that this unrealistic demand becomes manifested in the real world. The command to infinite responsibility is always already a command to justice, a command to reason and judge. Ethical responsibility demands that we render judgments ethically, and justice demands that we balance our responsibilities. Each acts as a limit on the other. The purpose of this paper is to show how justice emerges out of an infinite responsibility to the Other, and to show how ethics and justice relate to one another. To do this, I will begin, in Chapter 1 with a description of the progression from ethics to justice. There are some significant objections that arise with regard to this account. Some of the most important ones come from Jacques Derrida. Chapter 2 will attempt to address these objections as they are stated in his paper on Levinas "Violence and Metaphysics." In Chapter 3 I will discuss some possible manifestations of a Levinasian form of justice. What needs to be determined is whether or not his views are practical. Can there be such a thing as a just politics for Levinas? Is real peace possible?

Chapter 1

“The first question in the interhuman is the question of justice.”⁶

The ‘and’ in the title of Levinas’s Totality and Infinity points to the fact that Levinas is not simply trying to defend a philosophy of the Other. Levinas has often been accused of defending an ethics of otherness, an ethics of infinite responsibility between one and an Other. While this idea is an important aspect of Levinas’s thought, the quote cited above is evidence that there is much more to Levinas’s thought than a responsibility so abstract that it precedes all thought and conceptualization. Levinas often speaks of the need for synchronization between our “Greek and Biblical heritages.” Justice is the first question for Levinas, but justice always needs to refer back to the Infinite, to the ethical demand placed on each of us in an encounter with an Other. As we will see, the relation between the Greek and Hebrew heritage, between the Totality and Infinity, or between justice and ethics, is a relation where tensions do exist. These tensions though, are not something that need to be, or even could be overcome. Over the course of this paper I will show that these tensions are in fact necessary for there to be real justice. Sameness, that which has been focussed on by traditional philosophy since the Greeks, remains essential to the thinking of Levinas. Because of this, the first thing that needs to be discussed in any description of Levinas’s ethics is his phenomenological account of the life of the separated individual prior to any acknowledgement of an encounter with

⁶ *ibid.* 168

otherness. We will begin, as Levinas does in Totality and Infinity and many other works, with a picture of the existence of an isolated ego.

The Separated Subject

At the beginning of “The Ego and the Totality” Levinas describes the life of being in the totality, the life of a being that has not yet recognized, or acknowledged otherness. He states that a “being that has life in the totality exists as a totality, lives as though it occupied the center of being and were its source, as though it drew everything from the here and now, in which it was nonetheless put or created.”⁷ This position of isolation is called atheism by Levinas. It is a separation “so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated – eventually capable of adhering to it by belief.”⁸ Atheism is described as a position prior to the negation or affirmation of the infinite.

This isolated ego lives in ignorance of the exterior world. This ignorance is described as an absolute absence of thought. It is a life of pure sensation, a life of enjoyment. In Totality and Infinity Levinas elaborates on what he means by enjoyment. Enjoyment is the state of ‘living from.’ Levinas claims that we live from things like “good soup, air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep, etc.”⁹ but that these things are not representations and are not tools or implements in the Heideggerian sense. They are

⁷ Levinas. “The Ego and the Totality,” in Collected Philosophical Papers. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Boston, MA: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers. 1987. p. 25

⁸ Levinas. TI 58

⁹ *ibid.* 110

things by which we are nourished. Nourishment is the transmutation of the other into the same, which is the essence of enjoyment. All enjoyment is alimentation. “What I do and what I am is at the same time that from which I live. We relate ourselves to it with a relation that is neither theoretical nor practical. Behind theory and practice there is enjoyment of theory and practice: the egoism of life. The final relation is enjoyment, happiness.”¹⁰

Levinas notes that there is a certain amount of insecurity that belongs to the order of enjoyment. The plenitude of the I’s “instant of enjoyment is not ensured against the unknown that lurks in the very element it enjoys, the fact that joy remains a chance and a stroke of luck.” He states further that “the happiness of enjoyment, . . . , can be tarnished by the concern for the morrow involved in the fathomless depth of the element in which enjoyment is steeped.”¹¹ This insecurity is tied to the sense of the fragile nature of any enjoyment and to an anxiety about its tomorrow. The uncertainties of the future remind the separated being of its dependencies on the things in the world. He states that “The happiness of enjoyment is stronger than every disquietude, but disquietude can trouble it; here lies the gap between the animal and the human.”¹² The things of the world, on which the separated being is dependent, remind this being that the freedom of enjoyment is limited. Because of this limited freedom, Levinas expands his analysis to include the necessity of economic existence.

Economic existence, for Levinas, is the situation where the separated being moves

¹⁰ *ibid.* 113

¹¹ *ibid.* 144

¹² *ibid.* 149

out into the world in order to labour and possess. The goal of labour and possession is to master the uncertainties of the future, to prepare for possible future needs. Labour consists in the subject sojourning from the home into the world of things. The subject, in labour, appropriates, represents and assimilates the otherness of the world, making these external objects its own. The otherness of the things that we live from is not the Otherness of the Infinite. The otherness of things is a relative and transmutable otherness. Things are assimilated and appropriated in the act of enjoyment. It is the act of “the same determining every other, without the other ever determining it.”¹³

Peperzak states that “Everything that exists appears as an element of the self-constitution of an ego dominating the world, in such a way that the Other can emerge only as a beautiful and intelligent animal, an animated tool, a slave or a cherished object.”¹⁴

Levinas’s description of the dwelling is a further development of the distance maintained between the isolated subject and the exterior world. The dwelling makes the activities of labour and possession possible. He claims that the insecurities that are faced by the subject cannot be overcome unless there is a possibility of withdrawal from the involvement in nature, “a rupture with the elemental realm by which the subject conquers a standpoint and a centerplace from which it can reach out into the world in order to possess and dominate it.”¹⁵ Levinas claims that the dwelling is not situated in

¹³ Levinas. “The Ego and the Totality,” in Collected Philosophical Papers. p.26

¹⁴ Peperzak, Adriaan. Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Illinois: Northwestern University Press. 1997. p.122

¹⁵ Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Indiana: Purdue University Press. 1993. p. 157

the objective world, rather, “the objective world is situated by relation to my dwelling.”¹⁶ Any contemplation of the world by a subject presupposes a withdrawal into a dwelling.

The home is the place to where I can retreat to recollect myself, a place where I can seek refuge and rest from my labour in the world. Recollection is an important term in Levinas’s description of the home. By recollection he means “a suspension of the immediate reactions the world solicits in view of a greater attention to oneself, one’s possibilities, and the situation.”¹⁷ One becomes freed from enjoyment in recollection and this distance from enjoyment is produced because of the intimacy and familiarity of the home. Intimacy and recollection imply, for Levinas, the welcome of another person. He claims that the woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the home and inhabitation. Levinas anticipates the obvious objections with regard to his characterization of the dwelling as the dimension of the feminine when he states that “the empirical absence of the human being of ‘feminine sex’ in a dwelling nowise affects the dimension of femininity which remains open there, as the very welcome of the dwelling.”¹⁸ Peperzak clarifies this statement when he says that “the feminine presence by which a building becomes a home is a metaphor for the discrete and silent presence of human beings for one another that creates a climate of intimacy indispensable for a dwelling that simultaneously protects and opens to the world of enjoyment, possession, and labor.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Levinas. TI 153

¹⁷ *ibid.* 154

¹⁸ *ibid.* 158

¹⁹ Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p. 158

At this point the separated being is able to move out into the world, labour, grasp, and possess things which can be taken back and put away in reserve in the home. This hedonistic, egoistic existence of the isolated subject is the practice of the Same, it is the active determination of all otherness by an ego, without the ego being ^{conditioned} determined by any otherness. In this isolation a being situates itself within a totality while maintaining a distance towards it. So far the description that Levinas offers of the subject may not seem all that different from a traditional description in which the subject is isolated, moves out from this isolation in order to appropriate and assimilate all otherness, and to make this otherness its own. At this point we may even see similarities with a Hobbesian vision where isolated individuals seek their own good and try to satisfy their own needs. For Hobbes though, this view leads to competition between individuals and a war of all against all. As we will see, the conclusions that Levinas reaches are radically different and this is because of the emergence of the Other “who miraculously awakens the vital consciousness to the guilt of its ruthless egoism. This awakening – primordial shame – is the first possibility of an interpersonal relationship.”²⁰ This primordial shame arises because, as Levinas states in “Ethics as First Philosophy,” quoting Pascal, “my being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun,’ my being at home, have these not also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?”²¹ Levinas refers to the escape from this initial state of isolation and

²⁰ *ibid.* 176

²¹ Levinas. “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*. ed. Sean Hand. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell Inc. 1989. p. 82

self-absorption as salvation. The only true salvation occurs in the relation of the face to face encounter with another person. This other person cannot be overcome in labour, she cannot be possessed or appropriated by the subject. She belongs to a world that is other than the world of the subject and the enjoyment and freedom of the subject is called into question.

An important question that needs to be addressed here is: why should we want to emerge from the initial state of enjoyment? What is it that draws us out of this happiness? The state of enjoyment seems ideal. It seems like a state that we should seek to return to. It is a place where we are not troubled by true Otherness, and where we can worry only about fortifying ourselves against the uncertainties of tomorrow. It is a state where we are not alone, instead, we simply fail to recognize the Otherness of those around us. Why should we recognize Otherness? Levinas claims that we have a Desire for the Infinite. Normally, desire is thought of as a desire to return to a complete state from which one has fallen, a longing for a return. Metaphysical Desire is not like this desire because it is a Desire for something completely unknown. “The metaphysical desire does not rest upon any prior kinship. It is a desire that cannot be satisfied.”²² It is a desire for something that cannot complete one. “The desired does not fulfill it but deepens it.”²³ Metaphysical Desire does not try to bring together the desired and the desirer, instead the relationship is one of separation. Absolute Desire is an aimless movement towards an unanticipatable alterity. It is a desire for the invisible.

²² Levinas. TI 34

²³ *ibid* 34

Levinas makes a sharp distinction between Desire and need. A need is something that can be satisfied. It can be satisfied through appropriation, integration, and assimilation. "Need is the name for all human orientations toward something that is lacking or makes an achievement incomplete."²⁴ Desire, on the other hand, is the desire for something that cannot complete a subject. It is the maintenance of the separation between the Same and the Other. The question that rises is whether this description of desire is very different from the Hegelian conception of desire. Schroeder notes that "Hegelian desire culminates in the act of forgiveness in which the Other is allowed to go free as different, as distinct, as separate."²⁵ He claims that, for Levinas, Hegelian desire is actually need because it implies "a sense of lack, a separation that must be overcome or bridged in the self-other, subject-object relation. This occurs in the intersubjective relation in the moment of reconciliation, the moment of mutual and self-forgiveness after the initial clash or conflict for recognition takes place."²⁶ Desire for Levinas is a movement towards the Other that does not strive to comprehend or assimilate their Otherness, it is a movement toward transcendence.

The Emergence of the Other

As we have seen, Levinas makes a distinction between the otherness of the things in the world, otherness that the subject can appropriate, and Absolute otherness.

²⁴ Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p. 133

²⁵ Schroeder, Brian. Altared Ground: Levinas, History, and Violence. New York: Routledge. 1996. p.103

²⁶ *ibid.* 103-104

Absolute otherness cannot be reduced to an object of consciousness. The only thing that offers resistance to the assimilation by a subject is the alterity, the absolute difference or otherness encountered in the face of the Other. The alterity that Levinas discusses is otherness, understood as that which is external to, and other than the same, but it is more than this. It is that which resists assimilation and conceptualization.²⁷ The first thing that I notice when I encounter the face of an Other is alterity. I see before me a being that is not like me, a being that I cannot appropriate and turn into an appearance or a phenomenon of myself. Levinas does not deny that there is a knowledge of identity in that the Other is seen as a person like me, but this person is radically different from me.

This similarity does not abolish the difference that transcends it. This point of alterity is where ethical responsibility arises for Levinas. This point of alterity, or otherness, is manifested in the face of the Other. In the face of the Other, we encounter “extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself.”²⁸ In its expression, the face, “summons me, calls for me, begs for me, as if the invisible death that must be faced by the Other, pure otherness, separated in some way, from any whole, were my business.”²⁹ Because of the way that the face summons me, I become responsible. Levinas claims that this responsibility is prior even to responsibility I may feel for myself.

As I have already noted, we are in a world of things that are not ourselves, and the atheistic experience that has been described is biased and egocentric. We take precedence over these things around us and manipulate them to our own advantage. In

²⁷ It is at this point where a key objection to Levinas arises. A more complete description of Levinas’s view of alterity will be dealt with in Chapter 2 where I will describe Levinas’s response to this objection.,

²⁸ Levinas. “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*. p. 83

²⁹ *ibid.*83

the face of another person we find something that is unlike the things that surround us. The Other is not even experienced, at this level, as another being like me. The other person that I meet in a face to face encounter is not an alter ego, another self with different properties, but that is basically like me, in that we share the properties of being human. “The other may indeed, turn out to be, on the surface at least, merely an analogue of myself. But not necessarily! I may find him to be inhabiting a world that is basically other than mine and to be essentially different from me. He is not a mere object to be subsumed under one of my categories and given a place in my world.”³⁰ We may try and incorporate an Other or reduce an Other under one of our categories, but to do so would be an injustice, because it would mean reducing the Other to something she is not.

This raises an important question. How can one coexist with another and still leave their otherness intact? The way that this can happen, in Levinas’s view, is through language. “The questioning glance of the other is seeking for a meaningful response,” and if “communication and community is to be achieved, a real response, a responsible answer must be given.” An answer of this kind is a self-expression, an opening up of one’s world “with all its dubious assumptions and arbitrary features.”³¹ Language awakens in us what is common to us. “But in its expressive intention it presupposes our alterity and our duality. It is enacted between beings, between substances that do not enter into their remarks, but put them forth. The transcendence of the interlocutor and the access to the other by way of language make manifest that man is a singularity.”³² It is in speech between singular beings that universality is first constituted. In Totality and

³⁰ John Wild. The Introduction to Totality and Infinity. p.13

Infinity Levinas makes a distinction between expression and phenomenon. Later, in Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, this distinction becomes one between ‘the saying’ of language and ‘the said’ of language. This distinction will be dealt with at greater length in Chapter 2, but for now it is enough to note that the saying of language manifests the singularity of man. Levinas does not deny that there is a logic to language, what he does claim though, is that there is something prior to this system. “What he is interested in showing is that prior to these systems, which are required to meet many needs, and presupposed by them, is the existing individual and his ethical choice to welcome the stranger and to share his world by speaking to him.”³³ The Said, the system, or universality, arises out of the Saying.

The face to face relation is an ethical relation. In an encounter with the face of an Other, I am implicated and I feel constrained to take a stand in relation to the Other. I can ignore the other person or I can distance myself from them by focussing on what is said rather than the person saying. To act in this way is to not allow the Other to reveal herself as Other. “To the face, which is an invitation, call, and interpellation, I oppose the brutality of an attitude that wants to hear and see only what fits into the solitary project of my egoism.”³⁴ Another possibility is to respond to the call of the Other, to

³¹ *ibid.* 14

³² Levinas. “The Ego and the Totality,” in Collected Philosophical Papers. p. 36

³³ Wild, John. The Introduction to Totality and Infinity. p.14

³⁴ Peperzak, Adriaan. Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.125

recognize my responsibility. “By recognizing this situation, by obedience to the demands that the Other imposes on me, I am revealed to myself as *the-one-for-the-Other* responsible for what the Other suffers and does, and as a body in my own right, vulnerable and suffering for her.”³⁵

Levinas’s notion of the I as the-one-for-the-Other is key to his description of responsibility. In Totality and Infinity the subject is described in itself, before its encounter with the other, enjoyment prior to the disturbance. This description is offered in order to establish his notion of exteriority. In order to avoid the accusation of pure subjectivism, Levinas alters his description of the subject in his later work, Otherwise Than Being where he says “before any definition of the self by the self, subjectivity appears as a response to another, as engaged by the other’s request, as subjected to his call.”³⁶ This passivity is described as vulnerability to another. It is a passivity that is prior to any passive/active distinction, as opposed to the passivity that is normally associated with activity. The responsibility of substitution is prior to freedom, and arises because of one’s proximity to their neighbour. “The ipseity, in the passivity without arche characteristic of identity, is hostage. The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and everyone.”³⁷ The fate of the Other is more important than my own, and I am requested to put myself in the place of him. “In a paradoxical reversion, it is through

³⁵ *ibid.* 125

³⁶ Mosès, Stéphane. “Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics as Primary,” in Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal. Vol.20/21, no.1/2, 1998. p.19

³⁷ Levinas. OB 114

this *substitution* that the Self will henceforth be defined; being myself is being for another.”³⁸

Key to Levinas’s view of responsibility is the fact that the relation between one and an Other is asymmetrical. One’s responsibility as listener is not identical to the authority of the other person. Whether the other person listens to me or not is irrelevant. I still need to listen to the Other when they speak. When I speak I recognize the other person’s authority to challenge or question what I say. As we have already seen, speaking is making myself available. Gibbs states that “Listening opens me to another; speaking witnesses that openness, delivering myself to the other person.”³⁹ As we have already noted, language has two aspects; the expression, or Saying, and the phenomenon, or the Said. The Saying exceeds the thematization of the Said. As Levinas states, “To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry from it. It is therefore to *receive* from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught.”⁴⁰ The relation between the one and an Other is one of a master and a student. Levinas later claims that “The calling in question of the I, coextensive with the manifestation of the Other in the face, we call language. The height from which language comes we designate with the term teaching.”⁴¹

Responsibility, for Levinas, arises out of a relation of proximity, an unmediated

³⁸ *ibid.* 20

³⁹ Gibbs, Robert. “Asymmetry and Mutuality: Habermas and Levinas,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. Vol. 23, no.6. 1997. p.56

⁴⁰ Levinas. TI 51

⁴¹ *ibid.* 171

relation between one and an Other. The proximity that he speaks of here is not to be construed in terms of the narrowing of two points because this would give it a relative meaning. The proper meaning of proximity presupposes humanity. The relation of proximity is prior to thought, consciousness, and representation. It is the unmediated, infinite demand of responsibility toward the Other. Because of the relation of proximity, and the direct immediacy of the appeal from the Other, I am the only one who can respond to the appeal. "The relation, characterized by a radical non-reciprocity, is prior to the relata – before 'I am' – and I cannot escape its orientation."⁴² The obligation that arises is absolute and irreducibly mine. Because the relation of proximity is prior to thematization, I cannot claim that the relation is symmetrical. In the first instance, responsibility for the Other is mine, "for in me alone innocence can be accused without absurdity. To accuse the innocence of the other, to ask of the other more than he owes, is criminal."⁴³ Earlier, Levinas states that "To say that the other has to sacrifice himself to others would be to preach human sacrifice!"⁴⁴ Only an ego that is distinct from any generalization can hear and respond to the demand placed on it by an Other. Responsibility is an unmediated relation between one and an Other. If I inform you of your responsibility, either to me, or to an Other, then I am acting as mediator.

There is a rather obvious objection that arises at this point. If it is true that I am infinitely responsible for an Other, then is it not also valid for everyone? It would seem that all humans are equally obliged and that the Other that I am responsible for is also

⁴² Ciarelli, Fabio. "Levinas's Ethical Discourse Between Individuality and Universality," in *Re-Reading Levinas*. Ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley. IN: Indiana University Press. 1991. p.88

⁴³ Levinas. OB 195

⁴⁴ *ibid.* 126

responsible for me. It seems that the infinite, unique responsibility necessarily becomes universalized. There is a tension between the recognition of alterity and asymmetry, and the necessity of this relation being universalized. The fact that I am responsible for the Other, also means that Other has the same responsibility to other Others as well as to me. Peperzak states that “In trying to say the nonuniversal character of my unique responsibility, I fail because I change it necessarily into something universal. I then undo my Said by denying its universality and try to say it again in another way, but again I fail because I miss the Saying itself.”⁴⁵ As Peperzak notes in another place, this objection is formulated from a perspective outside of the immediate relation of proximity. “It considers all others and me as similar cases of one and the same species or genus of beings: both (or all of us) are human beings, who, as humans, appear to one another (and to all people) as commanding and demanding beings.”⁴⁶ This perspective is possible, and indeed necessary, but it must be remembered that it arises out of the relation of proximity. It arises only after the arrival of the third party.

At this point an important question needs to be addressed. It seems that we are never in either of the situations described thus far. We are never completely isolated, and we are never with just one Other. As we will see, the third party is always present. Why then, does Levinas go to such length to describe these first two situations? It appears to me that the answer to this question is what distinguishes Levinasian ethics from the tradition. Generally speaking, the tradition has sought for foundations from which an

⁴⁵ Peperzak, Adriaan. Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.126

⁴⁶ Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p. 27

ethics and theory of justice could be derived. This foundation has been sought variously in God, universal reason, the self or some other place. The possibility of a universal foundation is enticing because it allows us to say, ‘this is how we all ought to act.’ It would seem that the search for a shared, or universal foundation has failed. It is, at the very least, obvious that no consensus has been reached thus far. Levinas, too, is seeking for a foundation, one that is shared with everyone. Justice is grounded in the relation with Otherness, a relation that we all share, according to him. His descriptions of this anarchic relation are used to show the priority of responsibility.

The Third Party

Justice is an important, and perhaps the central, theme for Levinas and so the question that emerges from his discussion of responsibility is how can he move from an asymmetric infinite responsibility of the one-for-the-other to any sort of equality, social ethics, or justice. Levinas describes how a universal justice emerges out of the unique, asymmetric relation of responsibility, a relation that precedes all universality and community. This is an explicit theme in three of Levinas’s texts. The first one that I want to concentrate on is the section in Totality and Infinity entitled “The Other and the Others.” Peperzak notes that there are three arguments in this section. The first argument states “that the visage of the other (‘you’ who regard me) reveals not only the other’s obliging height but also and ipso facto ‘the third,’ that is, any other human being. The demanding presence of the other’s face is the presence of the third.”⁴⁷ The third is

⁴⁷ *ibid.* 167

there from the very beginning because it is manifested in the face of the Other. Levinas himself says that “The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other . . . It is not that there first would be the face, and then the being it manifests or expresses would concern himself with justice; the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity.”⁴⁸ The Other is at the same time unique and nothing special. All Others, whether or not I have met them, have a face and affect me and concern me for the same reason. The uniqueness and singularity of a face is universal. The third is manifested in the face of the Other, and, thus, concerns me as does the Other. What we find is that we are infinitely responsible for many others at the same time and here is the origin of justice: “in order to do justice to all others – and not to neglect any one of them – we must originate a political, economical, judicial, and social system that balances and guarantees at least the minimum of the absolute demands expressed by the other’s presence.”⁴⁹ Hand in hand with this argument is the idea that I, too, am an Other for all Others and am equal to all Others. I, therefore, am responsible, with others, to look after myself. This perspective is obviously different from the egoistic experience of enjoyment. The responsibility that I have for myself arises only out of an infinite responsibility for the Other.

The second argument that Peperzak identifies in this section is that “the other who faces me (you) is the servant of another (the third: “he” or “her”) who is the other for “my other”.”⁵⁰ The Other that faces me is responsible for an Other that faces him. Levinas states that, like the Other, the third is also destitute and that “in the midst of his

⁴⁸ Levinas. TI 213

⁴⁹ Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.168

⁵⁰ *ibid.* 169

destitution the Other already serves.”⁵¹ The asymmetry seems to disappear in this argument unless we maintain that I am more responsible, and therefore more guilty than everyone else. The asymmetrical responsibility is prior to thematization and symmetry. On this point, Levinas is fond of quoting Dostoyevski’s Brothers Karamazov. “Each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and for each one, and I more than others.”⁵² This statement by Dostoyevski emphasizes the singularity and the asymmetry of the responsibility of the one for the Other.

The third argument is contained in the expression “the other commands me to command.” “You who are the demanding presence of the other, you command me to be your servant, but since you yourself are a servant, you order me to assist you in your serving the third.”⁵³ This argument emerges out of the second one. In responding to my responsibility for an Other, I recognize that this Other is responsible for other Others. I, therefore, am required to aid the Other in their obligations. Peperzak claims that the latter command refers to the development of a judicial, political system. This argument is also an attempt to avoid starting from the position that the other and I are equal. In this way, Levinas is able to safeguard the priority of the unique, and infinite responsibility between one and an Other. The claim of the universal experience of asymmetry seems to lead to the contradiction that all people are simultaneously higher than all people but this problem can be overcome by noting that the immediacy of the relation to the Other

⁵¹ Levinas. TI 213

⁵² This quote appears often in Levinas’s works, for example in “God and Philosophy p.183 in “The Levinas Reader.” The quote is out of the Brothers Karamazov trans. D. Magarshack. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984. p.339. The English translation reads “every one of us is responsible for everyone else in every way, and I most of all.” The translation is modified to reflect the French translation given by Levinas.

⁵³ Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.173

cannot be captured in the language of ontology. “Levinas contends that the order of universal justice and reciprocity, as symbolized by the equality of the primary order and the third, is a consequence of the primordial relationship of transcendence and that the language of universal classes and individual instances, as it is used in traditional philosophy, is a secondary one: the language of theory.”⁵⁴ Because of the always and ever present third party, the passage from the transcendent to the universal is a necessary one. Because of the third party we are commanded to act justly.

Another text in which Levinas directly deals with the question of the passage from an ethical relation to a relation of justice is “The Ego and the Totality.” Levinas claims that injustice can only occur with respect to a third party. Injustice cannot arise in a society of love (presumably in a society consisting of only two people) because, in love, injustice is pardoned and annulled. “The third party is the free being whom I can wrong by constraining his freedom.”⁵⁵ Levinas claims that universal justice is better than personal love, and that this does not depersonalize the Other because the “social totality demanded by the claims of justice is composed of relations relating concrete egos who maintain their unicity while forming a community.”⁵⁶ Levinas opposes the second person of the beloved ‘Thou’ to the third.⁵⁷ In a love relation between two people, the third is neglected and treated unjustly. Peperzak goes on to explain that the reason that unicity and community can be maintained is that while a community of free individuals may

⁵⁴ Ibid. 174

⁵⁵ Levinas. “The Ego and the Totality,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*. p.37

⁵⁶ Peperzak, Adriaan. *To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. p.177

⁵⁷ Levinas opposes his idea of justice and responsibility to the “I-Thou” relationship of Martin Buber, which he claims excludes the third party.

form a whole, its unity is not that of a general concept.

One will may exercise power over another will, and this, for Levinas, is the core of violence. This violence is, however, necessary in the formation of a society because “Every form of society is based on a certain injustice: the injustice of an identification by which people’s wills are equated with the works that are produced by their activities. Someone’s *expression* is, however, different from his or her *work (oeuvre)*.⁵⁸ A person’s work becomes separate from their intention. This is the only way though that the expression can become assimilated by another. It is not the expression that becomes assimilated but it is the work, that is the manifestation of the expression, which becomes assimilated. The alterity, or the expression, of the interlocutors become suppressed in favour of the work, or the said. Person-to-person discourse is impossible because it would be conditioned by what conditions the interlocutors. Opposed to this kind of discourse there is a discourse in which the alterity of the interlocutors is suppressed, in which they are linked up to “the universality of impersonal reason.”⁵⁹ Levinas further states that “The impersonal discourse is a necrological discourse. A man is reduced to his legacy and absorbed into the totality of the common patrimony.”⁶⁰ This is how a will enters history. This alienation of a self from itself institutes history. This is the first injustice and it is because of this injustice that people form, around these works, a totality. The injustice of history lies in the fact that wills are deprived of their works. A work is different from an expression in which the speaker presents him or herself. A

⁵⁸ *ibid.* 178

⁵⁹ Levinas. “The Ego and the Totality,” in Collected Philosophical Papers. p. 35

⁶⁰ *ibid.* 35

work presents an author in absence of the author. The relationship between the will and society becomes an economic one. A work is presented as an effect and is the possession of the one who presents it. One has to take or purchase a work from a worker. “The ego’s relationship with a totality is then essentially economic.”⁶¹ The third party is accessible through injustice and this injustice is always economic injustice.

Levinas claims, with regard to this injustice, that it is not necessarily known as injustice. There exists a “plane of innocent injustice, where evil is wrought in naivete.”⁶² In order for one to recognize his or her injustice and to see the possibility of justice, someone has to call one to account. As opposed to traditional theories of justice, justice does not come from within, but from this external source, from the third party. “A society that is based solely on the production of work in the broadest sense of the term is defenseless against the power of money, blackmail, violence, and injustice. The secret of all philosophy that considers society and history to be the supreme perspective is war and exploitation.”⁶³ The face-to-face encounter of intersubjectivity opens the closed totality of anonymous history.

In Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence Levinas again takes up the question of how the transcendent (the Saying) is related to the inevitable dimension of thematizing and objectifying discourse. As Peperzak notes, the enigma that Levinas concentrates on is how the relation of responsibility between the I and the Other is related to the political, universalizable system of justice. “The transition from transcendence to universality (or

⁶¹ *ibid.* 38-39

⁶² *ibid.* 39

⁶³ Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.178

from the Saying to the Said) is necessitated by the emergence of the third.”⁶⁴ Peperzak quotes Levinas out of Totality and Infinity where he says, “If proximity ordered to me only the other alone, there would not have been any problem,” and further “The entry of the third is the very fact of consciousness.”⁶⁵ What Peperzak is emphasizing is that the dimension of the intersubjective and the dimension of politics are interwoven inseparably but also remain distinct. Expression, the Saying, and responsibility are distinct yet interwoven with phenomenon, the Said, and justice. Peperzak notes the apparent problems and contradictions that seem to arise with the notion of the third, namely, the contradiction that arises when an infinite claim is multiplied. I have an infinite responsibility to my children, to my neighbours, and even to people that I have never met. Not only is there a problem with the multiplication of an infinite claim, but how could I possibly go about acting on these responsibilities in any sort of practical way? He claims that this can be overcome “by the opening up of a dimension in which *all* others are served, respected, and treated justly: the dimension of universal justice.”⁶⁶ If justice necessarily emerges out of a prior relation to Otherness, a relation that we all experience, then justice is truly universal. What is interesting here is that the foundation of universal justice is found in the unique experience, or relation, between one and an Other. The importance of the connections that Levinas makes is that he shows that justice, politics, etc, are based on the more originary notion of infinite responsibility, and not on the totality of some universal reason. While Levinas seeks a foundation outside of a

⁶⁴ *ibid.* 180

⁶⁵ (see *TI* – Martinus Nijhoff edition p.160 and 157-158)

⁶⁶ Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.181

universal reason, he does see value in reason itself as long as reason is used to serve justice and not self-interest. Reason arises in the order of the Said, out of the ethical relation. Levinas is opposed to the traditional view, where reason is needed to bring about peace. Peace does not arise out of reason for Levinas. Instead, reason arises out of peace. Reason that serves justice is called, by Levinas, “a rationality of peace.”⁶⁷ Real justice requires both the pre-rational and the rational. “General justice is impossible if it does not originate ‘anarchically,’ in the responsibility of the unique one-for-the-(unique) other, but this responsibility includes the universality of politics and ontology.”⁶⁸ The face unites the finite and the infinite.

The community founded on the notion of reciprocity, equality, and justice, is called fraternity. In Totality and Infinity, Levinas states that the “human I is posited in fraternity: that all men are brothers is not added to man as a moral conquest, but constitutes his ipseity.”⁶⁹ The personal identity, or selfhood of each human subject is constituted in and by this relation. The human race is seen as composed of ‘unique children,’ a brotherhood in which one’s election, or responsibility, and one’s equality are evident.

Human fraternity has then a double aspect: it involves individualities whose logical status is not reducible to the status of ultimate individualities whose logical status is not reducible to the status of ultimate differences in a genus, for their singularity consists in each referring to itself . . . On the other hand, it involves the commonness of a father, as though the commonness of race would not bring together enough.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Levinas. OB 160

⁶⁸ Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.182

⁶⁹ Levinas. TI 279-280

⁷⁰ *ibid.* 214

Fraternity involves both asymmetry and symmetry, ethical and political, unequal and equal. This community is named Monotheistic and “refers back to the approach of the Other in the face, in a dimension of height, in responsibility for oneself and for the Other.”⁷¹ Justice demands a unique and fraternal world in the name of substitution.

What we have seen to this point is that justice is brought about through the apparition of the third party. In order to do justice to this third person, political institutions are necessary. The third cannot be helped by the acts called for by the relation with the Other because, as we have already seen, the third is described as absent. This is why what is called for are acts of justice and objective goodness, a work of economical justice. Levinas claims that a work consists in introducing equality into a world of conflicting freedoms. “Justice can have no other object than economic equality.”⁷² Justice is an essential notion for Levinas. Justice and the order of ontology are inseparable from his description of the relation of the one and an Other. This is one of the themes of Otherwise Than Being. In Otherwise Than Being, Levinas stresses that ontology and the order of essence is not bad but is, in fact, necessary, because it is here that reason is used, judgements are made, and justice is enacted. What must be kept in mind, though, is that it is to be subordinate to the beyond. Levinas shows that the *otherwise*, the relation of proximity, does not fit into ontological categories. He compares this relation to other relations that can be categorized by ontology. Terms like Saying, vulnerability, and sensibility are non-ontological categories. These terms are, in

⁷¹ *ibid.* 214

⁷² Levinas. “The Ego and the Totality,” in Collected Philosophical Papers. p.44

fact, presupposed by ontological categories, and here we can see that Being and otherwise than Being are connected. “The ultimate meaning of Being cannot be found in its own dimension; the interest that the essence holds for us owes its ultimate significance to the disinterested being-for-the-Other of responsibility, patience, and peace.”⁷³ On the other hand, he notes that this responsibility for the Other demands the order of essence and equality because of the third. The Other and the third are competing subjects of rights and my responsibility. They demand that justice is done to everyone. Because of this, justice acts as a limit to the responsibility one has for another. It may seem from this statement that responsibility becomes cheapened in some way, but Levinas claims that this is not the case. “In no way is justice a degradation of obsession, a degradation of the for-the-other, a diminution, a limitation of anarchic responsibility, a neutralization of the glory of the Infinite, a degeneration that would be produced in the measure that for empirical reasons the initial duo would become a trio.”⁷⁴ Why this is so is not clear, but Levinas is aware of the difficulties. Ethics as original goodness “is always in danger of being extinguished in the system of universal laws to which it nonetheless requires and supports,” and yet, even in the objectivity of society and politics there exists “the eventual possibility of goodness making itself understood in the guise of a prophetic voice which resounds imperiously below the depths of established laws.”⁷⁵

Levinas recognizes the interconnection between ethical responsibility and universal justice. The two notions are, in fact, inseparable. The difficulties arise when

⁷³ Peperzak, Adriaan. Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.113

⁷⁴ Levinas. OB 159

⁷⁵ Moses quoting Levinas out of “Répondre d’autrui. Emmanuel Levinas.” Mosès, Stéphane. “Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics as Primary,” in Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal. Vol.20/21, no.1/2, 1998. p.19p.11

we try to examine how the relationship between responsibility and justice should manifest itself. Can we have a system of justice, an institutionalized form of justice, that treats every individual with the responsibility that he or she is owed? Can there be an institutionalized form of justice that does not lose sight of the unique individual? Should there be such a system of justice? Responsibility is to act as a check on justice and make it accountable. On the other hand, justice acts as a limit on responsibility. It allows us to manage all of our responsibilities. The question that remains is whether or not this relation is one that can be maintained in reality or if it is one that Levinas longs for but sees no possibility of becoming actual. The tensions between responsibility and justice are great, and are evident in many areas. For example, in the institution of laws there is a difficulty in writing a law that will be general enough to cover any case, and yet remain specific enough to be able to deal justly with each specific, and unique individual. What is needed is a judge that is able to struggle with, and reason through the law, while maintaining a relation of responsibility to the uniqueness of those directly involved. Just judgements require a judge that will not distance herself from the individual, but will remain in a relation of proximity to the Other. As Levinas says in Otherwise Than Being, “Justice is impossible without the one rendering it finding himself in proximity.”⁷⁶

It appears to me that Levinas does not try to overcome the tensions between ethics and justice. He does not try to explain away the tensions. Instead, it is only through the tension, through the struggle between ethical and the just, between the infinite and the finite, that true justice can be found. Hierarchy and anarchy arise in the same experience.

⁷⁶ Levinas. OB 158

There can be no experience of responsibility without the simultaneous command to act justly. They are distinct yet inseparable. Levinas states that

it's the fundamental contradiction of our situation (and perhaps of our condition), which I called Hypocrisy in my book (TI 24), that both the hierarchy taught by Athens and the *abstract* and slightly *anarchical* ethical individualism taught by Jerusalem are simultaneously necessary in order to suppress violence. Each of these principles, left to itself, only furthers the contrary of what it wants to secure.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ This quote is found in the notes from a discussion following Levinas's presentation of "Transcendence and Height," found in Basic Philosophical Writings. Ed. Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. Indiana: Indiana University Press. 1996. p.24

Chapter 2

Aside from the doubts about the possibility of an institutionalization of a Levinasian form of justice, other significant objections and questions have been raised with regard to the project that Levinas attempts. One of the most important questions that arises has to do with the nature of otherness in Levinas's thought. Otherness is traditionally thought of as that which is other than the same and that which the same is not. The question that needs to be asked is: what is the nature of the relationship between these two terms? Traditional philosophy has often sought to find some sort of epistemological adequation between the same and the other. Adequation is traditionally seen as being reached through the determination of the other by the same. For there to be knowledge, the other needs to somehow be reduced to sameness. The object is received according to mode of reception of the subject. The otherness of the object is reduced and appropriated by the subject. A very simple example of this would be the experience of an encounter with a tree unlike any other tree that I have ever seen. It has branches and leaves and looks somewhat like other trees that I have seen in the past. Although it is unique to my experiences, its uniqueness is simply reduced to being another member of the category that I call trees. This epistemological reduction has ethical implications for Levinas when it comes to the reduction of the otherness of a person, because the reduction, it would seem, is a kind of violence. But, as we have seen, there is some kind of reduction necessary in order for Levinas to reach the justice that he is seeking to

describe. What he emphasizes is the need to remember that this reduction is preceded by ethical responsibility. The traditional description of the relation of the same and the other is opposed to the description offered by Levinas. Levinas claims that the relation is an ethical one rather than a violent one. The theme of the following chapter is the relation between ethics and violence. Can there be ethics or justice without violence? Is it possible to have a relation to otherness that does not subordinate otherness to ontology, that is not violence. The issue of violence is taken up in Totality and Infinity and one of the first and most important responses to it is found in Jacques Derrida's long paper, "Violence and Metaphysics."⁷⁸ Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi claim that "the questions put to Totality and Infinity have been largely determined by 'Violence and Metaphysics'."⁷⁹ This is the case because it was the first extended study of Levinas to be translated into English.

Assurances of his faithfulness to Levinas are scattered throughout "Violence and Metaphysics." Derrida begins his paper with what he calls a commentary, a commentary that remains "faithful to the themes and audacities"⁸⁰ of Levinas's thought. He also claims later that any questions that he raises are questions that Levinas himself raises. According to Derrida, even when his explication of Levinas goes beyond the faithfulness of commentary, he is doing nothing more than echoing questions that Levinas, himself, is putting to his text. He states that "the route followed by Levinas's thought is such that all

⁷⁸ Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in Writing and Difference. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1978. pp.79-153. Hereafter cited as WD.

⁷⁹ Bernasconi, Robert, and Simon Critchley eds. Re-Reading Levinas. Indiana: Indiana University Press. 1991. p.xii.

⁸⁰ Derrida, Jacques. WD. p.84.

our questions already belong to his own interior dialogue, are displaced into his discourse and only listen to it, from many vantage points and in many ways.”⁸¹ The obvious question remains as to whether or not this is actually the case, or, is it rather the case that Derrida’s asserted intentions are distinct from what his text claims. We may find that Derrida is guilty of exactly what he accuses Levinas of, saying one thing while meaning another.

Despite Derrida’s many assurances, it appears that the questions that he raises are more than innocent, thought-provoking questions. In some cases they are significant objections. In other cases, the difference between them may not be as great as they first appear. At times it seems that Derrida misunderstands and misinterprets Levinas. At other times there appears to be a fundamental disagreement between the two thinkers. It may even be, perhaps, that the reason that Derrida misunderstands Levinas on several points, the reason that he disregards important qualifications that Levinas makes, is because of this fundamental disagreement. The importance of the questions that Derrida raises in “Violence and Metaphysics” can be seen in the fact that Derrida is the only thinker and critic that Levinas has felt himself obligated to respond to. Many claim that Levinas’s second major work, Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence, is, in a large part, an answer to the questions that Derrida raises with regard to Totality and Infinity. Derrida is never named in the book, but it is fairly easy to see that many of the themes in it deal specifically with problems that are raised in “Violence and Metaphysics.” Manning claims, that while there are significant objections found in “Violence and

⁸¹ *ibid.* 109.

Metaphysics,” Derrida’s goal, in his appropriation of Levinas, is similar to Levinas’s own: “to produce a language that is as close as possible to nonviolence.”⁸² This in no way means, though, that Derrida and Levinas agree on the relationship between language and violence, and this issue is, in fact, one of the key differences between them.

Two main objections arise in “Violence and Metaphysics.” While distinct, they are closely related. Each has to do with otherness, the ethical relation, and the nature of language. In both of these objections, Derrida claims that Levinas’s declared intentions are different from what we encounter in the text. The first objection emerges in the form of a simple question: how can Levinas go beyond philosophy while relying on the language of philosophy? In other words, how can Levinas describe that which language cannot describe? His main example of this is his concern that Levinas is trying to describe transcendence through the use of words like “infinity,” “exteriority,” and “otherness.” We will see that, in Derrida’s view, language is inherently violent. No description of otherness, not even a negative description, can be put forward without causing violence.

Early in the paper, Derrida calls Levinas’s identity as a philosopher into question. He quotes Levinas who says “It is . . . toward a pluralism that does not fuse into unity that we wish to make our way; and, if it can be dared, to break with Parmenides.”⁸³ Derrida notes that we are held under the sway of the desire for unity and that for a Greek to break with this unity would be parricide. He implies that no real philosopher would dare do

⁸² Manning, Robert John Sheffler. “Derrida, Levinas, and the Lives of Philosophy at the Death of Philosophy: A Reading of Derrida’s Misreading of Levinas in ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’” in Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal. Vol.20/21, no.1/2, 1998. p.391

⁸³ Derrida. WD. p.89

this. Only a non-Greek could kill the father but to do this would require that the non-Greek disguise himself as a Greek, “by feigning to speak Greek in order to get near the king.”⁸⁴ “Here Derrida more than suggests that Levinas is really a non-Greek who is only pretending to speak Greek, only pretending to speak philosophy in order to kill philosophical speech.”⁸⁵ What is interesting in this objection is that Derrida accuses Levinas of attempting to disrupt the unity of Greek thought using ontological language. He also argues though, that this is impossible. What seems impossible, to Derrida, is for someone to describe otherness using totalizing, philosophical language.

What Derrida is concerned with is Levinas’s attempt to describe the infinitely other, the otherness from which emerges our ethical responsibility. Levinas tries to describe the otherness of an Other with words like ‘infinite,’ but Derrida states that “if I cannot designate the (infinite) irreducible alterity of the Other except through the negation of (finite) spatial exteriority, perhaps the meaning of this alterity is finite, is not positively infinite,”⁸⁶ which, it would seem, is the opposite of transcendence. If the otherness of the Other can be expressed in language, which is necessarily finite, then it must not be infinite. A few lines later, Derrida states that “The other cannot be what it is, infinitely other, except in finitude and mortality (mine *and* its).”⁸⁷ Any description of otherness as infinite reduces the infinity to finitude. Derrida claims that the other is such (finite) as soon as it comes into language and has a meaning. Because of this, Derrida sees language as reductionist and, thus, violent.

⁸⁴ *ibid.* 89

⁸⁵ Manning. p.392

⁸⁶ Derrida. WD. p.114

⁸⁷ *ibid.* 114

Manning claims that Derrida misunderstands Levinas when he speaks of the absolute or infinite alterity of the Other. The way that Derrida understands the otherness that Levinas speaks of is the Other as pure alterity itself with nothing at all in common between the same and the other. This is what Derrida calls a “pure thought of pure difference.”⁸⁸ What Derrida claims is that Levinas fails to allow for an absolute necessity: “the fact that for the same to recognize the other at all, she must recognize the other as an other me, as an alter ego.”⁸⁹ Levinas, himself, states, in his Introduction to Totality and Infinity, “The other person as he comes before me in a face to face encounter is not an *alter ego*, another self with different properties and accidents but in all essential respects like me.”⁹⁰ Derrida claims that it is impossible to encounter the other in the way that Levinas describes, “impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not *appear* for an ego (in general).”⁹¹ To Derrida, it seems that Levinas refuses to acknowledge the unavoidable intentional modification of the ego. It appears, though, that this may be a misreading. In Levinas’s description of the face we can see an intentional modification of the ego. “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we name here a face.”⁹² In the approach of the other we already have some concept of the person with whom we come into contact. The Other is in many respects like me and to deny this would be absurd, but the other exceeds this idea. Manning explains this statement when he says that “although the

⁸⁸ *ibid.* 151

⁸⁹ Manning, 396

⁹⁰ Levinas. TI 13

⁹¹ Derrida. WD 123

⁹² Levinas. TI 50

same does first comprehend the other as alter ego, the other bursts through and exceeds this understanding because the other is both alter ego and more than alter ego, is what resembles me but is also what I am not.⁹³ Having some idea of the other is what lets us relate to the Other, it is what provides us with a point of contact. On the other hand, the idea is exceeded by the Other, and it is from here that the relation of responsibility springs. It is what Levinas calls 'a relation with mystery.' Manning quotes Levinas's "Time and the Other" where he says "The other, as other, is not only an alter ego. It is what I myself am not."⁹⁴ It appears that Derrida focuses on one statement by Levinas while disregarding others. If all that Levinas had to say about the alter ego was the statement out of the Introduction to Totality and Infinity, then Derrida may be right in his accusation. To Derrida, it appears that there are two possibilities. Either the Other is approached as an alter ego, which means that there is violence done to the Other, or, the Other is not an alter ego and there is no possible point of contact. It seems though, that things are not so simple. What Levinas means by the other is that the Other is never exhausted. The Other is something that can never be grasped or comprehended. The Other is something that I can never contain, assimilate or make my own. He does not mean that the Other is so unlike me, in every way, that I can have no contact or concept of the Other. The Other is an alter ego plus alterity.

Manning notes that Derrida makes three accusations against Levinas. The first accusation is that Levinas is irresponsible, in that, in his failure to recognize an

⁹³ Manning, 397

⁹⁴ *ibid.* 397

intentional modification of the ego, he is left unable to “describe the other as infinitely other if he does not recognize the other as other than . . .?”⁹⁵ Derrida asks “What authorizes him to say ‘infinitely other’ if the infinitely other does not appear as such in the zone he calls the same, and which is the neutral level of transcendental description?”⁹⁶ It would seem that otherness should only be able to be noticed or described if it appears within the horizon of the same. If it is truly other, then we could never know it. The second accusation, and this point will be discussed more later, is that Levinas’s own discourse is itself violent, because “To refuse to see in it (the other) an ego in this sense is, within the ethical order, the very gesture of all violence.”⁹⁷ Thirdly, Derrida claims that to admit of an intentional modification of the ego would, for Levinas, be a totalitarian act. As Manning states “for Derrida, Levinas denies the undeniable, and in doing so reveals himself as a dreamer who wants to escape from rather than grapple with reality.”⁹⁸ All three of these accusations amount to the same thing. What Levinas fails to acknowledge is that all language is violent and since all experience is linguistic, all experience is violent. It appears to Derrida that Levinas is dreaming of a philosophy that is pure of all violence but in order to keep it pure it must remain dissociated from reality and language. It is a dream that Derrida claims “must vanish *at daybreak*, as soon as language awakens.”⁹⁹ What we will see though, is that Levinas does believe that there is some element of violence in all linguistic experience. There may not be as much

⁹⁵ Ibid. 398

⁹⁶ Derrida. WD 125

⁹⁷ *ibid.* 125

⁹⁸ Manning. 398

⁹⁹ Derrida. WD 151

disagreement on this point as Derrida seems to think.

What we have seen is that a key difference between the two thinkers lies in the fact that Levinas sees peace as primary and war as secondary. Derrida on the other hand sees, because of his view of language, war, or violence as primary. The conclusion that Derrida reaches in “Violence and Metaphysics,” through the connection he sees between ethics and language, is that peace presupposes war. He claims that language has an innate tendency towards violence. Derrida’s accusation that Levinas’s intent is different from his meaning is apparent again when Derrida looks at Levinas’s discussion of the primacy of peace. It seems, though, that in this case, the attention falls not so much on the use of language to describe ethics, as on the description of language itself as ethics. Derrida focuses on Levinas’s description, in Totality and Infinity, of the ethical relation as language.¹⁰⁰ What Derrida argues is that since language is universal, ontological, thematizing and conceptualizing, “all of which, according to Levinas’ own analyses, constitute a reduction of alterity, then Levinas must remain this side of his intentions”¹⁰¹ in which he seeks to show that discourse is a “non-allergic relation with alterity”. The main point that Derrida attempts to make with regard to this relation is that all language involves violence. He claims that there is a “transcendental and preethical violence” out of which emerges an ethical nonviolence. “In effect, *either* there is only the same, which can no longer even appear and be said, nor even exercise violence (pure infinity or finitude); *or* indeed there is the same *and* the other, and then the other cannot be the other

¹⁰⁰ Levinas. TI 39

¹⁰¹ Atterton, Peter. “Levinas and the Language of Peace,” in Philosophy Today. Spring 1992. p. 60

– of the same – except by being the same (as itself: ego), and the same cannot be the same (as itself: ego) except by being the other’s other: alter ego.”¹⁰² Derrida goes on to explain that “the necessity of gaining access to the meaning of the other” on the basis of an intentional modification of the ego, the necessity from which no discourse can escape – “these necessities are violence itself, or rather the transcendental origin of an irreducible violence, supposing, . . . , that it is somehow meaningful to speak of preethical violence.”¹⁰³ Every encounter with the other, (and all such encounters involve language in Derrida’s mind) involves a reduction of the other’s alterity. This reduction is violence, and is unavoidable, because language is unavoidable. Derrida describes this violence as an “economy of war.” Something seems right about this criticism of Levinas. Any encounter with an Other involves an intentional modification of the ego. The modification is a reduction of the alterity of the Other. This is necessarily so in order for there to be any point of contact between one and an Other. For Derrida, this experience is primary and it is why he sees violence as primary.

Levinas, on the other hand, is not, contrary to what Derrida claims, aiming to describe a “pure nonviolence.” Their views on violence may not be all that different. Instead, what Levinas is seeking to describe is the movement toward nonviolence from a place prior to both violence and peace, from the relation of proximity. As we have already seen, Levinas does not deny that we come to the ethical relation with the concept of an alter ego. Manning notes that “despite what Derrida says, Levinas does not shrink

¹⁰² Derrida. WD 128

¹⁰³ *ibid.* 128

from identifying this as a certain violence, the violence of my freedom to try to understand, grasp, contain, and hold the other within my conceptual categories.”¹⁰⁴ Instead of dreaming, as Derrida claims he does, of a time prior to this violence, of a return to some ideal state of perfect harmony, Levinas seeks to describe a situation where my violence is met with resistance and called into question. This situation that is described is the encounter with the face which, Levinas claims in Totality and Infinity, “arrests and paralyzes my violence . . .” Levinas insists as well that this resistance to my violence is not another form of violence itself. Instead of violence, he describes this resistance as a call. As he says, “the face is infinitely other than a violence like unto mine . . . He arrests and paralyzes my violence by his call, which does not do violence, and comes from on high.”¹⁰⁵ It is difficult to see how this resistance is not a form of violence, but this resistance, insists Levinas, opens up the nonviolent ethical relation. It is the expression of alterity that gives birth to the ethical relation. As the other calls my violence into question, the possibility for an ethical relation, and for justice arises. Violence, on the other hand, arises only when I choose to ignore the ethical call to responsibility, and the demand to substitute myself for the Other.

The encounter with the other does not come after the initial violence of language. As Levinas says, the ethical relation is anarchic and the possibility of violence arises out of the preethical non-violence. Derrida holds, as we have seen, that violence is necessary because all experience is linguistic and all language is violent. The possibility of peace

¹⁰⁴ Manning. 400

¹⁰⁵ Levinas. TI 290-291

comes after violence. For Levinas, this situation is reversed. Violence, for him, exists only as a possibility and it arises out of the ethical, non-violent demand of responsibility. The possibility, rather than the necessity, of violence is what Levinas recognizes. This is a key point of contention between the two thinkers. It is the fundamental disagreement that I spoke of at the beginning of the chapter, but as we will see, the disagreement may be based on different views of violence. Levinas does admit to a necessary betrayal of language. While he refuses to call this betrayal a violence, it may not be all that different from what Derrida sees as violence. The word ‘betrayal’ indicates that a kind of violence is present, but what distinguishes Levinas’s betrayal from Derrida’s violence is that in order for something to be betrayed there must be some prior state, or situation, from which it can be betrayed. This situation is the relation of proximity between one and an Other. In Derrida’s view though, violence is the most primary experience. All experience is violent. The way in which Levinas may be able to defend himself from Derrida’s critique is based on the very points that Derrida omits in his discussion.

“Levinas presents a view of nonviolence and peace that has to be realized, achieved, and produced within the economy of war – a nonviolence that has to assert itself over and always within the possibility of violence. Nonviolence can only be produced out of a real situation wherein real violence is always possible, where people are always capable of exercising their capacity for violence.”¹⁰⁶ Both peace and violence do not exist originally. They only exist where they are produced in a relation between one and an Other. As Manning notes, the word ‘produced’ never appears in “Violence and

¹⁰⁶ Manning, 400-401

Metaphysics,” and yet Levinas himself points out the fact that this word is “so often used”¹⁰⁷ in Totality and Infinity. The ethical relation, justice, peace, and even the otherness of the Other only exist to the extent that they are produced by me. By the word ‘produced’ here, Levinas does not mean to imply that these relations are produced through some kind of choice or action by a subject. Rather, they are produced through one’s proximity to the Other.

Levinas claims that there is always the possibility for violence but that this possibility arises as one potential response to the call of the Other. He points to the importance of language in overcoming violence. Levinas never denies conceptualization, nor does he deny the fact that there is violence within conceptualization, as Derrida accuses him of doing. Manning states:

Nonviolence is what I produce, what I choose to produce when, in my relation with the other that includes my knowledge of the other, I am confronted with a truth that exceeds, is more important than , and commands my knowledge of the other – the truth that the other is absolutely other to me, is other to my powers of comprehension and violence, is more than I could ever possibly grasp, contain, or comprehend.¹⁰⁸

This is the truth that we are called to by the other and it is this truth that Levinas calls the highest truth. It is a truth that calls us to the other and to peace. The call takes the form: “Don’t kill me.” As Levinas states, murder is the only way to exercise a power over that which escapes power. “To kill is not to dominate but to annihilate; it is to renounce comprehension completely.”¹⁰⁹ Murder is total negation and it is resistance to this

¹⁰⁷ Levinas. TI 253

¹⁰⁸ Manning. 402

¹⁰⁹ Levinas. TI 198

negation that we encounter in the face of the Other. This truth, this call, is what I encounter in the face of the Other and is prior to the choice that I have to make.

Derrida claims that we are always already within the war instituted by language and that this war is inescapable. As we will see, he may be in agreement with Levinas on this point, to a certain extent. Admission of this predicament, and the fight or violence against this violence is, for Derrida, the least violence possible. For Levinas, though, nonviolence is produced in the ethical relation between one and an Other. Language can be used toward nonviolence, specifically in the move toward justice. “The capacity of language not to produce but to resist violence, the capacity of the person to use language to resist violence – this is perhaps the central point of Levinas’s language and may well be what his language is attempting to enact and embody.”¹¹⁰ Manning claims that this is the very point that Derrida seems to miss in “Violence and Metaphysics.” It appears that Derrida and Levinas may not be disagreeing to a very large extent though. Both claim that a certain amount of violence arises in language. Both think that language can be used to enact peace. The only difference is in the priority given to violence. In order for the ethical relation to remain primary, Levinas needs to show that there is a relation prior to language.

Atterton claims that Derrida has not simply missed Levinas’s distinction between expression and phenomenon, but that the force of his argument comes from Levinas’s claim thought is language, that “thought consists in speaking.”¹¹¹ Whether or not Derrida

¹¹⁰ Manning, 403

¹¹¹ *ibid.* 403

misses the distinction between expression and phenomenon, or simply disagrees with it is debatable, but his argument may have been enough to encourage Levinas to develop this distinction later in his discussion of the Saying and the Said in Otherwise Than Being. The problem that Derrida notes is that, if the ethical relation is discourse, and discourse, or language, is thought, how can one have a relation to an Other without reflecting on the Other and thus reducing their alterity, which is a violence? “If, as Levinas says, only discourse (and not intuitive contact) is righteous, and if, moreover, all discourse essentially retains within it space and the Same – does this not mean discourse is originally violent?”¹¹² Derrida claims that Levinas’s thesis about the primacy of peace would be coherent if the face were only a glance, but, he notes, it is also speech.

Earlier in the essay, Derrida offers another complaint that is related to this one. Derrida turns Levinas’s question of the relation of the face to speech into a question that is an important one for himself, namely a question about the relation between speech and writing. It is a question that is obviously more important to Derrida than it is for Levinas and it is perhaps a case of Derrida simply using a point that Levinas makes for his own agenda. In Totality and Infinity Levinas discusses Plato’s distinction between spoken and written discourse. Plato maintains a difference between “the objective order of truth, that which doubtlessly is established in writings, impersonally, and reason *in* a living being, ‘a living and animated discourse,’ a discourse ‘which can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent’.”¹¹³ It is in living discourse, claims Levinas, that

¹¹² Derrida. WD 116

¹¹³ Levinas. TI 73

truth is constituted. He further states that “language is spoken where community between the terms of the relationship is wanting, where the common plane is wanting or is yet to be constituted. It takes place in this transcendence.”¹¹⁴ Discourse is an experience of something absolutely other, and it is only the other that can instruct us.

Derrida suggests, in opposition to Levinas, that it is actually through written discourse that we have a real encounter with otherness. Writing is more ‘metaphysical’ than speech because through writing the Other expresses his otherness more clearly. The reason that this is so is because in writing the Other ‘absents himself better,’ which is an expression of his otherness. Derrida claims that “The thematic of the *trace* . . . should lead to a certain rehabilitation of writing. Is not the ‘He’ whom transcendence and generous absence uniquely announce in the trace more readily the author of writing than of speech?”¹¹⁵ Derrida is right in noting that otherness is always threatened with restoration to presence, reintegration into the Same. It is for this reason, in fact, that Levinas introduces the term *illeity*. He/She (Ille/Elle) refers to the third person, someone who is not there. “Levinas calls this absolute absence which is constitutive of otherness *illeity*. One can only refer to *illeity*, to that which is always absent, in the past. In this sense, the otherness of the Other is revealed to us only as something which has already passed away, as a *trace*.”¹¹⁶ Derrida seems to read Levinas as saying that one expresses oneself better as Other by withdrawal. One’s presence threatens the expression of their otherness. This is not what Levinas says though. “For Levinas, for the other to express

¹¹⁴ *ibid.* 73

¹¹⁵ Derrida. WD 102

¹¹⁶ Mosés. 20

himself as other is to present himself in his expression, for in this expression the other's alterity is revealed as infinite alterity."¹¹⁷ The notion of responsibility arises, as we have seen, precisely in the encounter with the face of another. As we have already noted, Levinas's notion of otherness has two components, the finite and the infinite, the expression and the phenomenon, or the Saying and the Said. Each of these components are inseparable from the other. The otherness that Derrida is reading into Levinas is an otherness of pure difference, an otherness where there is no point of contact. As we have seen though, his reading of Levinas's notion of otherness may be mistaken. In Otherwise Than Being, Levinas claims that ethical responsibility arises out of our proximity to the Other, not in withdrawal. Manning claims that for Levinas, "Writing can be a way to renounce violence, but only if speaking is an acceptance of my responsibility, a responsibility that can go beyond my present situation because of writing. In writing I do not withdraw from responsibility. On the contrary, writing, as the perpetuation of my speech, nails me to my responsibility and perpetuates it."¹¹⁸

The question arises as to whether or not Levinas actually does contradict himself with regard to the relation of speech to thought, and their relation to the ethical responsibility. It may seem, at first glance, that he does because we have seen that language has an element of violence to it and he claims that all thought is speaking. This would appear to indicate that all thought is violent. Atterton believes though, that there is no contradiction here. The first point that Atterton makes is a clarification of what

¹¹⁷ Manning. 394

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 394

Levinas means when he speaks of speech and thought. He claims that Derrida has interpreted the assertion that “thought consists in speaking” too narrowly. Levinas qualifies this assertion when he says that “Language thus conditions the functioning of rational thought: it gives it a commencement in being”¹¹⁹ What he leaves open here is the possibility of a thought, or at least an experience, that is not reducible to reason or ontology. This is a point that Derrida disregards. When Levinas claims that language conditions thought, he is not referring to language “in its physical materiality, but language as an attitude of the same with regard to the Other, irreducible to the representation of the Other.”¹²⁰ Atterton holds Levinas to be implying a dissociation of ‘language as an attitude,’ and ‘language in its physical materiality.’ He claims that Levinas invokes the classical schema, not of the separation of language and thought, but of sensibility and understanding. Levinas refers to Kant on this point. “The role Kant attributed to sensible experience in the domain of the understanding belongs in metaphysics to interhuman relations.”¹²¹ Levinas understands Kant in an unusual way when he claims that “at least he (Kant) does recognize that of itself the sensible is an apparition without there being anything that appears.”¹²² Earlier, he calls this a “conceptless experience.”¹²³ Kant is not traditionally understood this way and in several places says the very opposite of what Levinas takes him to mean. He denies that there can be such a thing as a conceptless experience. This traditional understanding of Kant is closer to the view that Derrida holds. He claims that the immaterial language that

¹¹⁹ Levinas. TI 204

¹²⁰ *ibid.* 204

¹²¹ *ibid.* 79

¹²² *ibid.* 136

Levinas speaks of cannot remain distinct from language and thought as violence. He claims that a silent language offers nothing to the Other. He says that “A speech produced without the least violence would determine nothing, would say nothing, would offer nothing to the other,”¹²⁴ but Levinas insists that speech is a “primordial donation”¹²⁵ to the Other, the expression, or the saying, makes possible the phenomenon. Through this original donation, “things receive a name and become concepts”.¹²⁶

This view of language that Levinas puts forward, is one that is not developed at length until his book Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence. While his argument is anticipated in Totality and Infinity in his distinction between expression and phenomenon, it becomes clearer in his discussion of the Said and the Saying in his later work. Antecedent to linguistic systems, verbal signs, etc., is the Saying prior to all Said. The Saying is “the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification.”¹²⁷ Responsibility, the ethical demand placed on the one by the other, arises out of the Saying. The Said, by comparison, appears like a game, unless it is remembered that it is based on a prior responsibility. He notes that the Saying necessarily moves into a spoken language in which the Saying and the Said are correlative and that the Saying even becomes subordinated to the theme. The subordination of the Saying to the Said, the linguistic system and ontology is the price of manifestation. The Saying is necessarily betrayed. This paradoxical relation between the Saying and the Said is similar to the one between

¹²³ *ibid.* 101

¹²⁴ Derrida. *WD* 147

¹²⁵ Levinas. *TI* 173

¹²⁶ *ibid.* 174

ethics and justice. In an encounter with the face of an Other we are called to an infinite responsibility, but, at the same time, we see the face of all Others and are called to temper our responsibility. The necessity of justice and the Said, is a betrayal of ethical responsibility or the Saying. Levinas refuses to call this betrayal violence, when, in fact, it is this betrayal that Derrida calls a violent act. Despite this, Levinas claims that “thematization, in which being’s essence is conveyed before us, and theory and thought, its contemporaries, do not attest to some fall of the saying. They are motivated by the pre-original vocation of the saying, by responsibility itself.”¹²⁸ As soon as we convey the ‘otherwise than being’ it is betrayed before us in the Said and this leads us to the problem: can one “at the same time know and free the known of the marks which thematization leaves on it by subordinating it to ontology. Everything shows itself at the price of this betrayal, even the unsayable.”¹²⁹ This seems to be the very question that Derrida asks and sees no resolution to.

In response to this question, Levinas says that the purpose of Otherwise Than Being is “to ask if subjectivity, despite its foreignness to the said, is not stated by an abuse of language through which in the indiscretion of the said everything is shown. Everything is shown by indeed betraying its meaning, but philosophy is called upon to reduce that betrayal, by an abuse that justifies proximity itself in which the Infinite comes to pass.”¹³⁰ It seems that what Levinas is saying is that one cannot free the known of the

¹²⁷ Levinas. OB 5

¹²⁸ *ibid.* 6

¹²⁹ *ibid.* 7

¹³⁰ *ibid.* 156

marks of thematization, but that philosophy needs fight against this tendency. This sounds similar to what Derrida claims when he says that justice requires the recognition of the violence of language, and then the use of language violently against this violence. This is what he calls “violence against violence.”¹³¹ For Levinas the Saying is accomplished only in relation to someone, it is a speaking to someone, and it only happens in proximity to an Other. The saying, the expression, or the donation, occurs in the giving of oneself to another, in the substitution of oneself for another. Prior to any preoccupation with oneself, the subject is structured as responsibility for the Other. The Saying occurs in substitution, in the constitution of the subject as one-for-the-Other. The Saying does indeed become betrayed by the Said, but what Levinas claims is that it is the role of philosophy to assure that this betrayal does not become a violence. The betrayal is necessary because it is only through the Said that there can be justice. Levinas says that the “relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at. There is weighing, thought, objectification, and thus a degree in which my anarchic relationship with illeity is betrayed, but in which it is conveyed before us.”¹³² It seems that, for Levinas, the thematization of the Saying in the Said is not a violence. At the very least, it is not a violence in the way the Derrida seems to conceive it, in that it arises out of a prior experience of responsibility. The thematization of the Saying is a betrayal, but it is a betrayal that is necessary for there to be justice. With the introduction of the third justice

¹³¹ Derrida. WD 117

¹³² Levinas. OB 158

becomes necessary, “that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a copresence on an equal footing as before a court of justice.”¹³³

The third party is introduced by Levinas when he is describing the fact that the ethical relation is not visible to the third party. The fact that the attitude, or intention of one person with regard to another is stronger than the formal signification is due to the fact that it is invisible from the outside. In viewing a relation between two people it is impossible to see anything other than the actions. The intentions of the actors are invisible. While justice does arise out of a prior relation, it is blind to this relation. The third party can see the participants only as members of a totality. Although the relation is invisible to the third party it is the ethical relation that makes the third party visible. The ethical relation includes the third party. “The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice.”¹³⁴ Language is an expression of the concern for justice. “It is so because, inseparable from language as speech, it belongs to the order of universality (‘The relation with the Other does not only stimulate, provoke generalization . . . but is this generalization itself. Generalization is a universalization.’[TI 173-74]) – an order which derives from the relation with the third party.”¹³⁵ In encountering the third party, I see the need to manage my responsibilities in order to do justice to the third. To do this we need to resort to reason and judgement, universalization. The source of this

¹³³ *ibid.* 157

¹³⁴ Levinas. OB 213

¹³⁵ Atterton. 66

universality is the relation with the Other. There is the danger though of this non-violent universality becoming violent, becoming a tyranny, but this violence “corresponding to the necessity of the logos (speech, universality, ontology and so on), although neither chronologically nor logically posterior to the non-violence of ethics, could thus be said to presuppose that non-violence.”¹³⁶ It would seem that any universality has a tendency toward violence as soon as it is forgotten that it emerges out of the ethical relation. The history of the West has shown this time and again. Without recognition of the ethical relation beyond politics “we would be caught in the reasonable order of a tamed but not conquered violence that, at any moment, could explode again in the terror of a systematic destruction, unrestrained by absolute morality.”¹³⁷ Atterton notes that Derrida omits any discussion of the third party save for a passing footnote.¹³⁸ This is a serious omission because, as Atterton claims, “it is the concern with justice which gives rise to the necessity of speech as *logos*.”¹³⁹ It is because of the third party that the need for justice arises. Without justice the third would have violence done to it. The origin of language presupposes three persons: the one, or the Same, the Other and the third.

The final question that I will address in this chapter has to do with the practical implications of the differences between Levinas and Derrida. The differences between their views of language are fairly clear. In Derrida’s mind, all language, and therefore all experience, is violent. There is nothing prior to the physical manifestation of language.

¹³⁶ *ibid.* 67

¹³⁷ Peperzak. To The Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.130

¹³⁸ This footnote is found in WD p.314 n37 “For there is also in Levinas’ thought, despite his protests against neutrality, a summoning of the third party.”

¹³⁹ Atterton. 67

Levinas, on the other hand, believes that there is an element of violence in language (although he calls this a betrayal rather than a violence), but that prior to this violence is the ethical Saying, the call to responsibility. The key difference between them is the priority granted to violence. After this, the differences become less significant. For each, language is ethical. Critchley quotes Derrida's Of Spirit where he says "It (the question) responds in advance, whatever it does, to this pledge and of this pledge. It is engaged by it in a responsibility it has not chosen – and which assigns it even its liberty (Of Spirit 130)." Critchley follows this quote up by stating that "what is primary in language is that to which one is responsible, which has not been chosen . . . The origin of language is responsibility (OS 132)."¹⁴⁰ For each, the goals are nonviolence, and justice, and language is the necessary way of attaining these goals. Practically speaking, even their key difference has few, if any, implications. When it comes to seeking justice in the real world, all that we have access to is a flawed and somewhat violent language, and so perfect justice can never be had, but, the ethical responsibility we have to the Other demands that we try anyway.

"Violence and Metaphysics" is not Derrida's last word on Levinas. The dialogue between the two thinkers went on in several papers over a number of years. Many writers note that Derrida's position on Levinas changes. Manning claims that in Derrida's essay "At this very moment in this work here I am,"¹⁴¹ he is not so critical, but rather, his concern is "to make his work work the way that Levinas's texts work, which

¹⁴⁰ Critchley. The Ethics of Deconstruction. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell. 1992. p.194 - 195

¹⁴¹ Derrida, Jacques. "At this very moment in this work here I am," in Re-Reading Levinas. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1991. pp. 11-50

means to make his text do the work of ethics.”¹⁴² Both are working towards the least possible violence. The reasons why Derrida’s position shifts, if it in fact does, is unimportant for the purpose of this paper because the critique that he levels against Levinas remains crucial. How is it that one can speak of absolute exteriority, because when one does, the exteriority becomes part of a totalizing discourse, it becomes thematized? One cannot speak of transcendence without reducing it to immanence. This is why Levinas introduces his notion of the Saying and the Said. Levinas’s goal is to show that the call of the Other is prior to violence. The possibility of violence only exists because of the ethical responsibility of the one for the Other. Derrida’s omission of any discussion of the third party shows the necessity of this concept to Levinas’s project. For Derrida, language is inherently violent. Language involves a reduction of the otherness of the other. Ethics, for him, arises from the need to curb this violence. One might wonder though, if all experience is violent, why do we feel the need to curb this violence? Why should we be concerned about the degree of violence if all there is is violence? Because of the priority granted, by Levinas, to responsibility, he is better able to answer these questions. In Levinas we see that language arises from the need that is introduced with the arrival of the third party, the need for justice. Language is unavoidable because the third is always already there, and language is necessary in order to avoid doing violence to the third. As I have already noted, the ethical relation, or the Saying, is betrayed in the Said where it becomes universalized. It appears that this betrayal is not entirely unlike the violence that Derrida claims is inevitable. For Levinas though, this

¹⁴² Manning. 404

betrayal is ethical, in that the Saying needs to be betrayed for there to be such a thing as justice.

Chapter 3

But justice itself cannot make us forget the origin of the right or the uniqueness of the other, henceforth covered over by the particularity and generality of the human. It cannot abandon that uniqueness to political history, which is engaged in the determinism of powers, reasons of state, totalitarian temptations and complacencies. It awaits the voices that will recall, to the judgements of the judges and statesmen, the human face dissimulated beneath the identities of citizens. Perhaps these are the 'prophetic voices'.¹⁴³

The final chapter will attempt to deal with some of the questions that were raised at the end of Chapter 1. Is the integration of justice and ethics a possibility in the real world? Is the tension that exists between ethics and justice one that can be harmonized or is it a tension that is destructive, or is it the case that the tension is neither of these? Is it a constructive tension? Most importantly, can justice be institutionalized, as Levinas claims it must, without losing sight of the Other? These questions are key in determining whether or not the Levinasian project is at all useful or if is merely the dream of some past, or future utopia, as Derrida claims. Is justice hyperbolic or is it something that we can actually strive to see enacted in a real political system? These are all questions that I will attempt to address in the following chapter.

¹⁴³ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*. Translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press. 1998. p.196

Levinas does not answer these questions with an explicit description of possible manifestations of his form of justice, nor does he propose a particular political constitution. Instead he shows, as we have seen, how the dimensions of society and politics emerge out of the original asymmetric relationship between one and an Other. This relationship is one that precedes all universality, community and symmetry. “In the measure that the face of the Other relates us with the third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of the We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality.”¹⁴⁴ One of Levinas’s chief concerns is to safeguard the radical individuality of the asymmetric responsibility between one and an Other which, at the same time, declares itself to be universal. How is this accomplished and what is the nature of the relation between my responsibility as an irreplaceable subject and the universal thematization of ethics, justice? There is, in Levinas’s view, an antagonism between ethics and politics. This antagonism can be destructive if either is taken to the extreme, but it can also be a constructive antagonism, one that is creative of justice.

Levinas’s reflection on the prophetic may provide a connection point between the unique and the universal. Peperzak notes a paradox in “The Other, Society, and People of God.” He states specifically that: “As long as we remain within philosophical reflection . . . we cannot escape from the *universalization of the asymmetrical relation*, separating and inseparably tying together all me’s and all Others. Thus *asymmetry* shows

¹⁴⁴ Levinas. TI 300

itself to be a universal relation and universally *reciprocal*.”¹⁴⁵ Ordinarily ethics is approached as presupposing that humans are free and ethics is then necessary to get these free wills to submit to the rule of rationality in order to find the criteria for action that are universally intelligible and valid. Free will comes first and ethics comes second in this view. This is obviously different from the picture of the human situation that Levinas puts forth. In his view, ethics comes first. Ethics is not only prior to freedom but is prior to all understanding. Ciaramelli holds that the appeal to propheticism may shed light on the paradox that arises. He claims that the prophetic call is the preconceptual demand placed on us in our relation to an Other. “Such an absolute obligation properly defines the status of prophetic discourse which grounds itself solely on the authority of its source and bypasses the mediatory role of reason.”¹⁴⁶

Ciaramelli makes two points concerning the intelligibility and value of this obligation. The first point is that obligation does not refer to some universal place (arche or Being) “to acquire its meaning and its power to bind a subject.”¹⁴⁷ Obligation does not refer to some prior discourse to which we all have access; instead, it is unmediated and original. Secondly he states that “in the very particularity of such an unmediated obligation of the subject there also lies a dimension of universality” which springs from “the prescriptive power of the appeal and its pretension to concern each and every one of us, always and everywhere.”¹⁴⁸ What both Peperzak and Ciaramelli are noting is the paradox of our situation. Our situation involves an infinite responsibility, but at the same

¹⁴⁵ Peperzak, Adriaan. Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.126

¹⁴⁶ Ciaramelli, Fabio. “Levinas’s Ethical Discourse Between Individuality and Universality,” in Re-Reading Levinas. Ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley. IN: Indiana University Press. 1991. p.85

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 85

time, it necessarily involves the demand for justice. My responsibility for an Other is unsayable, but because of the third, I need to say it. The problem arises as to how to explain something prior to language, understanding and conceptualization in philosophical language. How can we translate from Hebrew into Greek, or from prophetic into philosophic language? It becomes obvious that Levinas does not want to reject the order of political rationality and its universal claims of justice. In the discussion following the presentation of his paper "Transcendence and Height" he states that "The goal of my communication was to insist on the irreplaceable function of the I in a world of peace, but it did not mean to dispute the role of the State and hierarchy as much as it has appeared to have done."¹⁴⁹ We can see from this statement that Levinas is aware of the potential difficulties in the move he makes from ethics to justice. He wants to show though, that the political order is based on the face-to-face relation of one-for-the-Other. He is critical of the attitude that only political rationality, by itself, can answer the problems of justice. Ethics, in his view, leads back to politics. He claims that if the ethical crisis of Europe is based on an attachment to its Greek heritage, then the Greek heritage does not need to be supplanted by a Biblical one. Instead, both heritages "are simultaneously necessary for the constitution of a just polity."¹⁵⁰ It is the situation that he calls Hypocrisy in Totality and Infinity.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.* 85

¹⁴⁹ Levinas. "Transcendence and Height," in Basic Philosophical Writings. p.24

¹⁵⁰ Critchley, Simon. Introduction to Levinas's "Peace and Proximity," in Basic Philosophical Writings. p.162

¹⁵¹ See p.29-30 in Chapter 1. In TI Levinas says "It is perhaps time to see in hypocrisy not only a base contingent defect of man, by the underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets."²⁴

A crucial point for Levinas is that individuality is not conceived in general terms. He conceives individuality as one's own uniqueness, and one's own substitution for an Other. In Otherwise Than Being we have already seen that Levinas describes subjectivity before its free activity in the world, before its constitution as an entity among other similar entities, and before consciousness. He describes subjectivity as a radical passivity, "that is, as being 'subject to' the other in an ethical relation that precedes the ontological constitution of subjectivity in any more familiar sense."¹⁵² Prior to any ontological constitution, subjectivity is I- for-the-Other. Although the break with Being takes place in this prior relation, subjectivity is "constantly betrayed by language and its meaning is reduced to the ontological order of the Said, which restores the exception to the essence."¹⁵³ Levinas suggests that instead of focusing on the Said, we should look to the Saying for the ultimate meaning of the subject. With this view of the subject in mind, we can move back from the Saying into the Said and act justly. Justice needs to recognize the priority of responsibility and it cannot forget the face of the Other.

Because of the relation of proximity, and the direct immediacy of the appeal from the Other, I am the only one who can respond to the appeal. The ethical demand is one that I cannot escape. The obligation that arises is absolute and irreducibly mine. "Here the unicity of the ego first acquires a meaning – where it is no longer a question of the ego, but of me. The subject which is not an ego, but which I am, cannot be generalized, is not a subject in general; we have moved from the Ego to me who am me and no one

¹⁵² *ibid.* 86

¹⁵³ *ibid.* 87

else.”¹⁵⁴ Ciarelli claims that the question of the unsayable is the question of the passage from the I to the me, from the universal to the individual. It is my position as a unique subject that is unsayable. Here again we are faced with a reoccurring problem. It seems that the ethical relation is transcendent and is uniquely mine. How can a universal ethic be derived out of this? What is the relation between this radical individuation and universality? These questions will be especially difficult to answer if we ignore the encounter with otherness as described in Otherwise Than Being.

These questions are approached differently in Levinas’s two major texts. In Totality and Infinity he focused on the separated subject that goes out from its own interiority and meets the Other in the world outside. In order to avoid “the selfish contestation of totality”¹⁵⁵ by the subject, which Levinas certainly wants to do, he is obliged, according to Derrida, to acknowledge the passage from the unique to the universal, thereby inflicting violence on the unique individual. Ciarelli claims that Levinas is able to overcome this problem in Otherwise Than Being where he succeeds in renouncing ipseity in general. The point of departure for the ethical relation, as it is described in Otherwise Than Being, is my subjective position understood in terms of my proximity to the neighbour. As Bernasconi states it “The emphasis on separation in the former (TI) is appropriate to an initial attempt to establish exteriority; the surplus which exceeds totality. The crucial point is that when we look to the relation itself we find that

¹⁵⁴ Levinas. OB pp.13-14

¹⁵⁵ Ciarelli, Fabio. “Levinas’s Ethical Discourse Between Individuality and Universality,” in Re-Reading Levinas. p.89

in responsibility for the stranger he is the neighbour.”¹⁵⁶ The Ego is no longer understood as a closed entity, rather it is understood as an openness to the neighbour. It is my situation of responsibility, my proximity to the other, that constitutes my subjectivity. The subject, as it is described in Totality and Infinity, is, in a way, annihilated by the Other. In Otherwise Than Being, on the other hand, there is this same sense of annihilation of the subject, but there is a difference in that the subject is constituted by the Other through his substitution for the Other. The non-reciprocity of the ethical relation is “not simply a passage to a subjective point of view. One can no longer say what the Ego or I is. From now on one has to speak in the first person.”¹⁵⁷ What Ciaremelli and Bernasconi seem to be claiming is that, with this different description of the subject, Levinas is able to make the passage from the unique to the universal without doing violence to the Other. Whether or not there is a real shift in Levinas’s thinking is debatable. Ciaramelli and Bernasconi think that there is no significant difference between the two texts. The difference simply amounts to a re-description of the same thing in order to overcome the problem of violence that Derrida, for example, points out.

Because of the radical asymmetry of the ethical relation it may appear that Levinas is describing ethics as an entirely private affair. He makes a claim that strikes us as obvious, but seems, on the surface, to run contrary to what he has been describing. He states that ethics shows itself as prophetic: “this means that ethics expresses a vocation

¹⁵⁶ Bernasconi, Robert. “Levinas Face to Face with Hegel,” quoted in Ciaremelli, Fabio. “Levinas’s Ethical Discourse Between Individuality and Universality,” in Re-Reading Levinas. p.90

¹⁵⁷ Levinas. OB 82

for humanity.”¹⁵⁸ All are called upon to be a me in a relation of responsibility. In this claim we can see the necessary universal dimension of ethical discourse, but, as Ciaramelli notes, “we cannot escape the fact that this assignation can be said only as my own individuation, brought about by the approach of the other.”¹⁵⁹ Ciaramelli reminds us that what must be remembered is that “even if there is a universality of the ethical by virtue of the fact that each subject is called to a responsibility as infinite as mine, it is only from the perspective of my own assignation and election that I can put it into words.”¹⁶⁰ My own particular relation to an Other remains nonreciprocal and this position cannot be generalized. I can only voice my responsibility to an Other in asymmetrical terms, but what needs to be remembered is that the third is already present in this relation. We are immediately drawn to think in terms of the universal, justice and politics. Here again we see the Hypocrisy of our situation. We are always pulled in two different directions. The only possible point of departure for ethical discourse is the one who speaks, the particular subject. What has to be recognized is that “the unique site from whence the Saying comes is unsayable as such. While on the other hand, insofar as it is Said, it is always universal, tangible, and public.”¹⁶¹ In the dimension of the Said, the meaning of an ethical situation becomes intelligible and universal, while this Said is preceded by an unsayable, an-archic origin, the Saying of a subject.

In order to grasp the universality of ethics without losing sight of the prior ethical

¹⁵⁸ Ciaramelli, Fabio. “Levinas’s Ethical Discourse Between Individuality and Universality,” in Reading Levinas. p.92

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.* 92

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.* 92

¹⁶¹ *ibid.* 93

demand placed on the individual subject, the ontological dimension of consciousness must be renounced. The subject is not seen as an Ego. In fact, the subject is individualized by the non-reciprocal relation to the Other. As Ciaramelli notes though, this does not entail the renunciation of universality. He distinguishes between the universality of the logos and ethical universality. The universality of the logos, the order of the Said, has a derivative function, in that it points to the ethical significance of the Saying. What is ethically universal is “the ethical significance of my being the hostage of my neighbor, and I can remain blind to it since, by virtue of its immediacy, it precedes consciousness and knowledge.”¹⁶² This universality is beyond the logos and does not concern knowledge at all. This is a very difficult distinction to make and whether or not Ciaramelli and Levinas are successful is debatable. What needs to be remembered though, is that ethical language does not reach any definitive formulation, or conceptualization. It calls, rather, for “an endless thinking back from the Said to the Saying.”¹⁶³ Nowhere does Levinas claim that the order of law and generalization is an unfortunate necessity. He never expresses a desire for some return to anarchy where we all act simply in terms of infinite responsibility. Peace can only arise somewhere in between the Saying and the Said. Practically speaking, what he is seeking, in terms of both everyday morality and politics, is judgments that are mediated by our ethical responsibility for the Other. Levinas claims, as we will see later, that this is the task of philosophy, to reduce the Said to the signification of the Saying that precedes it. This

¹⁶² *ibid.* 95

¹⁶³ *ibid.* 97

should be the role of philosophy despite the fact that philosophy is performed in the Said.

It is difficult to see how judgments can be mediated ethically when ethical responsibility is unsayable. How can something that can only be talked about from my own perspective be translated into the universal? John Caputo claims that the ethical relationship of proximity is a myth. What I understand Caputo to be claiming here is similar to what Levinas holds. We live in the order of the Said, and ethical responsibility can never be translated into this order without a certain amount of betrayal. No pure Saying can be said.¹⁶⁴ He claims that “justice is less an *arche* than an *an-arche*, so that when it concerns justice the archi-constructors are out of their element. If there were justice, if justice existed, we would not need an *arche*.”¹⁶⁵ Ethics cannot be captured by laws and institutions. As Caputo states, “Justice eludes law and philosophy. Justice is beyond them, exceeds them, transcends them, and often enough even transgresses them. For often enough it is necessary, for the sake of justice, to break the law and even to spend some time in jail.”¹⁶⁶ Caputo notes that stories about justice belong both to the singular and to the universal. Justice arises, as it does for Levinas, somewhere between the Saying and the Said and includes both. He claims that the aim of language is the absolutely singular, that which is immediately present, and is unmediated. Caputo calls this the myth of pure immediacy. As in the myth of ethical responsibility, I take Caputo

¹⁶⁴ It should be noted here that whenever Caputo uses the word ‘justice’ he is referring to the relation of infinite responsibility, and that whenever he speaks of ‘law’ he is referring to Levinasian justice.

¹⁶⁵ Caputo, John D. “Hyperbolic Justice: Deconstruction, Myth, and Politics,” in Research in Phenomenology. Vol.21, pp.3-20. 1991. p.5

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.* 5

to mean that language cannot capture pure immediacy. It is betrayed as soon as language says it. “For we are always already too late for such unveilings. As soon as language has arrived on the scene the singular has already fled, already slipped out the back door.”¹⁶⁷ The singular is picked out through the use of a universal system of signs, language. The universal and the singular belong to the same system. But, he claims, the system fails. The singular is lost “before we open our mouth.”¹⁶⁸ The systematization of both the singular and the universal is an impossibility, but this does not diminish the demands placed on us by both the Other and the third party. Caputo claims, with Levinas, that the role of philosophy is to move back and forth in the abyss between the universal and the unique.

Caputo sees Levinas as similar to a mad prophet demanding the impossible. He sees Levinasian ethics as hyperbolic, in that it demands of us a manifestation of the infinite. I do not think that this characterization of Levinas is accurate. He is not demanding that we act according to our infinite responsibility. We cannot act this way because of the ever-present third. Despite the impossibility of a real manifestation of ethics though, Caputo claims that it is necessary to inform the law. This is why, even though impossible, ethical responsibility remains important. “Hyperbolic justice is anarchic. It calls from beyond the universal, from the abyss of the singular. It calls upon us, calling for a response, calling upon our most secret responsiveness and responsibility.”¹⁶⁹ Cheryl L. Hughes emphasizes Caputo’s point by noting that Levinas

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.* 14

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.* 15

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.* 18

makes a careful distinction between the ideal of infinite responsibility and the morality of everyday life. “He refers to infinite responsibility as an ‘ideal of saintliness,’ a utopian ideal that cannot be fully realized but that provides a first and undeniable value. Thus, according to Levinas, the ethical responsibility of the face to face relation must inspire and direct the moral and political order, but it cannot be universalized or legislated.”¹⁷⁰ It seems to me that the way we behave, either in everyday moral situations or politically, may or may not be different if our actions are not inspired by the face-to-face relation. But, if our actions are guided with reference to our responsibility for the Other, we are more liable to continue to act justly.

Although infinite responsibility is prior to justice and political institutions, in that these institutions arise out of the face-to-face encounter, political institutions are necessary to realize equality and to distribute responsibility. Justice must be rooted in the face-to-face encounter: “it must include social, economic, and political institutions that attempt to address the needs of each person.”¹⁷¹ Political institutions need to be held in check by the responsibility of the face-to-face relation because of its primacy and priority. The face-to-face is the source of all true justice but it cannot be realized without the universal institutions. As Levinas says in “Difficult Liberty,” “The state is necessary to establish and maintain the conditions of concrete morality, but the demands of ethics

¹⁷⁰ Hughes, Cheryl L. “The Primacy of Ethics: Hobbes and Levinas,” in Continental Philosophy Review. Vol.31, 1998. p.93.

¹⁷¹ *ibid.* 92

have set the standard by which all politics must be judged, and the spirit of revelation is indispensable to remind the state of its purpose, which lies in universal justice only.”¹⁷²

Does the fact of the hyperbolic nature of the ethical relation make it meaningless? It seems that neither Caputo nor Levinas think so. As we have already seen, Levinas claims that justice is in no way a “degeneration of the for-the-other”. In fact, it is the relation of proximity that informs the system of justice and keeps it in check, keeps it from reducing the unique to the universal. How does Levinas make the move from ethics to justice without reducing, or causing violence to the alterity of the other? Critchley claims that this passage is approached in terms of the “latent birth of the *question* in responsibility.” “The passage from ethics to politics is synonymous with the move from responsibility to questioning, from the proximity of the one-for-the-Other to a relation with all others whereby I feel myself to be an other like the others and where the question of justice can be raised.”¹⁷³

In Levinas’s mind, ethics is opposed to politics, the Saying is opposed to the Said. The necessary passage between two opposing terms seems like a contradiction, but Levinas claims that this is the paradox, the Hypocrisy of our situation. This questioning is rooted in the priority of the ethical relation. What this means is that politics must be mediated ethically. Critchley claims that Levinas’s thinking is, in effect, a critique of politics, insofar as “he is opposing the domination of politics enacted in totalizing or immanentist conceptions of society.”¹⁷⁴ While all politics are enacted in totalizing

¹⁷² This quote is found in Peperzak’s Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. p.24. and is taken out of Levinas’s Difficult Liberty pp.277, 279.

¹⁷³ Critchley, Simon. The Ethics of Deconstruction. p.220

¹⁷⁴ *ibid.* 222

conceptions of society, he is opposed to a politics that is ignorant or dismissive of otherness. What it is a critique of is the idea that only political rationality can address political questions. While political rationality is important, it needs to be held in check by responsibility for the Other. Critchley notes that Levinas offers a good example of this way of thinking in a paper where he speaks of the peace agreement reached between Israel and Egypt in 1977. “Levinas claims that what took place on both sides was a recognition of the Other in their otherness; ethical peace overriding and guiding political reason.”¹⁷⁵ I think that Critchley may be mistaken when he says that ethical peace overrides political reason. Levinas is not a pacifist. The responsibility to the Other does not override politics. Instead, as we have already seen, it acts as a check on politics. There may even be times when political rationality takes precedence over responsibility for the sake of justice. What Levinas claims though, is that, prior to any act, I am concerned for the Other. This can never be forgotten. The difficulties with this position become obvious when we try to understand how war can be conducted with a concern for the Other. How can I kill the person for whom I am concerned? What Levinas is highlighting though is that the tension between ethics and politics is one that is ever-present.

Ethics, for Levinas, leads to politics, responsibility to questioning, to the interrogative demand for a just State. Critchley goes further and claims that “*ethics is ethical for the sake of politics* – that is, for the sake of a new conception of the

¹⁷⁵ *ibid.* 222

organization of political space.”¹⁷⁶ As I have already said though, I am unsure whether or not political space would be organized all that differently. It may be different, but it may not. What will be different is the priority granted to political reason. Alongside political reason will be a continual reference to responsibility to the Other. The third party ensures that the ethical relation takes place within a political sphere, within the public realm. The ethical relation to the Other is unequal and asymmetrical but at the same time opens onto a relation with the third and to humanity as a whole, to a community of equals. “This simultaneity of ethics and politics gives doubling quality to all discourse, whereby the relation to the Other, my Saying, is at the same time the setting forth of a common world, what in this context Levinas calls ‘prophecy’.”¹⁷⁷ The prophet is described as the person “who puts the community under the word of God, who binds the community and makes it a commonality.”¹⁷⁸ The passage from ethics to politics is seen then as a doubling of discourse. The response to the singularity of the Other’s face is, at the same time, a response to the prophetic word, to the word that makes the community a commonality. The community has this double structure of equality and singularity.

The notion of community is, for Levinas, based on of the idea of the non-coincidence of one and an Other in an ethical relation, a relation which Levinas calls human fraternity.¹⁷⁹ As he says in Totality and Infinity, “Human fraternity has then a double aspect: it involves individualities whose logical status is not reducible to the status of ultimate differences in a genus, for their singularity consists in each referring to itself .

¹⁷⁶ *ibid.* 223

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.* 226

¹⁷⁸ *ibid.* 226

¹⁷⁹ See pp.23-24 in Chapter 1 for a fuller description of fraternity.

. . . On the other hand, it involves the commonness of a father, as though the commonness of race would not bring together enough.”¹⁸⁰ He emphasizes this point later in “Peace and Proximity” where he states that “It is necessary to ask oneself if peace, instead of being the result of an absorption or disappearance of alterity, would not on the contrary be the *fraternal* mode of a proximity to the other (*autrui*), which would not simply be the failure to coincide with the other but would signify precisely the *surplus* of sociality over every solitude – the *surplus* of sociality and of love.”¹⁸¹

As we have seen, the human community is made up of both the singular and the universal. In order to get into any discussion about the singular, unique responsibility of one-for-the-Other we need to begin in the order of the Said. Critchley notes that Otherwise Than Being can be divided into three moments. It begins with a discussion of the Said, moves from the Said to the Saying and then moves back to the Said from the Saying, in order to reopen the question of justice. The distinction that Critchley makes between the first Said and the second Said is that between an unjustified and a justified Said. The justified Said is a Said that is interrupted by the trace of the Saying. He calls this justified Said “a political language of philosophical questioning that does not reduce ethical transcendence.”¹⁸² When Levinas says that the ethical relation becomes troubled by the entry of the third, it is obvious that the trouble always already exists because the third is always present. The third concerns me from the first. “The third party introduces a limit to responsibility and allows the ‘birth of the question.’ The question that is born at

¹⁸⁰ Levinas. TI 189

¹⁸¹ Levinas. “Peace and Proximity,” in Basic Philosophical Writings. p.165

¹⁸² Critchley, Simon. The Ethics of Deconstruction. p.229

the limit of responsibility is, for Levinas, the question of *justice*: ‘what do I have to do with justice?’”¹⁸³

Justice, in this view, is seen as the limit of responsibility. Levinas states that “it is in terms of the relation to the Face or of me before the other that we can speak of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of the state. A state in which the interpersonal relationship is impossible, in which it is directed in advance by the determinism proper to the state, is a totalitarian state. So there is a limit to the state.”¹⁸⁴ This is opposed to the Hobbesian vision in which the state emerges from the limitation of violence rather than a limitation of responsibility. We see here two ways of justifying the state. Hobbes justifies the state amorally. The state arises out of the fear of others. Levinas, on the other hand, justifies the state morally. It arises out of responsibility for the Other. In acting justly, I am no longer infinitely responsible for the Other. The asymmetrical relationship becomes one of equality. Levinas calls justice “an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity,”¹⁸⁵ In this moment, rights of all limit the duty to the Other. Critchley claims that this return to the Said is not a simple, or perhaps violent may be a better word, betrayal of the ethical Saying. To show this, he points to his distinction between a justified and an unjustified Said. There is no violence in a Said that “maintains within itself the trace of the ethical Saying.”¹⁸⁶ This is an important point. The justice that Levinas is seeking is one “that is impossible without the one that renders it finding

¹⁸³ *ibid.* 231

¹⁸⁴ Levinas. *Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other*. p.105

¹⁸⁵ Levinas. OB 158

¹⁸⁶ Critchley, Simon. *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. p.232

himself in proximity.”¹⁸⁷ In order for the Said to be justified, it must be informed by proximity; “the equality and symmetry of the relations between citizens must be interrupted by the inequality and asymmetry of the ethical relation. There must be a certain creative antagonism between ethics and politics which ensures that justice is done in the sight of the Other’s face.”¹⁸⁸ There cannot be a closed totality in the political realm. It must be repeatedly punctuated by responsibility for the Other. In “Ethics and Politics” Levinas claims that there is “a direct contradiction between ethics and politics, if both these demands are taken to the extreme.”¹⁸⁹ The problem with this though, is that both ethics and politics demand to be taken to the extreme. The Other demands infinite responsibility, and politics demands perfect equality, and herein lies the tension. He claims that there is an ethical limit to the necessary political existence. In Entre Nous Levinas states that “politics left to itself, has its own determinism. Love must always watch over justice.”¹⁹⁰ Often, he claims, the contradictions that arise between ethics and politics cannot be resolved by philosophers but need to be dealt with in lived human experience. It is only in lived human experience that the solution to the problem of the relation between ethics and politics might be found. Levinas writes that “Justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity . . . The judge is not outside the conflict, but the law is in the midst of proximity.”¹⁹¹ Injustice starts when the responsibility of the ethical relation is forgotten and when the State loses sight of the

¹⁸⁷ Levinas. OB 159

¹⁸⁸ Critchley, Simon. The Ethics of Deconstruction. p.233.

¹⁸⁹ Levinas. OB 159

¹⁹⁰ Levinas. Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other. New York: Columbia University Press. 1998. p.108

¹⁹¹ Levinas. OB.159

fact that it is informed by this relation.

Levinas's turn from the relation of proximity to politics is not a violent betrayal of the Saying. What he attempts to do is establish a just politics, one that does not disregard, or do violence to the transcendence of the Other. This does not mean though, that there is absolutely no violence in a just State. In Entre Nous Levinas is asked if the State is the acceptance of some level of violence. He admits that there is an element of violence in the State but that this violence can involve justice. "That does not mean violence must not be avoided as much as possible; everything that replaces it in the life between states, everything that can be left to negotiation, to speech, is absolutely essential; but one cannot say that there is no legitimate violence."¹⁹² We can see here that Levinas is in no way trying to overcome ontological and philosophical language. Instead, it is only through the use of this language that justice can be attained. Instead of degrading the role of philosophy, he attests to the importance of it. The third party leaves us with a problem: how do we judge, measure, and see that justice is done? These are the questions that we all need to address. "The extraordinary commitment of the Other with regard to the third party calls for control, to the search for justice, to society and the State, to comparison and possession, and to commerce and philosophy, and, outside of anarchy, to the search for a principle. Philosophy is this measure brought to the infinity of the being-for-the-other of proximity, and it is like the wisdom of love."¹⁹³ Levinas takes one of the traditional definitions of philosophy and turns it around. Philosophy is not, in

¹⁹² Levinas. Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other. New York: Columbia University Press. 1998. p.106

¹⁹³ Levinas. OB. p.161

Levinas's view, the love of wisdom, rather, it is the wisdom of love.¹⁹⁴ Levinas calls on philosophy to serve ethics. As he states, philosophy is the "handmaiden of the Saying."

Philosophy has then, a double role. "Philosophy serves justice, by thematizing difference and by reducing the thematized to difference."¹⁹⁵ Philosophy betrays the Saying in thematizing it while at the same time conveys the Saying in the Said. It is a double movement of both justifying and critiquing. As Critchley states it is the "alternating movement between the Saying and the Said, between ethical love and political wisdom".¹⁹⁶ In fact, the State is only justified insofar as it criticized. For justice to be achieved in a State there needs to be this alternating movement between the hierarchy of Athens and the ethical individualism of Jerusalem. The mistake of Western ontology and politics does not consist in its "structure and logic but in its pretense of grasping all reality and in that sense of embodying the absolute principle or point of view. The realm of the Said in which knowledge and thematization, calculation and planning, clarity and objective judgements are at home is even demanded and furthered by the transcending goodness. For it is a necessary presupposition of justice."¹⁹⁷

The question that remains at the end of this discussion is whether or not this view of justice and the ethical relation it presupposes can be translated into a sphere where questions of justice are crucial. Can it be translated into the legal or political sphere? It would seem that the ethical relation of one to an Other can never be enacted in reality.

¹⁹⁴ Levinas usually hesitates to use the word 'love' which he calls "worn out and ambiguous." In this instance love is meant as synonymous with charity and the ethical relationship. This is found in Entre Nous. p.108

¹⁹⁵ Levinas. OB 165

¹⁹⁶ Critchley, Simon. The Ethics of Deconstruction. p.235

¹⁹⁷ Peperzak, Adriaan. To The Other. p.228

As Caputo rightly noted, the ethical relation can never be captured by laws and institutions. There is always a betrayal of the Saying when it enters the Said. This does not necessarily diminish justice though. As Drucilla Cornell states, “it is true that legal principles inevitably categorize, identify, and in that sense violate difference by creating analogies between the like and the unlike. If we cannot escape this violation of difference in a legal system, however, we can still develop principles that minimize it.”¹⁹⁸ She further claims that we “can think of a principle as the light that comes from the lighthouse, a light that guides us and prevents us from going in the wrong direction.”¹⁹⁹ Elaborating these principles involves thematization in the Said. Thematization, for Levinas, means the synchronization of the Good with Being, or of the ethical relation with justice. Cornell elaborates on this point when she says that thematization is “the need to sound the common themes within the *nomos* so that it is possible to appeal to contextual principles. This attempt to sound the common themes still has the effect of synchronizing the Good with Being as a given state of legal affairs, because it appeals to the Good as it has manifested itself, even if only as unrealized potential of the legal system.”²⁰⁰ What needs to be remembered is that thematization of ethics into the public sphere is necessary but that no thematization, or system of justice can ever offer the final word.

“Alongside *ethics*, there is a place for *politics*.”²⁰¹ While Levinas hesitates to offer any explicit statement on what type of political system is best suited to his ideas on

¹⁹⁸ Cornell, Drucilla. The Philosophy of the Limit. p.105

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.* 106

²⁰⁰ *ibid.* 106

²⁰¹ Levinas. “Ethics and Politics,” in The Levinas Reader. p.292

justice, Critchley has no such qualms and I find his argument persuasive. For Levinas, philosophy has a political function. The role of philosophy is justification and critique, the questioning movement back and forth between ethics and justice. This sets a limit on both the ethical demands and the demands of justice. Critchley claims that democracy seems to be the form of government best suited to the justice that Levinas speaks of. What we have seen is that a just State is one where there is ongoing critique, questioning, and judging. It is one where the unique is not subsumed under the universal, where the universal is constantly being questioned by reference to the responsibility for the Other. The role of philosophy in this State is “not that of founding the *polis* upon science, knowledge, or wisdom, but, rather, consists in raising the *question* of legitimacy by calling the political order into question: What is justice?”²⁰² Philosophy need not abandon the Said, the place where politics in fact takes place, rather, philosophy is needed to justify and critique. The State in this view is not a closed, structured totality. It is a structure that is repeatedly punctuated by the unique other, and ethical transcendence. There is, as Levinas is often fond of saying, a “breach in the totality.” Closure is impossible. It is the role of philosophy in a just State, to ensure that the breach remains open, that the tension between the Saying and the Said, between ethics and justice, remain an active tension.

Because of this view of a just State, I will follow Critchley who claims that such a view of a just political institution is democratic if democracy is understood in the way that he understands it. He sees democracy as “an ethically grounded form of political life

²⁰² Critchley, Simon. *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. p.237

which is continually being called into question by asking of its legitimacy and the legitimacy of its practices and institutions: what is justice?”²⁰³ He further claims that “the central feature of democratic politics is that the source of power is contested, through elections or through parliamentary or extra-parliamentary activism and debate.”²⁰⁴ While it is obvious that not all democracies are like this, it would seem that only a democracy has the potential to be this way. If there is the possibility of a State that does not lose sight of the Other and does not reduce the transcendence of the ethical relation, then it would seem to be a democratic State. Critchley notes a reoccurring tension, the need for both the hierarchy taught by Athens and the ethical individualism taught by Jerusalem in order to suppress violence. In an interview recorded in Entre Nous, Levinas is asked if prophetic speech is contrary to the State. He claims that prophetic speech is “extremely bold, audacious speech, since the prophet always speaks before the king; the prophet is not in hiding, he is not preparing an underground revelation. . . Only the true prophet addresses the king and the people without truckling, and reminds them of ethics.”²⁰⁵ Critchley claims that “democracy practices the on-going interruption of politics by ethics, of totality by infinity, of the Said by the Saying.”²⁰⁶ Because of the need for on-going questioning in the just State, democracy, as it is conceived of here, does not exist. Democracy is always incomplete. While the Good may never be perfectly manifested in the political realm, it would seem that democracy, may have the best chance of attaining toward justice. Justice emerges out of the ethical relation of proximity. A just State

²⁰³ *ibid.* 239

²⁰⁴ *ibid.* 239

²⁰⁵ Levinas, Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other. p.106

²⁰⁶ Critchley, Simon. The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas. p.237

must, therefore, emerge out of a collection of people who recognize this prior relation and question the State with reference to it. As Levinas states “there is a possible harmony between ethics and the state. The just state will come from just men and women and saints rather than from propaganda and preaching.”²⁰⁷

On the face of it, a Levinasian form of justice does not sound very radical. The outcome of it simply requires us to make moral judgments while taking the Other into account. Many will acknowledge that there is a tension between ethics and politics. If all he is trying to do is to have us seek some sort of mean between ethics and politics then he is describing something that many other thinkers have. It seems to me that what makes his thought unique is that instead of overcoming the tension, he is seeking to light up, and heighten it. We live in two worlds. We are always in a position of infinite responsibility to Others, and, at the same time, we need to balance these responsibilities. We are pulled in two different directions at once. The tension we feel is not something that we should try to explain away. It is something that is good because it is uncomfortable and it forces us to constantly seek justice with the Other in mind. This tension is something that we feel on the level of everyday morality and in political life.

In order to bring this discussion from the political realm into the realm of everyday morality I will try to explain what I believe Levinas is describing by means of a simple example. When I walk down the street and see a homeless person sitting in a doorway, I feel a responsibility to this person, perhaps a responsibility so great that I am compelled to give them everything that I have. I quickly realize though, that I cannot do this. I have

²⁰⁷ Levinas. Levinas. Entre Nous: On Thinking of the Other. p.120

responsibilities to my family as well. How can I balance these responsibilities? The tension is obvious. I can react by giving this person a dollar, hope that others will do the same, feel that I have acted justly, see the tension dissolve, and go on my way. This though, is not the reaction that Levinas thinks is just. The tension should not disappear. In acting justly I may give a dollar and go on my way, but what I cannot do is forget the destitution that I saw in the face of the person I just passed.

Conclusion

As we have seen, a very important, if not the most important, theme in Levinas's writing is justice. While much of his effort is spent in offering a phenomenological account of the relation between one person and another person, what he is seeking to show is that justice emerges out of this relation. The distinction that he makes between the Saying and the Said is crucial to this argument. We live in the Said, and his description of the Saying involves a thinking back to that which precedes the Said. Levinas claims that we all share some sort of pre-conceptual experience of responsibility, and the description of this experience runs into difficulties as we have seen. It seems to me that Levinas is justified in this move because it does appear that there is some sort of vague sense of responsibility that we have towards others. There is no way of justifying this move by Levinas, but what we can do, in reading him, is try to validate the truth of his description on the basis of our own experience. If we accept these claims then we can understand his move from the Saying back into what Critchley calls a 'justified Said.' Only in recognition of the prior experience of responsibility for the Other can a just politics be attained.

What Levinas wants is peace. The peace that he describes is not a peace that is absolutely free of violence, but a peace that balances infinite responsibility with justice. It is apparent that this balance will involve a certain degree of violence, or betrayal, but

he maintains that it is not the violence that Derrida describes. For Levinas, this betrayal is a betrayal of the Saying for the sake of justice. For Derrida all experience is violent. In Levinas we see that this violence presupposes a non-violent experience, the ethical relation with the Other. Levinas is not describing some unattainable peace. He does recognize that there is an element of violence, and that this violence is necessary, in human relations. Themmatization is a form of violence, but it is a violence that is necessary in order to attain justice and peace.

Aside from judgments of the validity of Levinas's claims about ethics and justice, the question that needs to be asked is whether or not Levinasian justice is applicable and practical. Is the opposition between ethics and justice one that renders any discussion of an ethical political system useless? Levinas obviously denies that this is the case. While they are opposed to each other, there is the possibility of harmony between them. Levinas seems to be suggesting the possibility of an enterprise, one that is started, one that always fails and is re-started, of realizing a unity of the universal and the unique, of justice and ethical responsibility. Justice needs to question and act as a limit on the responsibility of the one-for-the-Other, and justice needs to be held accountable by the prior call of the unique individual. It requires a constant process of questioning and this is the proper role for philosophy, in Levinas's view. As we have seen, philosophy is required to take on a dual role in its service to justice. It needs to themmatize the unique, and reduce the themmatized to the unique. It needs to serve both Athens and Jerusalem, and in doing so, exercise the wisdom of love.

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