

## A CHRONOLOGY OF LEVINAS'S METAPHORICS

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### Abstract

Many readers of Emmanuel Levinas understand his thought as being oriented only by transcendence and therefore denigrate the immanent dimension of metaphor within his texts. Such readings reduce the complexities of Levinas's text to a set of polemical orthodoxies, orthodox predications such as *The Other is Most High* and *Ethics is First Philosophy*. However, Levinas's work invites us to contemplate not only transcendence, but also the way that immanence emerges through relationships with an infinity of others, third persons whose voices murmur within the system of language, articulated in concrete elements such as metaphor. Levinas employs metaphor to converse with the inherited ways that temporal becoming has been articulated, recurrently reorienting terms to assemble a variety of ethical-phenomenological constellations. To expose the dynamics that remain clandestine to orthodox interpretations – and thereby to invert revert pervert and subvert the upright opinion of the orthodox stance – this paper will chronologically trace the development of various families of metaphors such as those of having and doing; those of dimensionality; those of orality; those of familiarity; and those of birth, gender, and death. By examining the transformations of these metaphorical constellations, we hope to demonstrate how Levinas articulates the multitude of roles and perspectival positions assumed by the subject during its temporal becoming.

### Introduction

What is the role of language and metaphor within the texts of Emmanuel Levinas and the ethical phenomenology it describes? The relationship between the self and the Other in his work is often considered to be beyond language or beyond metaphor. If language is understood to be a synchronic system that produces meaning through immanent rules of signification, then admitting how much Levinas relies

<https://doi.org/10.14712/24646504.2021.17>

on metaphor and wordplay might seem to betray the fundamentally transcendental orientation of his thought. However, to conceive his ethical phenomenology in such a manner would be to confuse it with the mysticism of someone like Rudolf Otto, who posits the ultimate spiritual truth as numinous and ineffable, incapable of being expressed by language.<sup>1</sup> This type of reading misunderstands the relationship between immanence and transcendence — and more generally, the way that opposition functions in Levinas's writing — by interpreting such polarities as fundamentally antagonistic. The infinitude of the ethical does not exist as a numinous sphere distinct from everyday reality but rather as something that is revealed in and through concrete presentation. The exclusive focus on transcendence diminishes the importance of the neutral realm of immanence, the domain of impersonal representation and signification, the realm of language and metaphor.

Within the *Said*, the *Saying* is already expressed: each synchronic word already indicates its diachronous existence in and through the span of its vocalization, throughout murmuring funereally of past pronouncements and birthing future enunciations. The system of said sayings already echoes the concrete historical and political situations of third persons through the elements that compose language. For this reason, Levinas consistently uses terms metonymically, employing key terms to engage specific thinkers and lineages of thought, articulating *totality* to resist Hegel, *ontology* to condemn Heidegger, *play* to wink at Derrida, *intention* to discuss with Husserl, and so on. He carries on conversations with these histories of thought by repeatedly reorienting the metaphors and etymologies that animate language, thought, and experience.

In this paper, I will explore Levinas's usage of language and demonstrate the recurrence of metaphors throughout his writing. I will begin by considering a recent article on Levinas and metaphor to better understand the assumptions made by a common mode of analysis. After this, I will explore his texts chronologically to begin an empirical investigation of the roots of his metaphors that traces how these metaphors develop and interact over time.

## 1. Metaphor as Polemic

A recent article by Scott Davidson illustrates a standard interpretation of Levinas's usage of metaphor, announcing in the first line of its abstract: "In his published work, Levinas only mentions metaphor for the sake of dismissing its

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<sup>1</sup> Otto, Rudolf: *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1956, p. 4.

relevance to his ethics of transcendence.”<sup>2</sup> Even before the beginning of the article, in its preface and distillation, Davidson considers Levinas to be engaged in a polemic against metaphor, presenting a struggle between his philosophy and metaphor itself. Before we even consider the merits of Davidson’s argument, we are already struck by the violence of the language: the category of metaphor is described as something forcibly discarded, tossed into the trash as worthless. Is such antagonistic language appropriate to describe the thought of Levinas, a text that opens by questioning whether philosophical thought has too often considered the truth of Being, and conversely the being of Truth, in terms of war, of Heraclitean *polemos*?<sup>3</sup>

Within his article, Davidson repeatedly invokes metaphors of combat, figuring argument as war<sup>4</sup>; dialectics practiced according to the logic of friend against enemy, a struggle unto death. For the most part, Davidson’s usage of such terminology is relatively benign, so commonplace, that one could fail to hear the martial echoes of “aligning” metaphor and disclosure<sup>5</sup> or “dividing philosophical treatments of metaphor into two camps”.<sup>6</sup> Davidson resolves this combat through the wartime antimony of ally and enemy: “Levinas’s stance, as a result, is at once aligned with and against metaphor.”<sup>7</sup>

Within this rhetorical positioning as combat, Levinas “stakes out”<sup>8</sup> a strategic position, on the one hand attacking metaphor, and on the other defending himself from “famous challengers” such as Jacques Derrida.<sup>9</sup> According to Davidson, Derrida challenges Levinas’s thought by pointing out how it is enrooted in metaphors:

Instead of being able to exchange the figural for the literal, the indirect for the direct, it implies that the best that Levinas can do is to exchange one set of metaphors for another. He could only displace one set of metaphors (of light, disclosure, horizon, ontology) through the use of another set of metaphorical terms (of the invisible, revelation, height, ethics). But to read him in such a way would undercut the ethical seriousness

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<sup>2</sup> Davidson, Scott: “Metaphorical Transcendence: Notes on Levinas’s Unpublished Lecture on Metaphor”, in *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 29, Nr. 3, Pennsylvania University Press, University Park 2015, p. 366.

<sup>3</sup> Levinas, Emmanuel: *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1969, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> This is the first example of metaphor discussed by Lakoff and Johnson. “The ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing.” Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson: *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2003, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Davidson: “Transcendence...”, *art. cit.*, p. 367.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 368.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

in which Levinasian discourse shrouds itself. Levinas's ethical project would be reduced to a play of words; it would become a rhetorical strategy, a game that sets out to praise one set of metaphors over other metaphors.<sup>10</sup>

Here Davidson's rhetoric is fascinating: even though he warns against reducing ethics to a rhetorical contest for domination, he still seeks to defend *seriousness* against *play* by maintaining its superior position. Even in his defense, however, Davidson argues metaphorically, arguing that Levinas's thought is "shrouded", thereby evoking the metaphorical oppositions of light/dark common to all phenomenology and concealment/unconcealment innovated by Martin Heidegger. Davidson opposes Levinas's writing to Heidegger's, arraying the metaphors of its articulation against his: "Levinas aligns metaphor with disclosure and the work of ontology, whereas he identifies his ethics with a 'revelation' of the other that is straightforward, direct, and immediate."<sup>11</sup> However, are not all of these terms already metaphors? In any case, does Levinas use any of this terminology in such a univocal manner?

Davidson fails to appreciate how deeply committed Levinas's analysis is to metaphors, especially where he most apparently denounces them. Davidson claims

In *Otherwise than Being*, he goes on to insist that 'the suffering of constriction in one's skin' describes the ethical encounter in a way that is 'better than metaphors.' On the basis of these assertions and countless other ones like them, the boundaries of Levinas's thought would seem to be set: metaphor belongs to poetic imagery and the rhetorical devices that weave together an ontology of immanence, whereas transcendence is established through a literal, direct, and nonmetaphorical encounter with the other.<sup>12</sup>

Quite obviously, *constriction in one's skin* is an extremely vivid metaphor. However, for what exactly? In order to understand it, we need to read the entire *question* written by Levinas, rather than selecting apparent *assertions* that seem to add ammunition to an argument.

Or do the being encumbered with oneself and the suffering of constriction in one's skin, better than metaphors, follow the exact trope of an alteration of essence, which inverts, or would invert, into a recurrence in which the expulsion of self outside of itself is its substitution for the other?<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Levinas: *Otherwise than being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1998, p. 110.

This entire question is already metaphorical or tropological, as revealed by an investigation of empirical etymologies. Davidson recognizes that “metaphor” etymologically signifies “carrying over”, taking this to indicate a movement towards transcendence, pointing towards an otherness above or outside oneself.<sup>14</sup> In this quotation from Levinas, however, metaphor is better understood as an inward, immanent movement. An etymological dictionary provides a derivation: “from *meta* ‘over, across’ + *pherein* ‘to carry, bear,’ from PIE root \**bher-* ‘to carry,’ also ‘to bear children’”<sup>15</sup> *Trope*, an apparent synonym of metaphor, derives from the root meaning “to turn”.<sup>16</sup> The word *better* in the phrase *better than metaphor* can be read through Levinas’s description of the temporal future as “*better across the discontinuity of generations*”.<sup>17</sup> With this in mind, we can reread the entire sentence to understand how it narrates a story of pregnancy, gestation, childbirth, and new life, figuring metaphor as substitution, the birthing of a new subjectivity as an ethical returning to responsibility for others.

In the end, Davidson recognizes the similarity between metaphors and Levinas’s ethics of substitution, but he reduces the logic of both to be one of simple replacement, “where one takes over the role of the other and becomes the other”.<sup>18</sup> Levinas does indeed describe a dynamic of becoming, a continuous creation of death and rebirth, articulated as the fecundation of the present paternal Self into the future child Other, the incarnation of the present infant Self from the anarchic maternal Other, as well as in the reoriented relationships in which these roles are reversed. However, the logic of substitution that manifests as a present moment does not occur as the present’s replacement of the past but rather as a return to the weight of history, an assumption of responsibility for the past, a burden articulated through the material traces left behind by third person others — we know not whom — whose voices murmur within the anonymity of a system, articulated in the concrete elements of language such as metaphor. Rather than simply “displac[ing] one set of metaphors”<sup>19</sup> with another, Levinas employs metaphor to converse with the inherited ways in which the process of becoming has been articulated, recurrently reorienting terms to expose the ethical-phenomenological constellations of relationships through which becoming is assumed. We can trace

<sup>14</sup> Davidson: “Transcendence...”, *art. cit.*, p. 367.

<sup>15</sup> *Online Etymological Dictionary. Metaphor*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=metaphor> (15.10.2020).

<sup>16</sup> *Online Etymological Dictionary: Trope*, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=trope> (15.10.2020).

<sup>17</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, p. 268, *op. cit.*, Original emphasis. He similarly employs the motif of “goodness” to refer to the birth of the future.

<sup>18</sup> Davidson: “Transcendence...”, *art. cit.*, p. 373.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

how he articulates a multitude of perspectives and roles assumed during the process of temporal becoming by empirically investigating the metaphors in his work.

## 2. A Chronological Order of Metaphorics

### A. Principles of Radical Empiricism

Levinas remarks that the articulation of his thought into a series of events originates from the fact that there is a chronological order distinct from the logical order.<sup>20</sup> When we pursue a chronological examination of his works, we notice how Levinas shifts his terminology over time. Many translators and commentators have noted this prominent fact<sup>21</sup> yet we still require more genealogical explorations of his texts. As we develop these, we will more fully appreciate the parameters of Levinas's metaphors, the semantic and etymological relations between them, and the functional transformation of these relationships.

Given that Levinas's writing so often sounds paradoxical, that one can easily juxtapose two sentences that seem to imply the opposite, we must distinguish from the start that Levinas employs logical terminology in a manner distinct from formal logic. For Levinas, negation already implies a positive relationship, in which each term maintains its own specific gravity. For this reason, the negation of a negation is neither a tautology nor a direct reflection nor a Hegelian *Aufhebung* but rather a warped, inflected image produced by the light refracted by this gravitational excess. Because the apparent negations within Levinas's texts are made possible by a prior positivity, one should not reduce his work to a set of polemical polarities and formulations of his thought as violence. When Richard Cohen asserts that Levinas's "battle cry would be 'Against evil, for the good!'"<sup>22</sup>, we must ask whether such polemics express Levinas's thinking or whether the distinction between "good" and "evil" evokes a different genealogy of morals.

The attempt to reduce Levinas's philosophy to a set of slogans<sup>23</sup> occludes the relativistic dynamics within his wordplay. The other person is often characterized

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<sup>20</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Most especially the pioneering work of John Llewelyn's *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics*, Routledge, New York 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, Richard A.: *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 104.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Critchley warns "There is a danger in the canonization of Levinas as an essentially French philosopher, that is, as some sort of apologist for a conservative republicanism whose vapid universalism would somehow be caught in Levinas's slogan 'ethics is first philosophy.'" Critchley, Simon:

as *Most High*, or, as Cohen claims, “the central claim in Levinas is that the face of the other is manifested in and manifests a moral height”.<sup>24</sup> However, the center of Levinas’s text is often hard to pinpoint, and to identify one point as being most central produces an image distorted by the particular gravity of that focus: the upright stance of height can seem to elevate a right opinion, the orthodox source of truth. A better measurement of Levinas’s semantics, however, is the iterative recurrence of terms and their juxtaposition among others within semantic constellations. One calculates the meaning of the phrase *Most High* through understanding the dimensions of the superlative adverb and the vertical adjective.

Similarly, the ontological predication *Ethics is First Philosophy* should be read alongside Levinas’s usage of numeration. Numeration in Levinas does not follow the standard rules of ordinality, where each successive term can be produced by adding an increment to it. Each transition already refers to an ethical transmutation between (0) nothingness, (1) the subjective first-person, (2) the second-person dyad, and (3) the third-person who refers to ( $\infty$ ) an infinite multiplicity. To understand the phrase *First Philosophy*, one must already question the priority of priority, how the first principle *archē* is already disturbed by the anarchy of these numerous relationships.

The apparent significations that Levinas’s metaphors would obtain in a synchronic system of logic are always perverted by the materiality that indicates the diachronous history of the words themselves. A chasm occurs not merely between knowledge and the objects of knowledge but also between words and their thematic significations because these meanings are already weighed down by their concrete gravity. We are born into a dialogical universe of language, already furnished by words that have been used by other speakers and writers, in which each term has already been freighted down by a sedimentary accretion of associations, relations, implications, and significations. What speaks through language is not, as Heidegger would claim, the house of Being in which man dwells<sup>25</sup>, but rather the historical dead weight of once-living users of language. Levinas cites Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

Merleau-Ponty ... showed that disincarnate thought thinking speech before speaking it ... was a myth. Already thought consists in foraging in the system of signs, in the

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“Five problems in Levinas’s view of politics and a sketch of a solution to them”, in *Political Theory*, Vol. 32, Nr. 2, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks 2004, p. 177.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen: *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, p. 183.

<sup>25</sup> Heidegger, Martin: *Basic Writings*, HarperCollins, New York 2005, p. 217.

particular tongue of a people or civilization, and receiving signification from this very operation.<sup>26</sup>

Whenever I speak or write, my sentences are born into a context where words already have meaning through their popular, embodied, oral materiality. Within the work of Levinas, this diachronic dimension can be read on at least three axes: (1) within the history of philosophy, (2) over the course of Levinas's publishing history, and (3) along the spatial distance that separates terms within each text.

Levinas displays the first type of diachrony by enunciating his argument through the technical vocabulary of past philosophers, straightforwardly adopting their terminology such as Plato's *kath'auto*; echoing Aristotle's *prote philosophia* and Descartes' *prima philosophia* in his characterization of morality as *first philosophy*<sup>27</sup>; and even perverting terms through translation, as when he substitutes the generous *there is* of ontology implicit in Heidegger's German *es gibt* with the impersonal French of *il y a*.

Over the course of time, Levinas's terminology develops genealogically, with later works reappropriating and thematizing terms from his earlier writing. Cohen explains how Levinas's writings from the 40s both derive concepts from Heidegger and anticipate the thematics of *Totality and Infinity* by remarking "the earliest published text containing what is perhaps the nascent kernel of Levinas's thought hidden within the husks of Heideggerean ontology."<sup>28</sup> This analysis not only commits itself to the most traditional Heideggerean trope of the *hidden*, but also to the ontology of potentiality by contrasting a living kernel with a dead husk. This contrast misunderstands the metabolic process by which dead husks decompose into the soil where life is reborn, how "the work rises in the midst of the wastes of labor."<sup>29</sup> Whenever I apprehend words, I understand them as dead husks woven together with other dead husks, traces of the life that produced them, embedded in tapestries of signification, layered upon generations of metaphorical sedimentation. I encounter this temporal gravity not only when I engage another person's text, but also when I dig up my own words to animate them in the present.

Even though a given work is published synchronically in a singular tome in which terms are fixed in their constellated relationships with each other, the space between each term manifests diachronously under the pen or keyboard of the

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<sup>26</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 205–6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>28</sup> Translator's footnote. In Levinas: *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1987, p. 71n47.

<sup>29</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

writer and the visual apprehension by the reader. These intervals measure their periodic frequency and give them space to resonate with neighboring terms. Derrida recounts these rhythms:

*Totality and Infinity* proceeds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself.<sup>30</sup>

That is, Levinas's writing, both across the span of his works and within a single text, can be understood as a process of reiterative rewriting; as a rhythmic repetition of harmonic motifs; as the recurrence of terms and their mutations in various juxtapositions through various families of metaphors.

Not only does the accretion of sedimentary layers of historical meaning weigh down the position of each term thematized into a system, its material gravity always remains refractory to light. It is unclear how far back we must go to trace the birth of language or whether any origin myth could capture the miracle of its generation. Following the work of Sabina Spielrein, we could imagine a midwife for language in the materiality of maternity, prompting the nursing baby, at home enjoying nourishments, its mouth both eating and kissing, to respire in a cry of hunger and a call of desire, uttering a vocalization, babbling repeatedly *momommomoomoo*.<sup>31</sup> Even with this explanation, matter is still both too dense with mystery and too prone to appropriation such that we can only grasp things through their forms. For this reason, it is useful to trace semantic meanings of words through their formal characteristics. Derrida indicates this question by remarking "everything which Levinas designates as 'formal logic' is contested in its root. This root would not only be the root of our language but the root of all western philosophy."<sup>32</sup> Derrida's hint suggests that the easiest way to begin looking at Levinas's immanent wordplay would be through its etymological roots. For example, the Proto-Indo-European root *STA* has a long tradition in philosophy, articulated in the Latin usage of the term *substantia* to render the Greek through *hypostasis*. Whereas Heidegger argues that the "rootlessness of Western thought" begins with "the appropriation of Greek words by Roman-Latin thought"<sup>33</sup>, re-

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, Jacques: *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Routledge, New York 2001, p. 398n7.

<sup>31</sup> Naszkowska, Klara: "The language of the mother and the language of the father", lecture delivered at the Sándor Ferenczi Center, the New School for Social Research, NYC, Oct. 1, 2020, <https://blogs.newschool.edu/sandor-ferenczi-center/>.

<sup>32</sup> Derrida: *Writing... op. cit.*, p. 113.

<sup>33</sup> Heidegger: *Basic Writings, op. cit.*, p. 149.

turning it to Greek in the *ecstases* of temporality and turning it towards German in the *Gestell*<sup>34</sup> of enframing, Levinas romances this root back into French translation through a series of substitutions, analyzing subjectivity as a *stance* that is effected through *hypostasis*, an ethical-phenomenological event which he later rewrites as *substitution*, two words that not only share the same root but also whose prefixes are synonymous, connoting a downwards depth.

Already in his earliest published works, Levinas displays extraordinary attention to linguistic morphemes and their metaphorical dimensions. In his 1932 article that introduced Heidegger to the francophone world, *Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie*, Levinas explains his decision to translate Heidegger's term *Zuhandenheit* as *maniabilite* because he wishes to "take this term in its etymological sense"<sup>35</sup>, preserving the root's reference to the hand. In a conversation shortly after the end of the second world war, Levinas explicitly reflects upon the importance of morphemes in Heidegger's thought, explaining that what Heidegger's linguistic constructions *Being-in-the-world*, *Being-towards-death*, and *Being-with* add to our philosophical awareness "is that these prepositions 'in', 'for', and 'with' are in the root of the verb 'to be' (as 'ex' is in the root of the verb 'to exist')"<sup>36</sup>. We should therefore assume that Levinas thinks deliberately about all aspects of language: of roots, prefixes, and suffixes; of the nominal, verbal, prepositional, adjectival, and adverbial parts of speech; of the active, middle, and passive voices; of the nominative, vocative, dative, genitive, ablative, accusative and even locative cases. We can observe this attention to linguistic morphology by tracing the transformations of metaphors throughout his work.

## B. The Revolting Facts of Ontology

In *Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie*, Levinas presents Heidegger's ontology as being the radical, groundbreaking solution to the central problem of modern philosophy, particularly neo-Kantianism. However, after Heidegger committed his rebellious thinking to the rise of Hitler, Levinas resurrected the metaphors of idealism to critique ontology.

According to this early laudatory essay, Heidegger correctly identified the error in idealism by interrogating the way it posited a yawning chasm between the knowing subject and the known object. Levinas began his critique by declaring,

<sup>34</sup> Heidegger: *Basic Writings*, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

<sup>35</sup> Levinas: "Martin Heidegger and Ontology", in *Diacritics*, Vol. 26, Nr. 1, 1996, p. 19 n17.

<sup>36</sup> Wahl, Jean: *A short history of existentialism*, trans. F. Williams and S. Maron, Philosophical Library, New York 1949, p. 50.

“The concept of the subject, understood as a substance having a specific position in the entire domain of being, presents us with difficulties of two kinds.”<sup>37</sup> This statement presents us with two motifs that will resonate throughout his later works: (1) the *separate position* of subjectivity and (2) *substance*, a motif that will be regenerated throughout Levinas’s work, as when he reassembles the prefix and root as *substitution* and considers the ethical-linguistic import of the nominal substantive *Said* in *Otherwise than Being*. Even in this early work, Levinas anticipates these correlations: “[can the] subject be called a substance and can it have being except in a purely nominal sense?”<sup>38</sup> Levinas additionally introduces, perhaps unreflectively, the metaphoric of subjectivity as generated by asserting that idealist separation has “its true source [in] the concept of ‘subject’ as elaborated by modern philosophy. The cogito presided over the subject’s birth.”<sup>39</sup>

Important thematics in Levinas’s writing often take on a myriad of linguistic forms. With each transmutation, a metaphoric accrues additional semantic sedimentation as it becomes layered together with other motifs from correlated thematic families. For example, Levinas develops a metabolic metaphoric of *having* and *doing* behind *being*, *avoir* and *faire* behind *être*. These metaphors of *faire* emerge in the 1932 essay not in the verbal form of doing but rather in the nominative *le fait*. In this article, Levinas uses the word *fait* to translate Heidegger’s discussion of existential facticity, how apparently inert facts are produced through the dynamic projection of past possibilities onto the current moment.<sup>40</sup> Levinas articulates this notion by declaring “the fact that *Dasein* is riveted to its possibilities, that its ‘right-there’ is imposed upon it”<sup>41</sup>, further emphasizing “we do not stand before the fact –we are this fact”.<sup>42</sup> Levinas thereby fashions the word “fact” according to a contrast that will form a stratum of signification undergirding all of his later work: *being riveted* or *being imposed* as opposed to a *standing before* in a stance of separation.

With the rise of Hitler to power and Heidegger’s embrace of the new regime, Levinas’s attitude towards the *facts* and Heidegger’s ontological analysis of them changes dramatically. In his 1934 essay *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism*, Levinas introduces the problematic of the fact through a consideration of the *fait*

<sup>37</sup> Levinas: “Martin Heidegger,” *art. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* In *Otherwise than Being*, the nominal substantive is articulated as the “Said” and the verbal as the “Saying.”

<sup>39</sup> Levinas: “Martin Heidegger,” *art. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Heidegger, Martin: *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson. Harper, San Francisco 1962, p. 82, 55–56.

<sup>41</sup> Levinas: “Martin Heidegger,” *art. cit.*, p. 24.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

*accomplit* as a temporal weight. “The *fait accompli*, swept along by a fleeing present, forever evades man’s control, but weighs heavily on his destiny.”<sup>43</sup> This article employs an analytic methodology that Levinas uses throughout his philosophical corpus: viewing a naked material phenomenon through a variety of perspectives to demonstrate how such distortions refract into different thematic constellations and existential orientations. He first presents the Jewish response to the brutality of the brute facts as an expression of radical powerlessness, referring to it as “remorse”<sup>44</sup>, a word that will take on additional significations in his later writing. He then describes a chronology of European resolutions to the problematic of the *fait accompli*, all of which provide a means for separating oneself from the inevitability of fate, imploring his readers to affirm the humanism of these solutions over the Germanic will-to-power that exerts this bondage as force.

The first sentence of *On Escape* announces a *revolt*, turning against the ontological conception of these facts, the “brutal fact of being that assaults [human] freedom.”<sup>45</sup> The last paragraph of this introductory section correlates this with the ideas of a “certain philosopher” and the dangers of a “certain civilization, firmly established in the *fait accompli* of being and incapable of getting out of it.”<sup>46</sup> Counter to these ontological facts, Levinas articulates others such as “the fact of self-positing.”<sup>47</sup> This event, felt most nakedly in states like shame and nausea, reveals that the *me*, the first-person, is *riveted* not to a universal Being, but to the third person of the *self*, the “fact that the I is oneself.”<sup>48</sup> The *me* who is the subject of experience is produced through a process of reflection as an identity of self-sameness, a *self* posited in the world “almost in the very fact of having a body, of being-there.”<sup>49</sup> Using this language, Levinas indicates that the locative *there* in which humans exist is not determined by the fateful facts of Being, but rather by one’s establishment of and enchainment to a nakedly material self, “a kind of dead weight”<sup>50</sup>, both gravity and death.

Levinas seemingly parodies Heidegger’s model of temporality as a unity of *ekstatikon*<sup>51</sup> by expressing the evasion of being through the same prefix as a “need

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<sup>43</sup> Levinas: “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism”, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, Nr. 1, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p. 65.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Levinas: *On Escape*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57. In this text, Levinas also begins to employ “accomplish” to indicate the emergence of ethical-phenomenological situations. In later works, he discusses how such events “are accomplished” (*s’accomplit*).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>51</sup> Heidegger: *Being...*, *op. cit.*, p. 377/329.

for *excedence*.<sup>52</sup> Yet he articulates much of this trajectory through the prefix *re*, as a “refusal to remain there”<sup>53</sup> – there where the facts of being-there (*Dasein*) are – and in the “revolt” of human freedom.<sup>54</sup> The only escape he can conceive in such a dire historical moment is being “revolted from the inside”<sup>55</sup>, the embodied malaise of nausea that precedes vomiting, a turning that orally purges one’s self from one’s interior.

### C. Standing at the Altar

Levinas’s articles in the 1940s extend and transform the metaphors of his previous writings. *Existence and Existents* resumes his examination of the metaphor of *having* and *doing* by expressing undifferentiated being in the phrase *il y a*. Each word within this expression is significant. Although *il y a* is best translated into English as *there is*, a literal translation of each word would be rendered as *it has there*. Within the book, Levinas draws attention to the impersonality of *il* by comparing it to similar constructions such as “it rains, or it is warm (*il pleut, ou il fait chaud*)”.<sup>56</sup> The word *there* (*y*), can be understood as a parody of Heidegger’s notion that human being is *Dasein*, the *there* (*Da*) where *Being* (*Sein*) is disclosed, to indicate that Being’s *there* occurs as a diffuse nowhere and everywhere. Lastly, the word *has* (*a*) indicates that the dynamic within anonymous and undifferentiated existence is not *being* but *having*; that being-in-general is not possibility but nameless possession.

The existent person emerges from the *il y a* through an event of self-having by establishing a *here* out of the anonymous *there*. “Consciousness ‘has’ a base; it ‘has’ a place... Consciousness *is* here.”<sup>57</sup> Levinas calls this event *hypostasis*, literally *standing beneath*, a “stance taken at a site”<sup>58</sup> that situates a person at a particular location in the particular moment of the present. This fact occurs as an event<sup>59</sup> through a labor that establishes a substantive in the anonymous verb of being. From his stance of a first-person subjectivity, the self establishes a distance between himself and the rest of existence, establishing his virile power to refer it back to himself.

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<sup>52</sup> Levinas: *On Escape*, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>56</sup> Levinas: *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1978, p. 58.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

Levinas uses metaphors of turning to describe the process of hypostasis. He describes it first as an “inversion”<sup>60</sup> because this appropriation of existence makes the external world seem to derive from the interior of consciousness. However, even this domination is not total: although consciousness can internalize the world as form, it also gets lost in the materiality of aesthetic sensation or in extreme psychological states such as insomnia. The process of hypostasis is enacted not only as an inversion but also as a reflection. Echoing his earlier writings, Levinas explains that, in positing oneself as a subject, one is doubled up as the self-sameness of one’s identity. “My being doubles with a having; I am encumbered by myself.”<sup>61</sup> One’s stance of mastery occurs through a riveting to the material gravity of one’s self.

Within these articles, Levinas develops the trope of rebirth that appeared only embryonically in his earlier work. Articulating temporality through birth parodies Heidegger’s notion of ecstatic existence as Being-Towards-Death. The self-positing of the hypostatic instant constitutes a birth for first-person subjectivity, one that is experienced as a *sui generis* event in which I can begin from myself, separated from other moments by the interval of death.

As Levinas transitions from his analysis of death to that of rebirth, he introduces the metaphor of *femininity*, a difference of gender that disrupts the unity of being itself, opening up an erotic relationship that remains refractory to the power, possession and knowledge of virile subjectivity. From this relationship results the masculine relationships of *paternity*, the rebirth of an independent yet related hypostatic subjectivity, and of *fraternity*, the relationship between birthed subjectivities. Here it is important to make a few notes about Levinas’s concept of femininity in preparation for our discussion of *Totality and Infinity* below. First, Levinas’s description of *Eros* as something that cannot be absorbed by consciousness echoes his description of material aesthetic sensibility. Second, Levinas describes “the feminine ... [as a] mode of being”<sup>62</sup>, but he does not ascribe this attribute of femininity to female persons. Indeed, he cites Shakespeare’s description of Macbeth, the son (Mac) of *Beth*<sup>63</sup>, the paradigmatic hero of tragic virility, as being “cowed”<sup>64</sup> when, unable to destroy the world with his own suicide, confronting imminent

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>61</sup> Levinas: *Time...*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>63</sup> Who is named by *Beth*, object of the traditionally patronymic *Mac*, for Macbeth, son of life? In Hebrew, *Beth* is not also a name but also the second letter of the alphabet (ב) the number 2, the locative prefix for *inside*, and a noun meaning *house*. It is the first letter of creation, בראשית *in the beginning*, the second (ב) preceding the first (א).

<sup>64</sup> Levinas: *Time...*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

death from a “being of no woman born”<sup>65</sup>, he is transformed metaphorically into something animal and feminine and potentially pregnant.

In addition to making birth rather than death the dynamic fundamental to temporality, Levinas demonstrates that positivity is more fundamental than negation. Although he describes the *il y a* as a negation of any particular being, it is not an absolute absence but still the positivity of bare existence. Alongside this analysis, Levinas articulates negation as something produced by the positivity of the social relationship. When one expresses one’s love for another person, one also expresses one’s inability to fully convey this sentiment, thereby motivating future expression. Conversely, the positive manifestation of the other person appears through negation: “He is what I am not: he is the weak one whereas I am the strong one; he is the poor one, ‘the widow and the orphan’.”<sup>66</sup> These negations are negated yet again in other statements. Levinas explains that the other person may also appear as the “enemy and the powerful one”<sup>67</sup>, indicating that even animosity is based on positivity. Even more intriguing, Levinas implies that the virility of subjectivity can be inverted through paternity and fraternity such that “I myself [am] the poor one, the weak and pitiful.”<sup>68</sup>

#### D. Up and Down and All Around (*Disoriented*)

Levinas’s first major work *Totality and Infinity* provides us with useful keys for understanding the dynamic interplay of metaphors. Levinas may seem to be opposed to vision because he correlates the synoptic gaze with totalizing thought, yet a closer look at his text reveals that Levinas is as profoundly committed to perspectivism as Nietzsche, who argues that the will-to-power determines various viewpoints. Conversely, for Levinas, one’s perspective is determined by the ethical confrontation with the other person. This can be understood through the most prominent metaphor he uses to describe the ethical experience, *le visage de l’autre*. By translating *visage* as *face*<sup>69</sup>, Alphonso Lingis loses some of the wordplay intended by Levinas. The visage is both something that is envisioned by the self and something that maintains its own capacity of vision. In isolation, the subject can master the external world by incorporating it as a content within its own consciousness vis-à-vis the intentionality of its vision. When confronted by the visage of the other

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<sup>65</sup> Shakespeare, William: *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 8.

<sup>66</sup> Levinas: *Existence...*, p. 95.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>69</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 25. Translator’s footnote.

person, however, the self recognizes an entity that possesses the same sovereign power over reality, a dialogical encounter that puts into question the imperialism of its subjective viewpoint, a conversation that requires perspectival conversions.

In contrast to the *visage*, Levinas uses the French word *face* to describe the *façade* or *surface* of the elemental, the formless depth of materiality. Lingis, however, translates the *face* as *side*, explaining “It is in order to reserve the English word ‘face’ to translate ‘visage’ — the countenance of the Other — that we are using the term ‘side’ to translate ‘face’ in this context.”<sup>70</sup> Yet readers should hear both the height of the *visage* and the depth of the *face* in the ethical confrontation of the *face-à-face*.

Throughout *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explicitly declares the perspectival nature of his philosophy. He remarks in the preface “ethics is an optics”<sup>71</sup> and later elaborates:

The differences between the Other and me ... are due to the I-Other conjuncture, to the inevitable orientation of being ‘starting from oneself’ towards ‘the Other.’ The priority of this orientation over the terms that are placed in it (and which cannot arise without this orientation) summarizes the theses of the present work.<sup>72</sup>

The ethical relationship begins from the separated stance of the subject, oriented by its body<sup>73</sup>, looking at something that is a someone who distorts that vision. From my perspective of interiority, the other person’s stance appears as an exteriority. Levinas explains this distortion by using the metaphor of a “curvature of intersubjective space”<sup>74</sup> that deforms the synoptic viewpoint. He attributes this curvature to the fact that the Other appears in a “dimension of height”<sup>75</sup>, yet the terminology of *curvature* implies another dimensional warping. Emerging out of 19<sup>th</sup> century research into non-Cartesian geometries and non-Euclidean spaces, the concept of curvature became famous in the 20<sup>th</sup> when Einstein employed the work of Bernard Riemann to explain how gravity bends light.<sup>76</sup> According to his

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131. Translator’s footnote.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>73</sup> Lakoff and Johnson discuss orientation as one of the main types of metaphor, “These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment.” *Metaphors ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>74</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 291.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p. 86.

<sup>76</sup> “According to this theory, light rays suffer a curvature in a gravitational field.” Einstein, Albert: *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*, volume 6, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1997, p. 5.

theory of general relativity, it is the massiveness of matter leaving a weighty imprint within the fabric of spacetime that produces this curvature.

Acknowledging Levinas's perspectivism provides a key to understanding the storyline that animates *Totality and Infinity*. Each section of the book can be understood as a shifted perspective on the becoming of a temporal moment, as can be noticed by the recurrence of the same motifs in different orientations to describe different ethical-phenomenological events. For example, the motif of *depth* is used to describe not only the relationship to the element but also the fright of recognizing oneself as an other<sup>77</sup>, the distance in depth of the face-to-face<sup>78</sup>, the depth of the absence of the *il y a*<sup>79</sup>, the infinite depths of the past<sup>80</sup>, the fathomless depth of the disquieting future<sup>81</sup>, the depth of materiality<sup>82</sup>, the secret depths of feminine being<sup>83</sup>, the depth of erotic tenderness<sup>84</sup>, and so on. Most significantly, Levinas repeatedly describes the eyes of the other as exhibited in a depth that is naked and defenseless<sup>85</sup>, which seemingly contradicts his metaphor of the visage exhibited in a height.

Apparent contradictions such as this can be noticed throughout Levinas's texts. As discussed above, Levinas's work from the 40s demonstrates the tension of countervailing dimensions. The birth of subjectivity in hypostasis occurs simultaneously as a height and a depth, two opposing movements that describe the same event from diametrically reversed perspectives. As Levinas develops his account of the interaction between the self and the other person, he expands the idea – already implied in previous work – that the twofold dynamic of opposition can also be understood as a fourfold turning. The conversation with the other person delineates a set of perspectival conversions.

The first perspective is an *inversion* of this subjective point of view, in which I gaze upwards at the Other. The perspective is the most noticeable one in *Totality and Infinity*, articulated in Levinas's description of the visage as revealed “in the dimension of height”<sup>86</sup> and in the motif of *transcendence* that animates much of the text. Levinas's usage of the superlative adverb *most* and suffix *-est* is

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<sup>77</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 297.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

determined by this perspective as are his employment of prefixes such as *ex-* and *sur-* to describe, for example, how the other person *exceeds* or *surpasses* as an “absolute surplus”.<sup>87</sup> The Other’s height is articulated through correlate attributes such as mastery, which is manifested in a variety of ways, for example as the one who commands “you shall not commit murder”<sup>88</sup> and who teaches the lesson of his exteriority to consciousness.<sup>89</sup> This mastery can also exhibit malevolence as the “transcendence of the antagonist”<sup>90</sup> who threatens me with death that “comes from the other as a tyranny”.<sup>91</sup>

The second perspective, *perversion*, occurs when I look downwards at the other person from my relative height, such as when I perceive the “defenseless eyes”<sup>92</sup> of the other emanating from a depth. This perspective is similarly indicated whenever I regard the other person in an embodied materiality, in misery and destitution, as naked and hungry.<sup>93</sup> From my height, I perceive this material poverty as an “appeal to my powers”<sup>94</sup>, appealing to my sovereign subjectivity to provide material assistance.

The third perspective, *subversion*, occurs when the other person views the self in its lowness. The dynamic of being-underneath can already be understood in the terms “subjectivity” and “hypostasis”, which etymologically connote being thrown-under and standing-under. Within *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas mentions this aspect when he describes the nascent self relating to the environmental element as “a wave that engulfs and submerges and drowns”.<sup>95</sup> Levinas intensifies this analysis in *Otherwise than Being* by applying to subjectivity vivid metaphors of material poverty; for example, as a “denuding beyond the skin, to the wounds one dies from, denuding to death, being as a vulnerability”.<sup>96</sup>

The fourth perspective, *reversion*, occurs when the self is viewed in its height. From the viewpoint of the Other, the self-assertion of subjective mastery comes under judgment such that it manifests as “the imperialism of the same”.<sup>97</sup> This external

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<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>96</sup> Levinas: *Otherwise...*, *op. cit.*, p. 49. “Denuding” is the same motif Levinas ascribes to the visage in *Totality and Infinity*, “La nudité du visage est dénûment”, which Lingis translates as “The nakedness of the face is destituteness.” Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>97</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

perspective demonstrates that the first-person of subjectivity is already secondary and that the birth of the subject is already a rebirth. For this reason, the dynamics of subject-formation often appear through the prefix *re*, as repetitions and returnings, the “reversion”<sup>98</sup> of interiority that “reabsorbs”<sup>99</sup> the alterity of the world in a present of representation through the remembrance of memory<sup>100</sup>, an achievement of subjectivity expressed as “recurrence”<sup>101</sup> within *Otherwise than Being*.

## E. The Genesis of Generation and the Metabolic of Death

In addition to understanding the way perspectives operate in *Totality and Infinity*, it is useful to trace the narrative of the book as a whole. When one weaves together the metaphorical motifs in the book, the narrative of birth, death, and rebirth emerges. The divisions of *Totality and Infinite* narrate a story of genesis, of the generation of gendered generations, a progression of birth, maturation, adulthood, old age, death, and rebirth. Although this storyline progresses sequentially, each step resonates with others such that Levinas seems to be describing the same situation from the perspective of a different character in this family drama. *Otherwise than Being* presents this same narrative from yet other perspectives, exhibiting dynamics that were latent or implicit in the earlier text. In this final section, I will begin an analysis of this storyline in *Totality and Infinity*, and consider how various constellations of metaphors refract throughout the book and anticipate metaphors in *Otherwise than Being*.

Levinas begins his narrative of genesis with the entrance of the self into the economy of the ethical relationship as the “birth of separated being”<sup>102</sup>, one that “breaks the tranquil eternity of its seminal or uterine existence”.<sup>103</sup> From the very start of the narrative, however, the event of birth is already positioned in relation with its opposite as a “triumph over death”.<sup>104</sup> Because present moments are separated from each other by the nullity of “dead time”<sup>105</sup>, the subject understands itself as autochthonous, having forgotten the conditions of its creation, as a “latent

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<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>101</sup> Levinas: *Otherwise...*, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

<sup>102</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, 56.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

birth”<sup>106</sup> Thus, the newborn self arises as a *resurrection*, one who again (*re*) establishes a position of height over (*sur*) the world. This conception becomes inverted when the subject views the downcast other. From this perspective of height, the Other appears as an *orphan* (*l’orphelin*)<sup>107</sup>, a naked and dependent child. *Otherwise than Being* reverses this perspective yet again by applying this metaphor to the emergence of the self. Levinas explains, “the oneself [is] a creature, but an orphan by birth (*orpheline de naissance*) or an atheist no doubt ignorant of its Creator”.<sup>108</sup> This new perspective genders the orphan as feminine, seemingly indicating the phenomenon of a *daughter* within Levinas. In addition, this text introduces the motif of the “rebirth of skepticism”<sup>109</sup>, the “legitimate child”<sup>110</sup> of philosophy, one that can be read in several ways, most obviously as a perspective on the *cogito*’s emergence from Cartesian doubt, and as a playful gesture to the felicitously footnotable<sup>111</sup> Jacques Derrida.

The newborn relates to its elemental milieu through what Alphonso Lingis translates as “nourishment”.<sup>112</sup> It finds itself materially dependent upon the world, “cold, hungry, thirsty, naked, seek[ing] shelter”<sup>113</sup> – metaphors readers typically associate with the destitute Other – but can reconcile with this dependency through a metabolic process Levinas figures as eating, as sinking one’s teeth into the world, transforming the world’s otherness into my substance.<sup>114</sup> This characterization reverberates with several of Levinas’s metaphors. First, the motifs that

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78. Levinas: *Totalite et Infini*, Livres de Poche, Paris 1990, p. 76.

<sup>108</sup> Levinas: *Otherwise...*, *op. cit.*, p.105. Levinas: *Autrement que l’etre*, Martinus Nijhoff, LaHaye 1974, p. 133.

<sup>109</sup> Levinas: *Otherwise...*, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7. Lingis translates this as “illegitimate” but the French reads “enfant legitime”. Levinas: *Autrement...*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>111</sup> Levinas: *Otherwise...*, *op. cit.*, p. 189 n23. “... M. Derrida has felicitously and boldly translated ...” To Levinas, Derrida poses questions across the philosophical community of the question:

Nevertheless, these should be the only questions today capable of founding the community, within the world, of those who are still called philosophers... A community of the question, therefore, within that fragile moment when the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of an answer to have already initiated itself beneath the mask of the question, and not yet determined enough for its voice to have been already and fraudulently articulated within the very syntax of the question. (Derrida: *Writing...*, *op. cit.*, p. 98).

A call to ethical responsibility by another philosopher, to which Levinas responds:

Unless, that is, the naivety of the philosopher not call, beyond the reflection on oneself, for the critique exercised by another philosopher ... empirically it is realized as the history of philosophy in which new interlocutors always enter who have to restate, but in which the former ones take up the floor to answer in the interpretations they arouse. (Levinas, *Otherwise...*, *op. cit.*, p. 20).

<sup>112</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Levinas uses to describe the elemental milieu echo his descriptions of the *il y a* and the third-person realm of generality, as well as the *elementary* in his 1935 essay on Hitlerism.<sup>115</sup> Second, Levinas's usage of the term *other* to refer to the infantile environment raises the question of how it relates to the other person as interlocutor. Third, this phenomenological event occurs a process of *having*, incorporating the world's matter to establish oneself as a body, a self-having (*se tenir*) that situates oneself as a separated being, a substantive subject.

In describing the relationship with the element as *eating*, Levinas reminds us of the myriad ways in which he employs orality as a route of connection, including the speech that communicates to the other person in its separated otherness, the vomiting that would project the self outwards, the equivocal laughter of the witches<sup>116</sup>, the absurd laughter of Nietzsche<sup>117</sup>, the ambiguity of the kiss<sup>118</sup>, and, on the final page of *Otherwise than Being*, the kiss of God to whom Moses gives up his soul.<sup>119</sup> Within this text, Levinas most prominently inverts the motif of eating through another mode of orality, breathing, which exposes the self to the other instead of incorporating it. He emphasizes this inversion by describing "inspiration" as "psyche in the form of a hand that gives even the bread taken from its own mouth."<sup>120</sup> Most dramatically, Levinas describes this aspect of selfhood as a "gnawing away at this very identity – identity gnawing away at itself – in remorse"<sup>121</sup>, hearkening back to his 1935 characterization of Judaic remorse, as "the painful expression of a radical powerlessness to redeem the irreparable."<sup>122</sup>

Levinas asserts that the maturation of the infant presupposes a relationship to what he calls "feminine alterity."<sup>123</sup> He refers to this process as a "sojourn in a dwelling"<sup>124</sup> and as an "economy", alluding to this word's etymological root *oikos*, signifying "home" in Greek.<sup>125</sup> The home allows the child to grow into an adult by establishing itself in a site of interiority, separating itself from the elemental milieu such that the world manifests as an exteriority. Levinas explains that the home founds possession because it is already "hospitable", already referring to

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<sup>115</sup> Levinas: "Reflections...", *art. cit.*, p. 64.

<sup>116</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>117</sup> Levinas: *Otherwise...*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200. "The sages of Israel say, as a parable, that Moses gave up his soul in the kiss of God. To die on the order of God is expressed in Hebrew as dying 'on the mouth of God' (Deut., 34:5)."

<sup>120</sup> Levinas: *Otherwise...*, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>122</sup> Levinas: "Reflections...", *art. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>123</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, 155.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

“the inhabitant that inhabits it before every inhabitant, the welcoming one *par excellence*, welcome in itself—the feminine being”.<sup>126</sup> The sudden appearance of this perhaps conjugal character may seem surprising, but Levinas has already indicated femininity within the elemental. The term that Lingis translates as “nourishment”, *nourishment*, can be rendered more literally as “nursing”. Even though Levinas explicitly thematizes *paternity* and *fraternity* within the book, the involvement of the maternal is indicated from the outset, equivocally exposed and clandestine, through metaphors. Moreover, if the metaphors of *welcome* and *hospitality* are markers of the feminine, then one can only conclude that the bridal self is the basis for the ethical perspective most often associated with *Totality and Infinity*, “the metaphysical event of transcendence – the welcome of the Other, hospitality”.<sup>127</sup> *Otherwise than Being* makes this metaphoric explicit by providing a new perspective upon this ethical-phenomenological event. The metaphor of the hostess’s hospitality becomes intensified when attributed to the self’s identity as “the-one-being-hostage-for-the-other”.<sup>128</sup> Furthermore, the book explicitly attributes maternity to the embodied constitution of the self, stating “Signification signifies, consequently, in nourishing, clothing, lodging, in maternal relations, in which matter shows itself for the first time in its materiality”.<sup>129</sup>

The implicit indication of maternity in *Totality and Infinity* and the attribution of this quality to subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being* foreground the question of the gender of self and other. From at least the 1940s, Levinas discusses subjectivity as a *virility*, a term connoting masculinity, effected by the erection of its standing height. However, he deliberately perverts the masculinity of selfhood in *Totality and Infinity*’s discussion of the Phenomenology of Eros. As the subject “arises” from the erotic copulation that births its subjective copula, it becomes tender and “effeminate”.<sup>130</sup> This discussion of the erotic not only tentatively endorses Aristophanes’ nostalgia for original androgyny, it also introduces a family member who receives little attention: the incestuous “sister soul”<sup>131</sup>, a feminine character who reappears under conjecture in a discussion of ethical substitution in *Otherwise*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>128</sup> Levinas: *Otherwise...*, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>130</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 270–271.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254. “Love as a relation with the Other can be reduced to this fundamental immanence, be divested of all transcendence, seek but a connatural being, a sister soul, present itself as incest. The myth Aristophanes tells in Plato’s Symposium, in which love reunites the two halves of one sole being, interprets the adventure as a return to self. The enjoyment justifies this interpretation.”

than *Being*.<sup>132</sup> Whatever these references mean, it seems clear that, for Levinas, both self and other embody a certain ambisexuality, enacting roles that have been coded throughout patriarchal thought as stereotypically masculine and stereotypically feminine.<sup>133</sup>

After culminating the economy of interiority with the figure of a husband engaged in productive labor, Levinas explores how this character becomes exposed to death when it exchanges the products of its labor in the economy of exteriority. Even before this section, Levinas alludes to this violence by describing the infantile incorporation of the world as “capable of killing for a crust of bread”.<sup>134</sup> The metaphors he uses to describe productive labor indicate how human consumption is ultimately grounded in murder.

Although Levinas does indeed claim that the primordial expression of the visage is “you shall not commit murder”<sup>135</sup>, this command is an *ethical* one; the actuality of murder is banal.<sup>136</sup> As with many negations in Levinas’s text, this ethical negation also indicates that its opposite is a positive phenomenon. Each present moment of birth is also a moment of death, a death that occurs as murder. Murder for Levinas is the origin of death: death is not a Heideggerean nothingness but a something that proceeds from a human being, from the “murderous will of the Other”<sup>137</sup> – or, inversely, “the Other is the sole being I can wish to kill”.<sup>138</sup> This will can be understood as a “claim to total negation”, as the way one suspends someone’s independent vitality as soon as one comprehends them.<sup>139</sup> Whenever I interact with another person, I recognize them in and through their identity, as a *quiddity* or a *what*, defined by the properties they manifest. The ethical prohibition reminds us that the other person is not entirely reducible to our present understanding of them. However, from the perspective of a momentary snapshot, we comprehend

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<sup>132</sup> Levinas: *Otherwise...*, *op. cit.*, p. 126. “The ego involved in responsibility is me and no one else, me with whom one would have liked to pair up a sister soul, from whom one would require substitution and sacrifice.”

<sup>133</sup> Robin Podolsky similarly argues that one should read Levinas’s work such that the gendered positions he articulates can be assumed by anybody. Podolsky, Robin, “AIMÉ QUI EST L’AIMÉE: Can Levinas’ Beloved Be Queer?”, in *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, Vol. 49, Nr. 2, Autumn 2016, p. 50–70. For a perverse reading of gender in Levinas, see my article *Levinas, Pervert*, 2008, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/mitchell-cowen-verter-levinas-perverter>.

<sup>134</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 230.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

them as what Levinas refers to as a “dead face [that] becomes a form, a mortuary mask; it is shown instead of letting see”.<sup>140</sup>

Levinas articulates this aspect of the other in his discussion of labor, which describes the genealogy of the third-person public sphere. The third person’s manifestation in the face of the other person is what defines the Other as exterior. This aspect distinguishes the relationship with an interlocutor from the erotic relationship that creates “a dual society, an intimate society, a society without language”.<sup>141</sup> The presence of the third party is most prominently displayed in the identity of the Other person: their attributes are not merely personal properties but already socially-defined markers, already referring to an economy of properties possessed by others. Levinas describes the emergence of properties, both material things and the materiality of our attributes, both the creation of products and the production of our created selves, through a meditation on labor that rewrites the metaphoric of facts (*le fait*) as a process of doing (*faire*).

Levinas invokes the metaphors of Karl Marx throughout this discussion, explaining that the production of signs “detaches them from my own usage, alienates them, renders them exterior”.<sup>142</sup> Within the sphere of commerce, the other person can dispossess me of the products of labor and control me through them, “an anonymity into which, as a wage-earner, the worker himself may disappear”.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, Levinas describes “the world of ‘complete works’” as “the heritage of dead wills”<sup>144</sup>, echoing Marx’s description of capital as “dead labor which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks”.<sup>145</sup> Although a finished product manifests as if its existence were determined solely by the dynamics of exchange, this commodity-form obscures its genesis in living labor-power; that a human being lived and suffered, perhaps were even tortured or slaughtered, to produce a product for consumption. Our material world is constructed as a sedimentation of layers upon layers of dead products that testify to the alienation of the forgotten lives that produced them. For this reason, Levinas refers to the subjects of material history as “survivors” who “utilize the works of the dead”<sup>146</sup>, living (*vivre*) on top of (*sur*) a mountain of dead corpses.

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265. This is also his critique of Martin Buber: “The I-Thou in which Buber sees the category of interhuman relationship is the relation not with the interlocutor but with feminine alterity.” *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 209.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>145</sup> Marx, Karl: *Capital: Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, New York 1992, p. 342.

<sup>146</sup> Levinas: *Totality...*, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have endeavored to demonstrate the rich interplay of metaphors and morphemes within the work of Levinas. By doing so, I intend to question an orthodox<sup>147</sup> mode of reading that reduces his wordplay to a set of sanctimonious slogans such as *Ethics is First Philosophy* and *The Other is Most High*. Although the text of Levinas does include such ontological assertions, reading them in isolation provides a distorted understanding of his work. Each of the terms in such predicative proclamations already refers to deeply interlinked constellations of metaphorical signification. When Levinas makes a declaration such as the *The Other is Most High*, one must also investigate his texts to expose resonances beneath, within, and alongside the meaning determined by the metaphorical constellation in which it is embedded. Such metaphors are reused, modified and inverted in the descriptions of other ethical-phenomenological events, and a close reading of Levinas must account for these parallels, variations, and apparent contradictions. As Sandor Goodhart explains, the traditional Judaic fourfold hermeneutic considers the metaphorical or tropological level of *derash* for “an inquiring into or, conversely, a drawing out of or extracting from text that is perhaps somewhat obscure”.<sup>148</sup> Applying a metaphorical reading is especially important for understanding the feminine dimension of Levinas’s text, which he asserts is never expressed directly but only under what he calls “profanation”<sup>149</sup>, shown as hidden, simultaneously exposed and clandestine.

Perhaps the most profaned concept of Levinas is that of immanence itself: although the Other manifests its transcendence in the command “you shall not commit murder,” this manifestation occurs in and through dead materiality, the living body haunted by the corpse of substance. Throughout his work, Levinas attempts to understand the *becoming of immanence*, how the *facts* are *accomplished* within the *fait accompli*, how the present moment assumes the weight of the past and a responsibility for the future. From the outset, he questions whether the becoming of the present emerges through elementary forces, extending the domain of that question in his post-war analysis of the *il y a*, the anonymous field

<sup>147</sup> Cohen ominously opens *Elevations*, “I remember distinctly to this day the impression Levinas made on me. ‘This is true’, I thought, in contrast to all the philosophers and philosophies which are *fascinating* or *provocative*” (p. xi), overlooking the Good Beyond being in his martial declaration of orthodoxy.

<sup>148</sup> Goodhart, Sandor: “Back to the Garden: Jewish Hermeneutics, Biblical Reading, PaRDeS, and the Four-Fold Way.” In *The King James Bible across Borders and Centuries*, ed. Angelica Duran, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 2014, p. 48.

<sup>149</sup> Levinas: *Totality... op. cit.*, p. 257.

of forces – implicating not only Nietzschean wills-to-power, but also the mechanistic forces of Newtonian physics and the generative flux of Heraclitean *polemos*. He briefly discusses these motifs in *Totality and Infinity*, but as a whole the book describes how the present emerges through relationships with not simply the individual Other, but with the multiplicity of third-person others who determine the general thematic structures of objectivity through which present phenomena appear. That is, Levinas's work invites us to contemplate not just transcendence, but the way that immanence emerges through relationships with an infinity of transcendental others, to recognize economic and ecological relations with other persons behind the anonymous forces of becoming.

Tracing through the metaphors of Levinas's writings allows us to recognize the dynamic relationship between apparently opposing terms and to understand how different ethical-phenomenological events emerge from different constellations of them. Appreciating how each pole plays a role in the process of dynamic creation should make us realize how inappropriate it is to subject Levinas to a Manichean reading, especially one that portrays his work as a polemic against categories such as immanence or representation or metaphor or even totality. One should always be mindful of the fact that the operative conjunction in the title of his first book, "and" indicates an adjunctive, dynamic, peaceful relationship rather than any outright declaration of war.<sup>150</sup>

**Mitchell Verter** has published several articles on Levinas, Buddhism, political economy, feminism, and anarchism, as well as a volume on the Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón. Many of his articles are available online at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/category/author/mitchell-cowen-verter>. He is currently developing his research into Levinas's morphemes and etymologies at <http://levinasradicalempiricism.com/>.  
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<sup>150</sup> Most importantly, what does it mean when scholars of Levinas name themselves as *Levinasians*, affixing a collective noun, a label or designation or signification, upon unique individuals? Is it a collective noun, a patronym, indicating one's inheritance from The Father? Is it a team? For play or for war? How do they contest against the sons of other derided paternities: *Derridian*, *Hegelian*, *Heideggerean*, *Nietzschean*? Do they shake hands before they wrestle in the Coliseum of Discourse? Beforehand?