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Willie van der Merwe & Vida de Voss

The ethics of responsibility: the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

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

Die etiek van verantwoordelikheid: die etiese filosofie van Emmanuel Levinas

Die etiek van Emmanuel Levinas is gegrond in die Ander/ander. Hy argumenteer dat ons in 'n asimmetriese verhouding tot ons naaste staan, deur wie ons (in sy metaforiek) "uitverkies" is tot etiese verantwoordelikheid, selfs voor ons keusevryheid as subjekte of bewussyn van onsself. In die gesig-tot-gesig ontmoeting, die ervaring van die "gelaat van die ander", word die "andersheid" of alteriteit van die ander/Ander (wat Levinas ook "oneindigheid" noem) ontbloot en daardeur word ek gedwing om op hom te antwoord. Hierdie verhouding maak ons mensheid vry, omdat ons solipsistiese alles-vir-myself 'n alles-vir-die-ander word. Die ek is onvervangbaar, omdat elkeen van ons eties verantwoordelik is vir ons naaste, selfs tot op die punt van sy materiële ellende. Die bedoeling van hierdie artikel is om 'n inleiding te bied tot hierdie ge-dagtegang van Levinas en dit grotendeels te ondersteun.

Prof W L van der Merwe & Mrs V V de Voss, Dept of Philosophy, University of Stellenbosch, Private Bag X1, Matieland 7602; E-mail: lek@sun.ac.za

> Every one of us is responsible for everyone else in every way, and I most of all (Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)

The thought of Emmanuel Levinas continues to be a major influence in various developments within contemporary Continental philosophy. In spite of this, fairly few studies of or about his philosophy have been published in South Africa or by South African scholars.[1] This is ironic, because the uniquely ethical tenor of his thought and his insistence on the significance of the other/Other are highly relevant to the South African context. They have a direct bearing on how we could and should think about central issues like the justification for a culture of human rights, social responsibility and retributive or distributive justice, poverty and hospitality, finding a balance between civil unity and cultural diversity (universality and particularity), and the regeneration of public morality, to name only a few issues. It is not possible to address the relation of Levinas's thought to issues such as these in this article. What we rather hope to achieve is to introduce the main tenet of his philosophy as an "ethics of responsibility" in a manner accessible to the multidisciplinary readership of this journal.

Levinas's profoundly ethical thought developed in dialogue and dispute with two major trends fashionable among the French intelligentsia at the time of the publication of his first creative philosophical work. These two trends were Sartrean-inspired existentialism and the French-left version of Marxism, which was quite different from the so-called neo-Marxism of the *Frankfurter Schule* in Germany. For the sake of brevity the second trend, epitomised by the thought of Louis Althusser, need not be of concern here. But to contextualise the first stirrings of Levinas's thought, it may be helpful briefly to recall the main stance of Sartrean existentialism.

Sartrean existentialism, enormously popular at the time, was in essence a reinvention, inspired by Heidegger, of the phenomenology of Husserl. What Sartre did was to turn Husserl's discovery of the intentionality of subjective consciousness into a fully-fledged "philosophy of subjectivity", a philosophy of the ultimate freedom,

1 A notable and very significant exception is the excellent study by Jordaan (2006).

futillity and anxiety of the individual's existence. From its inception Husserl's phenomenology suffered from an inability to ground the necessity of ethics in ontology, because of phenomenology's inherent tendency towards solipsism. Both Husserl and Heidegger tried to rectify this split between ontology and ethics, but neither could do so convincingly. However, what was considered a "failure" in the phenomenological uncovering of transcendental subjectivity (Husserl) or *Dasein and Mittsein* (Heidegger) was taken up by Sartre as the cue to the proclamation of the solitary and absurd drama of individual existence. In consequence, the only way left for Sartre to explain intersubjectivity, the social relations between human beings, was as a dismal objectification of one another. In the end, his existentialism could provide no other ground for ethics — including the ethical activism of his own social engagement — than the individual's quest to exist authentically (i e not in "bad faith").

Levinas, being a reputed scholar of Husserl and deeply influenced by Heidegger, confronted this dilemma head on. His intuition was that intersubjectivity, the appeal of the other to the subject, was more fundamental, original and evident than one's experience of one's own subjectivity and freedom. One's inherent solipsism as a subject is therefore crushed by the "approach of the other/Other", which means that one's being (ontology) is rooted in one's responsibility (ethics) towards the other human being or the "Other", the transcendent. Throughout his philosophy, a demanding one from its inception to its mature complexity, Levinas argues consistently and relentlessly that "ethics" is the original relationship of absolute responsibility in which the "I"[2] finds itself as "being-for" its neighbour.[3] The self, it must be noted, is simultaneously in a symmetrical political[4] relation

2 Levinas uses the terms "I", "subject", "individual", "existent", "ego" and "self" interchangeably.

3 In Levinas (1981) he shifts to using the term *prochain* (the neighbour) more often than the abstract *Autrui*; also prefering *les autres* (others) to *l'Autre* (the Other) in an attempt to move away from the ontological distinction between the same and the other. Cf also Davis (1996: 82).

4 In distinction from the ethical relation, where the self is absolutely responsible for the other and unable to objectify him, the need for knowledge and

and an asymmetrical ethical relation with the Other/other (Levinas 1981: 158). It is the latter relation which this study will explore. The sole aim of Levinas's oeuvre is to break through the indifference and *naïveté* of our everyday life to reveal our humanity — a humanity which, despite its potential to cause suffering and pain, even to commit murder, is primarily and ultimately a "being-human-for-the-other". To a certain extent, this revelation of our being as a "being-for-the-other" is both the premise the conclusion of Levinas's thought. This should become clear if we follow the logical (not necessarily chronological) trajectory of his thinking from his ontological analysis of the subject's egoistic effort to be, and its being riveted to its own self, through to this solipsistic subjectivity being redeemed by its openness towards time and infinity, to its unique ethical election to exist "for-the-other" (Levinas 1999: xii & 2000: 162). This is the event of the human overwhelming the inhuman in being (Robbins (ed) 2001: 106). The Other/other[5] is the "very force and fact of the human" (Robbins (ed) 2001: 113).

"The other concerns me in all his material misery. It is a matter, eventually, of nourishing him, of clothing him", says Levinas (2001: 52). In the same vein his notion of substitution aims to disclose our capacity to feel the other's pain in our own flesh (Levinas 1981: 117). In fact, one's responsibility for the other can be likened to one's devotion to oneself (Levinas 1989b: 83). Levinas's understanding of "ethics" does not provide for responsibility as a psychological event

theorisation remains in order to solve moral and practical problems. The other person is both the ethical other and the political third (Levinas 1981: 160), and it is the presence of the third that necessitates justice, knowledge, equality, politics, and so forth, for decisions need to be made as to how responsibility has to be divided and fulfilled. The third therefore enables a respite from infinite responsibility and includes the I in an equality and a reciprocity.

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

of pity or compassion (Levinas 1981: 125). It is not an appeal to emotion, nor an act of freedom by which responsibility for the other is willingly chosen, but a phenomenology of a pre-contracted passivity which destines the subject for inescapable responsibility for the other. The passivity of this pre-originary vulnerability transcends the limits of one's time, electing one before initiative or choice in that unremembered past (Levinas 2000: 177).

To illuminate this phenomenology of "ethics" as "first philosophy", preceding even ontology, we will examine three works by Levinas and allow their titles, in particular, to guide us in the unfolding of his all-encompassing idea. In *The Cambridge companion to Levinas*, Bernasconi & Critchley (2002: 6) refer to Levinas's "big idea", maintaining that most original thinkers are usually obsessed by one idea. This recurrent idea was already present in his earliest work, *Existence and existents*. Derrida (1978: 312) also speaks of the thematic development of *Totality and infinity* as proceeding 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.

This returning movement continues with deeper insistence in *Otherwise than being*, where Levinas best succeeds in breaking with ontology. In these three works Levinas's wave brings his ultimate idea to our shore variously as subjectivity, the meaning of ethics, responsibility, the alterity of the other, and substitution.

Levinas's own version of phenomenology first emerged in *Existence and existents*, published in 1947, when he was already an established scholar of Husserl and Heidegger. In this work, his analyses show the subject taking on the burden of its own existence as a self, the project of "existing with which it finds itself affected" (Levinas 1978: 10). This initial idea is then worked out extensively in his first *magnum opus*, *Totality and infinity: an essay in exteriority*, published in 1961, where he focuses on the Other/other, who from his exterior face speaks from a "height" and "infinity" that breaks through the totality of the subject's selfsame existence and reminds the subject of a pre-contracted responsibility. In an even greater work, *Otherwise*

than being or beyond essence, published in 1974, the focus of analysis is the subject as bearer of this original ethical responsibility, and the structure of its very subjectivity is shown to predetermine it subject for irreplaceable substitution in responsibility. Our discussion can therefore start out from Levinas's understanding of the subject — the "existent" — in its initial self-obsessed attachment to existence and to the cumbersome burden of its own being, and proceed to its "being-for-the-other", which affords an escape from the totality of interiority, opens it up for the exteriority of alterity and infinity, and thereby renders life meaningful. But to find a suitable point of entry into this discussion, a further orientation on a more than introductory level is required.

1. Orientation

As has been indicated, Levinas departs from any traditional Aristotelian, Kantian or Millian understanding of ethics to posit a radically more demanding, transcendental sense of ethics. His ethics is neither an advocation of virtues nor an explication of moral imperatives or universal rules of conduct, commands or prohibitions (Davis 1996: 35). Instead, he aims at a phenomenological description, a proto-phenomenology of the pre-predicative situation (or situatedness) of responsibility prior to any sort of ethics in the traditional sense(s) of the word. His questioning of the meaning of ethics is prior to what are normally considered to be the first questions of ethics, for example "What is the good, and how can we know it?" or "What is the true source of ethical knowledge?" Least of all is it merely a question of "How should I conduct myself" or "What should I do?" (Peperzak 1993: 223). Because of his insistence on ethics as referring to a pre-predicative calling to irrevocable responsibility "for-the-other", Levinas's philosophy has been called masochistic, too extreme, even excessive in its limitlessness (Levinas 1989b: 46).

In contradistinction to the political relation it would seem that the unconditional responsibility of the ethical relation is indeed overwhelming and so all-encompassing that it renders the subject impotent, not knowing how, where or when to act ethically in the

world. As is clear from his interviews,[6] Levinas (1985) is not unaware of the implications of the gravity which he affords ethics, but counters these by recounting that he lives and thinks in a wounded world.[7] His philosophy is an attempt to give a voice to the unbearable guilt experienced by the survivors — the survived victims of the Holocaust — at having survived (Peperzak 1995: 5). The focus of such a person is not his own innocence, but instead his implicit contribution to the fact that another, with one digit differing from his own serial number, did not make it. It is the shattered innocence of a human being who knows that his usurpation of the position of survivor could only have come about by denying an other a chance to life. The survived victim is the vivid symbol of all people — despite our own victimisation or innocence, we are responsible for our neighbour beyond choice or excuse. As Pascal stated in his *Pensées*, one's "being in the world" or "place in the sun" is the beginning of usurpation of the whole earth (Levinas 1999: 130). Thus, one is violent and murderous toward all others whom one displaces by the simple act of taking up a place. And so it is not the suffering of the other *per se* that gives rise to the ethics of responsibility, but this capacity of the self both to harm and to "be-for" the other. As we have seen, this responsibility is already embedded in the "neutrality" of simply maintaining one's own space and merely facing the other, being exposed to his alterity and infinity. Though the other may not actually be suffering, I discover myself in the nakedness of his face as one who can hurt him or simply choose to live only for myself. Not "being-for-the-other" results in hunger, poverty, and ultimately killing (Levinas 1985: 96-7). Hence, denying the humane within ourselves manifests these concrete examples of the "flesh of life" and ultimately points to a responsibility prior to any action or neglect on the part of the individual.

6 The book *Ethics and infinity* (Levinas 1985) comprises ten radio interviews with Philippe Nemo broadcast on Radio France-Culture during February-March 1981.

7 Cf Peperzak (1995: 4), Bernasconi & Critchley (1991: 126, 2002: 252-67), Van Hove (1993: 79).

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

With the often-quoted words of Dostoyevsky[8] about the "I" being more responsible than everyone else, Levinas wants to emphasise that the "I" is irreplaceable — nobody can substitute for the first person (Levinas 1981: 114, 126, 142 & 2000: 162, Robbins (ed) 2001: 161, 229). In Levinas's own words the pronoun "I" means to be "answerable for everyone and everything" (Levinas 1996: 90). Even though I may not be the one who caused the other's suffering, I remain more responsible than the one who caused it, including the sufferer, should he have brought it upon himself (Levinas 1981: 112). I am responsible for him, insists Levinas, up to the point of being responsible for his responsibility towards me (Levinas 1981: 117 & 1989d: 226).[9] My responsibility extends beyond the people with whom I come into contact, extending even to those I don't know (Levinas 1996: 81), including people of the past and the future, as well as those currently in situations about which I can do practically nothing (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 239). In other words, my responsibility is not limited to an act of responding, nor to a state of responsiveness; my responsibility is beyond any intentionality, because it is the constitutive condition of my subjectivity.

2. *Existence and existents*

In *Existence and existents* Levinas deals with the mode of the subject, the existent's existence. According to his analysis, the existent's being as an existent, a self, must constantly be wrested from the threat

8 Cf for example Levinas (1985: 101, 1986: 184, 1996: 105, 168, Robbins (ed) 2001: 56, 72, 100, 112, 133, 161, 229).

9 Levinas is not arguing that the victim take the blame for the violence committed against him, because that would be to confuse ethical responsibility with legal responsibility. He is not concerned with the question of who is to blame, but with the question: "What am I to do?" (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 240).

of "anonymous being", the ever-present drone of undifferentiated existence which Levinas calls, in an untranslatable phrase, the *il y a* (Levinas 1978: 56-64). It is not to be confused with the Sartrean *en-soi* of inner peace, or Heidegger's generous *es gibt* (Levinas 1989a: 29). For Levinas, existence itself is an imprisonment, an oppression — for we have not chosen to be, yet here we are, burdened with our own being. The human is not thrown into existence like a rock — oblivious and unable to engage with its own being here (Van Hove 1993: 78). As Heidegger taught, our existence matters to us. In *Existence and existents* Levinas introduces two means of escape or freedom from this situation. Beginning with a measure of autonomous exertion, he ultimately presents our heteronomous constitution.

Levinas's positing of the *il y a* is not based on philosophical argumentation, but on intuition, the intuition of an evidential primordial experience of our being in the world, for anonymous being precedes and is presupposed by anything that can be differentiated or known by reason (Davis 1996: 23). The *il y a* is, metaphorically speaking, the shadow of everything that is: should everything that is disappear, it would remain as the persistence of being. For at the heart of all negation, unbearable indifference, and unceasing monotony deprived of meaning, we find Being, the *il y a* (Levinas 1978: 61; 2001a: 45). In examining loneliness, indolence, boredom and insomnia, Levinas attempts to show that such states of suspended subjectivity reveal that the self is forced to exist, compelled to take up its own existence against this unceasing, impersonal being. At these times the ego is stripped of its freedom almost to the point of being crushed as a subject: for it wants (as an autonomous subject) to sleep, but there-is-sleeplessness; it wants to escape from itself, but it remains stuck with itself, bored by its own incessant existence; it wants to erect itself in work or play, but recoils back on itself in inertia (Levinas 1978: 65). Unlike in the thought of Kierkegaard or Heidegger, for Levinas existents do not fear the nothingness of death, but the there-is of brute existence (Robbins (ed) 2001: 46). The existent longs to escape this oppressive rivetedness to self and being (Levinas 1978: 84, 88). Levinas depicts this unshakeable enchainment literally and metaphorically as horror, which is particularly felt when

consciousness cannot exert itself against participating in unending nothingness. The horror of the *il y a*, the *there-is*, is the horror of being displaced as an "I" by an "it", experiencing the transfusion of one's being from an "I am" to a "there is" (Levinas 1978: 65 & 1996: ix). Initially the "I" will take the position of an enjoying entity who dominates the earth, but it soon finds its true being and real freedom to be itself is in being for the other.

As early as *Existence and existents*, thus, Levinas analyses and describes the self-positing of the subject as an existent in distinction from the il y a as a "hypostasis", literally a "standing under", which is also a "standing out", an exit or "ex-sistere", from anonymous being. In *Totality and infinity* and *Otherwise than being* the initial notion of hypostasis is fleshed out as separation, interiority, psychism, atheism, enjoyment and egoism. All these terms refer in different ways to the instance, the ontological event, in which an existent emerges from the *il y a* to take up a position with regard to its own existence (Levinas 1978: 65 & 2001b: 182). At this point the *il y a* no longer bears the determinate being; rather, the existent backs itself up against the *il y a*. There is refastening being to the existent in a passage going from being to a some-thing, a some-one, a self, an "I" (Levinas 1985: 51). In this way the existent establishes a personal sphere and, as posited, becomes "the bearer and master of being" (Levinas 2001a: 45). He moves from a being dominated by the anonymous, invading power of the *il y a* to exert himself and take on his own being.

Yet, the self establishes but a measure of escape in hypostasis — in positing itself in self-indulgence such as interiority and enjoyment. In enjoyment, I "exist as separated, above being" (Levinas 1969: 63). The self can recoil into itself and be at home with itself to taste the pleasures of life in exuberance (Levinas 1969: 110). In the understanding of substitution (which is dealt with in section 5.2 below), the necessity of being able to experience life in abundance and selfishness will become evident. This joyful autonomy is, however, merely a mid-escape point, for the existent is pre-occupied with himself and his exertion remains momentary and fragile. It remains in constant risk of being sucked back into the horror of the *il y a*, so that this hypostatic effort is an infinite task (Levinas 1978: 84).

This perpetual hypostasis, the never-to-be-completed exit from the *il y a*, which is from moment to moment also the realisation of the present, should not be confused with a longing to escape a certain lifestyle, for example, the bourgeois style of existence coupled with boredom and meaninglessness or the harsh realities of a pauper's life (Llewellyn 1995: 11). It is escaping the brutal truth of the *il y a* as such that should be understood, for it is this escape that is a necessity, constitutive of subjectivity and freedom.

Ultimately the true exit to freedom is not afforded by beings that are self-posited existents, but deposed in their obligation "for-the-other" (Levinas 1985: 52). The desire that lies at the bottom of existence, the longing to rise above being, is thus not quenched in the enjoyment of self-sufficiency (Levinas 1969: 63). Levinas locates the complete break with the *il y a* in the ethical event of facing the Other/other. The dread of the il y a can ultimately only be escaped through intersubjectivity, or what Levinas (1969: 80) calls "a relation without relation", the social relationship with our neighbour in a dis-inter-ested relation that is unconditional responsibility for the Other/other (Levinas 1985: 52). We may now turn to *Totality and infinity* in order to embark upon a deeper exploration of the impact and force of the Other/other.

3. Totality and infinity

The title *Totality and infinity* (1969) points to a critique of totalising thinking as exemplified, *inter alia*, by the history of Western philosophy. Elsewhere Levinas (1999: 198) says:

> This book [*Totality and infinity*] challenges the synthesis of knowledge, the totality of being that is embraced by the transcendental ego, presence grasped in the representation and concept ...

Consequently he addresses the question of what lies outside of totality, the "Other" which cannot be reduced to the "Same" in the systematic construction of a totality of thought — as a critique of the closure of Western philosophy, but more importantly, to found subjectivity in the idea of infinity (Levinas 1969: 26). Hence we should distinguish between ethical questions and ontological concerns. As

all ontological relations with that which is other are relations of comprehension, which inevitably form totalities (Levinas 1969: 43, Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 12), Levinas introduces the idea of the infinite into ethical relations. As succinctly put by Hand (1989: 166) "infinity both includes and negates the finite: the *in of infinity* means both non finite and in the finite". Note further that in *Totality and infinity* Levinas still employs ontological language and concepts to a great extent in his refutation thereof (Derrida 1978: 88).

Totality and infinity stand in opposition to one another. Totality points to finite, objectifiable knowledge — by which the "I" dominates in a symmetrical relation. Totalising thinking has been

> an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought (Levinas 1985: 75).

Totality thinking, held as egocentric and reductive theory (Levinas 1969: 13), objectifies everything — even the other person — to a finite knowable object. In this way the Other is reduced to the Same, and people become interchangeable (Levinas 1969: 43). When conceiving the relation with the other as understanding or even recognition, the other has already been totalised (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 12).

Against the synthesis of traditional Western philosophy, which destroys real alterity, Levinas (1969: 86 & 1985: 77) maintains that relations between people are non-synthesisable, for the Other eludes thematisation. The neighbour can therefore not be another me, an *alter ego* as Descartes or Husserl, for example, argued (Levinas 1969: 13 & 1985: 85). In the totalised order where the Other is violated in order to exist as part of the whole, he is reduced to specific roles afforded by life and his works (Levinas 1969: 178). Yet according to Levinas (1969: 84), the Other stands in the sign of the perfect and presents himself as an interlocutor, as one whom I cannot totalise (by reducing him to specific roles) or over-power, because my uncontracted relation with him cannot be expressed in terms of enjoyment or knowledge. It is thus this dimension of infinity about the Other that escapes traditional systematic thinking. It is therefore not the

characteristic of his material poverty, but the force of his irreducible infinity, which calls forth my responsibility for him. This notion of infinity affords a break from reductive totalising thinking and in turn opens up a dimension enabling ethical responsibility.

3.1 Infinity

Descartes's "Third Meditation" is of great importance to Levinas as it provides the first model of the subject existing in relation to exterior infinity, unable to reduce the Other's infinity to itself (Levinas 2000: 142). In Descartes's work, subjectivity discovers itself not as self-evidently given, but in reference to the non-self of the infinite by which it is transcended (Davis 1996: 39).[10] The infinite is discovered as an *a priori* in the Cogito, but at the same time as an idea beyond knowledge — for "the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its ideatum surpasses its idea" (Levinas 1969: 49); thought of the idea of the infinite is indeed "thought behind thoughts" (Levinas 1981: 149). Levinas (1969: 49) writes: "to think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object". The Cartesian argument proves the separate existence of the infinite and the finitude of the being who has an idea of infinity. In this way the significance of the encounter with the infinite as something beyond knowledge enables a relationship with that which is total exteriority and alterity, utterly irreducible to interiority (Levinas 1969: 50, 211, Davis 1996: 39).[11]

3.2 Metaphysical desire

According to his idiosyncratic interpretation/reconstruction of Descartes's argumentation, the desire for the infinite is, for Levinas, a metaphysical desire for the otherness of the human Other and/or the otherness of what he metaphorically calls "the Most High" (Levinas 1969: 34, 50). By introducing this quasi-transcendental aspect,

10 The infinite in the work of Descartes is God, but Levinas (1969: 49, 211) transforms it into the Other, in fact the absolute Other. Cf also Davis 1996: 40.

11 Whereas the Cartesian subject discovers the idea of the Infinite in his interiority, the Levinasian subject discovers from the exteriority of being faced by his neighbour that a trace of the Infinite was left behind in him at creation, which predisposes him to responsiveness (Levinas 1969: 85-7).

Levinas moves from the *naïveté* of the natural attitude (the attitude suspended by the epoche in Husserlian terms) and the veil of the empirical to the *a priori* whereby "the idea of the overflowing of objectifying thought by a forgotten experience from which it lives" is shown (Levinas 1969: 28). Through this metaphysical dimension Levinas transcends totalising thinking and reaches back to the motivation for infinite responsibility.

This desire, however, is not physical or psychological — in principle susceptible of satisfaction — but a desire for the absolutely other, for alterity, which is beyond satisfaction (Levinas 1969: 34). Neither the relation to the Other, nor conversation or sociality can make this state revert as it is not a nostalgia, a longing for a return to a satisfaction that was once familiar. These modalities may not satisfy, yet it is through them that the subject escapes meaninglessness and the oppression of the *il y a*. This metaphysical desire desires beyond what can complete it; it is insatiable because the desired does not fulfil, but rather deepens or protracts the desire (Levinas 1969: 33-4, 304). Levinas (1985: 92) says in an interview: "Desire in some way nourishes itself on its own hungers". The Other and the "Most High" are beyond totalising, irreducible to the interiority of the self, not assimilable by the subject (Levinas 1969: 35, 39). It is thus desire that surpasses the egoistic inclinations of the subject. The subject, the "I", discovers in metaphysical desire that it is not solipsistically enclosed within itself, because it has "always already" been open and ready to respond to the Other (Peperzak 1995: 190). Arguing thus, Levinas prepares the way for an understanding of substitution.

In the presence of the Other an immemorial past is revealed, a pre-reflective, unintended past, prior to knowledge or choice (Peperzak 1995: 108 & 1985: 91). In this encounter the self experiences the disruption of its supposed autonomy and discovers itself as a heteronomous subject. In this exteriority a trace/echo of the Infinite is revealed, awakened in the face of the Other/other. The cloak of the subject's autonomy is ripped off to reveal its original heteronomy — whereas he used to be a law unto himself (*autos + nomos*), he now finds that the other (*heteros*) has become a law unto him. Here he discovers an obligation to an immemorial debt into which he has always

already been contracted prior to his own volition. He finds himself to be responsible, held hostage by and as the substitute for the Other/other (Levinas 1981: 126, Peperzak 1995: 190).

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

Bringing together Levinas's notions of the metaphysics and ethics of the subject's encounter with the Other/other, Peperzak (1995: 112) sheds light on the intricacies of the ego and the self in Levinas's thinking. In the presence of the Other, desire moves the self towards that Other, in an encounter which reveals the unconscious and non-intentional affectivity of the self as having been pre-originally meant for and tied to another (Levinas 2000: 175). This meeting is an event which, transcending the ego, calls forth from the self a response that dethrones that ego (Peperzak 1995: 113, Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 251). This response is a responsibility for the Other that exists before any self-consciousness, so that from the beginning of any face-to-face encounter, the question of being involves the right to be (Levinas 1989b: 75). And so the ego discovers here what Levinas calls a "prehistory" where "the self is through and through a hostage, older than the ego, prior to principles" (Levinas 1981: 117). The subject's freedom and egoistic enjoyment of the world is called into question at the very origin of moral consciousness, which brings to remembrance the trace of Infinity; a trace left at its creation which pre-destines the subject[12] to question his own existence as an autonomous ego in favour of the existence of the Other/other (Levinas 1969: 84 & 1981: 55, Peperzak 1995: 113). At this point the subject discovers a non-intentional, pre-reflective affectivity that quickens an "answerability" and "respons-ibility" in him. Peperzak (1995: 113) argues that if the event did not touch one "twice or in two ways or two places — or times, synchrony and diachrony" — then the commandment and authority of the face would not make sense. The reason the face has the moral force to occasion this awakening is because the self is created for and like this, so that it "becomes human in these birth pains" (Peperzak 1995: 113). Desire in the presence of the Other thus brings to an end the self's egoistical modalities by awakening apology and goodness within it (Levinas 1969: 40). The other in *misère*

calls upon the subject from its unprotected, naked, defenceless face. At the same time it calls with the authority of the Infinite, though in the vulnerability of its human face (Levinas 1999: 198-9).

This duality of the face is a movement by which the Other constantly exceeds being thematised, but at the same time brings us to the border of its "numinosity". It is this "epiphany" and "holiness" which brings us to our ethical responsibility (Levinas 1969: 195, 207, 221). In section 2 it was emphasised that, for Levinas, ethical responsibility is not limited or determined by the suffering of the other *per se*. Similarly, it is the other's alterity that demands respect, so that we refrain from reducing it to its distinguishing characteristics, despite the fact that those characteristics are its literal poverty or nakedness (Levinas 1969: 194). Instead, Levinas insists, it is by the phenomenological poverty and nakedness of the unmasked skin through which the epiphany of the infinite appears that we are called to responsibility.

4. The human face

Levinas establishes ethics as a "first philosophy" by beginning with the notion of the "face-to-face". Before there is knowledge, totalisation and ontology, there is the Other/other, what he also calls "the saying" (as distinct from "the said"), the infinite. Hence, Ethics is not a subdivision of (ontological Western) Philosophy, but should be regarded as the beginning of philosophy as truth-seeking. The relation to the face is immediately ethical, as it spells the first mode of "knowing", as a facing (Levinas 1985: 87). It is in speaking/saying (which is done by its mere presence and in the nakedness of its skin) that the face renders possible and begins all discourse (Levinas 1969: 66 & 1985: 87). It is discourse, and more exactly, response or "responseability", which begins the authentic relationship with the Other/other. Thus, we respond to our neighbour even in simply recognising him. The following sections will therefore attempt to illuminate Levinas's notions of the face and its form, what the nakedness of the face entails, the meaning that arises from the face, and finally the significance of speech — the saying and the said; all of which explain the interplay

between finitude and the infinite that affords an understanding of Levinas's ethics.

4.1 Face and form

Levinas is not a discursive thinker; he does not start out with argued-for premises and develop his philosophy systematically through a series of arguments to a logical conclusion. Rather, as was indicated early on with reference to Derrida's metaphor of the wave, Levinas's thinking is rhetorical and thoroughly poetic, returning like the same current of waves to break relentlessly on the same shore. The "shore" is an appeal to what he regards as a primordial, evidential human experience, namely that we always find ourselves already in an established ethical relation of responsibility in facing an Other/other. Our being turned towards the Other/other, which affords access to his face, should therefore also be distinguished from actually looking at another, merely noticing his features, so to speak. Levinas draws a distinction between the face and its form (its features). Unlike the form, the (Levinasian ethical) face is "present in a refusal to be contained" (Levinas 1969: 194). Its alterity does not consist in its features being different from that of other "others". The otherness which we encounter in the face is an alterity which cannot be reduced to a definable, perceivable difference — it bears the trace, or makes manifest what is wholly Other, beyond this world of perception, judgement and knowledge (Levinas 1969: 39, 194 & 1985: 86). It is impossible for this alterity to be contained by my vision or touch. Hence Levinas's contention that we should not speak of a "look" turned toward the face as this would suggest enclosing knowledge and perception (Levinas 1985: 85).

The Other's alterity remains impenetrable. The part featured by his face remains unknowable. Indeed, the face is meaning all by itself — *kath' auto* (Levinas 1969: 75). For the face is signification without context and thus uncontainable. Its meaning is not determined in relation to other things sharing the same context. The face is constantly breaking through and overflowing the phenomenological form of its appearance (Levinas 1981: 89, Kuypers & Burggraeve 1998: 102), yet retrieved just as soon by its transcendence,

which escapes the self's gripping (Levinas 1969: 51). Incarnated in its form — from which it should be distinguished, but cannot be abstracted — the otherness of the Other/other makes an appearance and is present, recognisable in the world.[12] Though the Other appears in form, the face refuses to be limited and captured by the cognitive. In the instance of its appearance in the form, it again breaks through it to supersede that of which we have had a brief glimpse (Levinas 1969: 181, 198). Llwellyn (1995: 123) calls this interplay: the appearing-disappearing act of the Other — able to be known, yet unable to be objectified.

The vulnerability of the skin is the most naked nudity for Levinas. In an interview in *Ethics and infinity* (1985: 86) he states:

> It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance.

This is one aspect of what Levinas calls the form. Further aspects generating recognisable forms for the Other/other are through his physical features, manner of dressing and presenting himself, his name, title, and activities (Levinas 1969: 178, 1985: 86, 1999: 199, Kuypers & Burggraeve 1998: 102). This signification is containable and knowable as the other ís signified, and can only be signified, by it — although the Other does not coincide with these manifestations.

4.2 Vulnerability

The Other/other does not appear only in unabated alterity, but also in utter vulnerability. The (skin of) the face is the most unprotected, the most destitute of its phenomenal appearance (Levinas 1985: 86). This vulnerability seems to invite violence and can most easily be violated, scorned even by a failure to recognise it (Levinas 1999: 145). Despite this weakness, however, in and through the face the Other/other calls from an authoritative height, which Levinas (1999: 199) calls "the word of God and the verb in the human face", because in its presence the face is non-ignorable; not to heed it is precisely not to heed it, already a violation of trust. From this dimension of "height"

12 This idea will be taken up again in discussing the saying and the said.

the face projects an unavoidable command: "Thou shalt not kill" (Levinas 1969: 34-5 & 1999: 155). This commandment is indeed the first saying of the face.

The resistance of the face to conceptualisation does not mean it is invulnerable to power. Instead, by this vulnerability it transforms our power over it (Wyschogrod 2000: 94). The Other/other's vulnerability and weakness constitute an invitation to the pleasure- and power-seeking "I" to want to dominate it by trying to reduce it to the self, because the "I" now has the power of life and death over it (Kuypers & Burggraeve 1998: 105, Wyschogrod 2000: 94). This desire to totalise and objectify the Other would be a violation. The highest ultimate expression of this violation would be murder (Kuypers & Burggraeve 1998: 105). It is at precisely this point, however, that the self discovers in the Other/other a power beyond its frailty — a power that resists the self's potentially "murderous" inclinations. Thus the "I" finds that his most deliberate attempts to exert his power over the other are ultimately foiled by its transcendence. It is rather the other/Other that exerts power — not the power of threat but that of capture, of turning the "I" into a hostage of responsibility (Davis 1996: 49). The other/Other's power lies in its implicit, innocent, involuntary calling into question of my right to be, of my egoistic enjoyment of the world and ultimately in the usurpation of my freedom. As Derrida (1978: 98) puts it, referring to both Scheler and Hegel, the face is not only seen because it is naked, but also sees — and thereby questions — me.

This relation of the subject to the face of the other/Other is thus unequivocally ethical, owing to the meaning of the face, which says: "Thou shalt not kill". Accordingly, the face is an original speech, an asking to be helped in its (his, her, my) *misère*, though at the same time being imperative. Paradoxically, in its face the other/Other simultaneously commands that it be not killed, yet begs to be assisted to live. Levinas (1969: 43) first states in *Totality and infinity* that ethics is the calling into question of the Same and its totalising tendencies. Later, in *Otherwise than being* (Levinas 1981) he develops this asymmetrical relation to an even higher and more pre-original degree.

5. Otherwisely saying and the said of being

In *Violence and metaphysics*[13] Derrida points out that though Levinas attempts to dethrone ontology in *Totality and infinity*, he still expresses the non-ontological in the language of ontology (Derrida 1978: 82-3, 88, 95, 97, 111-3, 125).[14] Levinas's subsequent work, but especially *Otherwise than being*, is indeed maddening in its attempt to say the unsayable — what Bernasconi & Critchley (2002: 19) term "tortuously beautiful, rhapsodic incantations". With *Otherwise than being or beyond essence* Levinas does not only introduce the notions of the "saying" and the "said": his whole text becomes a deconstructive engagement with the distinction between the effable and the ineffable.

As the title suggests, in *Otherwise than being or beyond essence* Levinas wants to articulate the possibility of thinking transcendence.[15] But is this possible? If "Being" is the totalising Western philosophical tradition (Peperzak 1993: 213), how can one think or speak of the pre-linguistic, beyond Being — other than by a "doubling or multiplying" thereof through unsaying and resaying that which strictly speaking cannot be said (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 75)? For the saying is inevitably violated when its alterity and uniqueness are transformed and represented through the conceptualising of the said. Levinas's break with ontology ultimately becomes a necessary betrayal of the non-objective, the non-thematic, and the non-ontological (Levinas 1996: xii). This disparity is made explicit in the distinction between the saying and the said, where the unsayable is necessarily objectified and reduced to the said, yet the unsaying persists in continuously disrupting the said in resaying it (Levinas 1981: 44, 153-6 & 1996: xii, Peperzak 1993: 227). And so the saying and the said flow into and through each Other/other, not remaining

13 Cf Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: xii-xiv. They argue that Derrida's *Violence and metaphysics* (1978) should not be understood simply as a critique of Levinas, but rather as a deconstructive double reading of his work.

14 Cf also Bernasconi & Critchley (2002: 17), Davis (1996: 58-9, 65-6).

15 The word "essence" refers both to Plato's "being" (*ousia*) and to Heidegger's "Being" (*Sein*). The expressions "otherwise than being", "beyond being" and "beyond essence" are all translations of Plato's *epekeina tes ousias* and characterise "the good" which is beyond being (Levinas 1996: 109).

oppositions like the Same and the Other. The betrayal is further exemplified in Levinas's reduplication of terms, such as "more passive than all passivity", "denudation of denuding" and "infinition of the infinite" (Levinas 1981: 14, 49, 93).

Moving briefly from the ethics of language into the relational sphere: in these expressions Levinas tries to explain the subject's election for ethical responsibility, which precedes even the passivity that could have held a measure of autonomous assertiveness, for the proximity of the neighbour makes it impossible for the self to abandon him/her (Levinas 1996: 167). In turn, this betraying-resaying language guarantees the impossibility of betraying the uncontainable relation in ontological terminology and thinking — in terms of believing one is responsible only for that of which one is guilty. The unconditionality of this responsibility, contracted before passivity, means that we are "always already beyond essence" in an ethical relation of responsibility. The verb "to be" implied in the later *Otherwise than being* should be understood differently: as referring to the enjoying, totalising egoistic subject of the earlier Levinas of *Existence and existents* (1978) and *Totality and infinity* (1969), the subject who existed naïvely and unquestioningly, only-for-him/herself. In Otherwise than being this being, who is actually a being-for-the-other, is "described" adequately when Levinas breaks with ontological language by introducing the "saying".

Thus Levinas is forced to express his intentions in language which necessarily betrays itself, since his fundamental problem is the aporia of deconstruction as found in (the) language needed to expose the strangeness of the other/Other (Derrida 1978: 88, 151, Davis 1996: 66). In *Otherwise than being*, in particular, Levinas finds himself in earnest on the limits of language, for he has no choice but to travel this *a-poria* (literally a "no-road" that cannot but be taken) of language (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 19). His transmuted (usage of) language from *Totality and infinity* to *Otherwise than being* conceals a shift in his understanding of the way in which subjectivity is established. In the earlier book one is initially given to understand that this happens at the very moment of an encounter with the other, but in the later book it takes place at a pre-original level. The shift

had been anticipated in *Totality and infinity*, but Levinas had not yet found the vocabulary that could express it. Yet, as early as *Totality and infinity* he draws a distinction between the ego and the self that demonstrates this point, though still in the language of ontology. Hence, he does not change perspective in *Otherwise than being*[16] but now with a sharpened deconstructive edge illuminates the shift from an encounter to a pre-encounter, which is vital for his argument on substitution. The question of thinking and speaking of that which is "other than Being" will be dealt with in the discussion of the notions of the "said" and the "saying".

5.1 Saying and said

It has been shown thus far that the relation with the Other is irreducible (*i e* uncontainable); it is moreover linguistic (Peperzak 1995: 62). The ethical relationship is beyond knowledge, thus beyond the containable intelligibility of total presence (Levinas 1999: 168; 1984: 64). This notwithstanding, it is authentically assumed through discourse. According to Levinas, one does not reflect on or contemplate the Other/other, nor grasp him with one's vision — one converses with him (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 11). Levinas distinguishes between the saying (*Dire*: to say) and the said (*le Dit*) in order to point out that discourse is not a form of knowledge (Levinas 1985: 88). To begin with, one can explain the saying as the ethical and the said as the ontological, the identifiable meaning (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 17-8). Reminded of the interplay between language and the ethical relation, Peperzak (1995: 63) writes:

> 'face to face' is irreducible, because the Other is 'inexhaustible', 'reced[ing] from thematization' just as *Dire* is not absorbed in the *Dit*, in grammar, rules, and themes of language. *Dire* is that which is not thematized, which is both transcendent and immanent in language.

16 The necessity of an actual encounter would nullify the possibility of being responsible for all others with whom the "I" never comes into contact. As early as *Totality and infinity* Levinas (1969: 80) speaks of a "relation without relation" (cf also Robbins (ed) 2001: 52). The face-to-face encounter instead brings together an epiphany and a pre-existing responsiveness.

In other words, "The saying is a non-thematizable ethical residue of language that escapes comprehension, interrupts ontology and is the very enactment of the movement from the same to the other" (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 18).

Levinas's problem, then, is to say the saying through the said. That the saying must become concrete in the said is as unavoidable as the fact that the face needs the form for appearance. Indeed, the saying is betrayed because its uniqueness is violated in representation and the knowledge of the said. Yet the problem is found and necessarily "resolved" when the Infinite shows itself through a finite act (Levinas 1969: 51 & 1985: 92). Levinas (1981: 190) also writes: "The said in absorbing the saying does not become its master, although by an abuse of language it translates it before us in betraying it". In this way one's ethical exposure to the Other/other is given a philosophical exposition that is not utterly undermined in incomprehensible saying, despite the continual interruption of the said by the saying (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 18).

The (inexpressible) ethical significance of the saying lies in its compulsion to respond. Though this response passes through the said, which absorbs alterity into thematisation, it does not culminate in the said. It still maintains a non-totalising relation to the Other/other. This obsessiveness about responding stems from the primordial awareness that the face is language-before-words (Levinas 1999: 199, Robbins 2001: 5). As Peperzak (1993: 223) puts it,

> As an adequate description of the subject, insofar as it escapes the order of Being, ethical language is pre- or meta-ontological. As characteristic of a situation that precedes freedom, it is also pre-or meta-ethical.

Given that the saying is expressed in the infinitive, it is able to convey both the transcendent and the immanent in language, as it can convey meaning beyond the act of saying to include that which underlies this act (Peperzak 1995: 63). The appearing-disappearing effect of conveying meaning is also found in the interaction itself, where the irreducible Other recedes from thematisation, yet has delivered its message (Peperzak 1995: 167). We also find the saying described as so subtle an entrance that "unless we retain it, it has

already withdrawn [... as it] withdraws, before entering" (Levinas 1996: 70). Ultimately this primordial conversation is contentless — as such the saying is irreducible to the ontological definability of the said. Saying is what makes the self-exposure of this response and sincerity possible for through it the "I" announces "here I am" (Levinas 1984: 64-5).

5.2 Substitution

Levinas describes the meaningfulness of the saying and the "unsaid" in corporeal terms as a stripping beyond nudity (Levinas 1981: 15, Hand 1989: 88). And so intentionality is found in sensibility, which is a proximity to the other/Other of which substitution is the basis (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 21). Thus the "I", the first person, becomes a subject in the literal sense of being hostage to the other/Other, through a "passivity more passive than all patience" (Levinas 1981: 15). A necessary condition for ethical subjectivity is its corporeality, for it is only embodiment that renders itself susceptible to deprivation such as pain, labour or decline (Peperzak 1993: 222). It is the subject's sentient capacity for hunger, his proclivity for eating and enjoying his bread and good soup, that enables him to know what it means to give up his food for the other/Other (Levinas 1981: 56, Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 21). According to Levinas (1981: 69, 72, 74; 2000: 190), only a being that eats can give and be for the other/Other. Bernasconi & Critchley (2002: 21) consider what must be the world's shortest refutation of Heidegger to be Levinas's complaint that "Dasein is never hungry". Indeed, Levinas (1969: 134) writes, "The need for food does not have existence as its goal, but food". Furthermore, responsibility, as the passivity of being-for-the-other, is not expressed only in the self's capacity to offer up the bread from his own mouth, but also in the giving up of one's body as a victim and bearer of pain; ultimately of giving one's life for the other/Other (Levinas 1981: 51).[17]

17 In an interview with Poirié, Levinas (2001: 53) says: "I am responsible for the death of the other" — thus the "I" does not die for itself alone.

Levinas makes it clear that we are not dealing with a free "I" who is actively able to place himself in the position of the other/Other. Instead, the "I" is passively placed in the position of the other/Other, prior to any commitment (Levinas 1981: 102), to the extent that he is unable to unburden himself of the ethical responsibility brought about by the other/Other's appeal (Levinas 1981: 102 & 1996: 95). This passivity is that of a hostage, not a free ego which could boast about the sacrifice of his substitution or his altruism, his "natural benevolence or love" (Levinas 1981: 112, cf also Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 39). Responsibility articulated as love would create the impression that substitution springs forth from empathy, compassion or benevolence within the "I" (Kuypers & Burggraeve 1998: 112). This form of egoism does not enable sacrifice, nor does it subject the subject to the position of a hostage or a persecuted being (Bernasconi & Critchley 2002: 235).

Facing the Other, the "I" is recalled to a responsibility he never contracted (Levinas 1981: 109 & 1999: 58).

> It is an event that strips consciousness of its initiative, that undoes me and puts me before an Other in a state of guilt; an event that puts me in accusation — a persecuting indictment, for it is prior to all wrongdoing — and that leads me to the self, in the accusative that is not preceded by any nominative (Levinas 1981: 112).

The response of responsibility is a response that "answers, before any understanding, for a debt contracted before any freedom and before any consciousness and any present" (Levinas 1981: 12). It is this passivity of the self as hostage that ultimately enables pardon, compassion, pity and proximity in the world (Levinas 1981: 117 & 1996: 91). According to Peperzak (1993: 222), Levinas uncovers persecution as a necessary presupposition, for "only a persecuted subject is a subject who — without so desiring, against his will — lives for the other/Other".

Levinas (1981: 114-5) also writes: "The word 'I' means, here I am, answering for everything and everyone", introduces it as a primordial form of "response of responsibility", and continues: "I exist through the other and for the other [...] as being-in-one's skin,

having-the-other-in-one's-skin".[18] Levinas employs "motherliness" as a metaphor for the ultimate meaning of vulnerability. For example:

> On the other hand, vulnerability is found to be a pre-requisite of the relation of the One-for-the-Other — a relation that seems to coincide with the relation of the 'One-in-me' and thus with motherliness (Levinas 1981: 19).

The mother is the perfect image for substitution as she embodies the capacity for an "echoing-in-another" (Levinas 1981: 108). At the same time, mother and child are completely together, but also completely separate (Peperzak 1993: 232). In thus being-for-the other, I abandon "all having, all for-myself" by substituting myself for the other (Levinas 2000: 176).

From this non-totalising ethical relationship, despite the fact that the other/Other constitutes the self's identity, Levinas argues that the propensity of the subject is not so much *conatus essendi*, as he was intent on thinking in *Existence and existents*, but that it is an inspired giving (Levinas 1981: 141). The subject's "originary constitution" is thus traced to this primordial vocation of his (Levinas 2001: 22) to substitute himself for his neighbour to the point of feeding him with bread from his own lips, and beyond (Levinas 1981: 56; 2001: 22). In Levinas's (1981: 124) own mature formulation:

> Substitution frees the subject from ennui, that is, from the enchainment to itself, where the ego suffocates in itself due to the tautological way of identity, and ceaselessly seeks after the distraction of games and sleep in a movement that never wears out.

As has been mentioned, enjoyment is a necessary step in the self-sustainment of the ego, and similarly embodiment is a pre-requisite for substitution. But as enjoyment is the singularisation of an ego in its coiling back upon itself, it is in its unwinding that it renders suffering sensible (Levinas 1981: 73). Whereas we can totalise and absorb the otherness of the world (food, objects, etc) in order to satisfy our needs, we cannot reduce the otherness of the other/Other to our interiority. In the first and last instance, our identity and humanity

18 In his commentary Peperzak (1993: 232) paraphrases: "Passivity is irritability, receptivity, barrenness, vulnerability".

are released through substitution for our neighbour — this is the desolate shore against which the waves of Levinas's thinking break unremittingly.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this article was to introduce a multidisciplinary, not necessarily philosophically schooled, South African readership to the main tenets and the ethical tenor of Levinas's thought. Obviously a great deal has had to remain un-said (to use Levinasian terminology). In recent decades Levinas's thought has begun to receive the recognition and influence it deserves, but its reception has also engendered critique and debate. We decided to refrain from discussing these criticisms or offering our own normative evaluation of his thought. If we had done so, our point of entry would have been the strength of his basic distinction between the phenomenal "face" of the other/Other and its infinite countenance or visage, the "alterity" of the other/Other which we encounter in our intersubjective and social relations.

Levinas laboriously calls on this distinction and extrapolates it with various ontological and socio-political effects, as well as implications for the (im)possibility of philosophical discourse as such (the "saying" and the "said"). The question, however, is whether one could and should divorce the phenomenality of the other from his/her infinity in this way? Is the other/Other not always unretrievably incarnated in the "flesh", the here and now of the phenomenal other in his/her concrete otherness? Is the appeal of the other to me to respond an appeal "from on high", from an anonynmous universal plane beyond being and non-being? Or is it an appeal which I am able to hear and respond to, because it is incarnated in the very concrete, cultural or social difference of the fellow human being, the neighbour, whom I encounter? It would seem, at least to us, that Levinas in his attempt to draw attention to the infinity of the other/Other, neglected the imperative to relate it back to the finitude of our human being — as historical, cultural and linguistic beings, marked by the differences of our finite facticity. This line of criticism could be worth considering in an attempt to bring Levinas's thought to bear on the South African issues mentioned in our introduction.

Nevertheless, Levinas does not present us with arguments that appeal to a higher authority, not even the authority of rationality, nor does he appeal to good conscience. His ethics is not prescriptive — even when he speaks of the third party and social justice. It is a descriptive ethics with the sole intention of appealing to our most primordial intuitions. It situates us in an asymmetrical relationship, where diachronic time and the proximity of my neighbour surpass rationality and engage me before ontology — or "otherwise than being" — with infinite responsibility for my neighbour. The present discussion has been similarly without prescriptive intention; it has simply wished to illuminate the "that" of our absolute responsibility, as posited by Levinas — the often forgotten fact of our being, if Levinas is correct: that every individual is responsible for his neighbour's life, including his material misery.

There is consensus among commentators that Levinas tried to say something that perhaps could not be said in philosophical terms (Bloechl 2000: 53). In *Otherwise than being* (1981), Levinas does, however, ultimately make a "theme of the unthematisable" (Bernasconi & Critchley 1991: 149).[19] He does this at the risk of undermining himself when he performs an ethical writing to deal with the necessary betrayal of the saying (Davis 1996: 19). In this way he does not limit his text to the said, despite the fact that he is talking about ethics (the saying) as in the case of *Totality and infinity* (1969); in *Otherwise than being* the text itself truly becomes a "saying" (ethical writing). Moreover, considering the three main texts discussed, it is clear that Levinas's work had the effect of a saying even before its conscious and mature expression in *Otherwise than being*. As early as *Existence and existents* (the French original dating from 1949), which he wrote in the stalag at the epitome of the failure of morality, he argued for the absolute, irrevocable responsibility which each of us has for our neighbour. Given his (personal and intellectual) context and subsequent sober arguments, his work carries an undeniable authority. Levinas's work speaks with an authority remarkable in the history of Western philosophy, blinding in its sincerity and irresistible in its metaphoric power to convince us of its "truth".

19 Cf also Davis (1996: 54-7, 69, 71-4) and Bernasconi & Critchley (2002: 19).

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