

### Gadamer and Levinas on the topic of Sociality

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#### *Abstract*

Students of Heidegger, both Gadamer and Levinas present positions on sociality which emphasise care for the other—not only being-in-the-world but being-*with* others. Both philosophers depart from Heidegger in their stress on responsibility to the other, for the subject always finds himself under a claim. Whilst Gadamer, remaining within the realm of ontology, is concerned with understanding, Levinas moves away from grasping the other towards the very alterity of the other. Further, Gadamer draws particular attention to the *said*, whilst Levinas prioritises the *saying*. This paper, in comparing and contrasting these two positions, underlines Gadamer's emphasis on reconciliation as key to finding common ground between hermeneutics and fundamental ethics.

#### *Article*

The philosophical positions of Gadamer and Levinas can both be seen as radical departures from Enlightenment thought in their questioning of the privileged position of the subject. Where they differ is that for Gadamer the move is from epistemology to ontology, whilst for Levinas, from ontology to fundamental ethics. Gadamer, following Heidegger, departs from Cartesean assumptions by stressing that the subject cannot be isolated from the world in which it is thrown. Understanding—which is the very way of being—is thus inextricably linked with history. Nonetheless, Levinas accuses Gadamer and Heidegger alike of remaining too concerned with identity and *mineness*, and thus failing to rid phenomenology of the Husserlian obsession with the transcendental ego. Levinas radically decenters the subject in his move away from understanding and totality, and towards alterity. In this paper I shall compare and contrast Gadamer's hermeneutics and Levinas' ethics, specifically with regards to their views on the topic of sociality.

Heidegger's account of facticity and the characterisation of our relation to the world in terms of habitation proves to be fundamental for both Gadamer and Levinas. Dasein is not only a being-in-the-world but a being-with others. Further, the relation is not one of disinterested regard, but rather one of concern or care. It is precisely the proximity of the world and others that demands a necessarily intimate relation to it. Levinas accuses Heidegger of repressing the ethical dimension in favour of a concern for ontology and unity of being. For Heidegger, the necessary relation of being-for-others must be overcome in order for Dasein to live authentically. Levinas reverses this interpretation of being-for-the-sake-of-others in order to replace the Heideggerian focus on ontology with fundamental ethics. Rather than the face-less other beckoning me away from my desire for authenticity, the call of the naked face of the other is precisely what defines what it is to be human. Being human, according to Levinas, does not first stem from one's consciousness and self-reflexive freedom, but rather out of a position of responsibility for the other. It is in being-for-the-sake-of-others that human existence is given its meaning as transcendence. Moreover, the demand of the other is inescapable: "To be dominated by the Good is precisely to be excluded from the very possibility of choice."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Gadamer, whilst emphasising the contingent, situatedness of our understanding of other people (or texts, or tradition), moves away from Heidegger in insisting that we always find ourselves under a claim—we are always being addressed—since we are essentially in a condition of exposure to what we desire to understand. Thus, since understanding always demands a call for action, Gadamer too holds that we are always and necessarily in a mode of responsibility.<sup>2</sup> The subject is thence depicted for both thinkers as the accusative "me" rather than "I".

According to Levinas, the encounter with the other means that I am now both vulnerable to and answerable for another. It is *me* who is here—not here

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Humanism and Anarchy," (1968), in: Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers: Dordrecht, 1987), 135

<sup>2</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, "On the Coherence of Hermeneutics and Ethics: An Essay on Gadamer and Levinas", in Bruce Krajewski, ed., *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics* (California: University of California Press, 2004), 31-2

*I am*. It is the passive form—I am for you; command me! Only then can there be communication with the other. For Levinas, unlike for Gadamer, this communication is not dialogical. He writes that it is “a passivity more passive than any passivity: filial, previous, pre-logical subjection, a one-way subjection which it would be wrong to understand on the basis of a dialogue.”<sup>3</sup> The other is in a superior position to me; he is commanding me, moving me, and taking me out of my false progressive state. I am because of him. There is no dialogue as such, but only the command “thou shall not kill.” Levinas describes the subject as an irreplaceable *hostage* (not slave) to the other.<sup>4</sup> I respond to the other (and response is inescapable for no one else can take my place) through care, and in doing so put myself in a lower position. Such is the transition to passivity. Pure passivity is “responsibility for the freedom of others. There where I might have remained a spectator, I am responsible, that is, speaking. Nothing is theatre any more; the drama is no longer a game. Everything is grave.”<sup>5</sup> It is in this way that radical passivity requires the subject to answer even to his persecutor.

Levinas’ ethical subject is defined by an anarchic responsibility prior to rational deliberation; the good has chosen me before I have chosen it. In his 2010 paper, Bensussan describes this “having to respond” as “immemorial: it goes way back and precedes all questions I can ever ask myself concerning the reasons why I have responded or not.”<sup>6</sup> The logic of this argument is found in Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*: in doubting thinking, I am thinking; one cannot negate thinking. Similarly, one cannot negate responsibility, for trying to do so is itself a response, not only to the other but *before* and *for* the other. He pays attention to my moves, and so every action—or lack thereof—is already understandable to and has meaning for the other. In this way, Levinas describes the face-to-face relationship as the “impossibility of denying, a negation of negation.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Levinas, “Humanism and Anarchy”, 135.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>6</sup> Jerard Bensussan, “Ethics in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in Maria Dimitrova, ed., *In Levinas’ Trace*, (Sofia: 2010), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 34-5.

The relation between me and the other is, according to Levinas, a necessarily non-reciprocal face-to-face relation. It can be seen as the judge talking to the accused; he “is not yet speaking. It is true that the accused has a right to speak. But it is a speaking that precedes speaking; the accused speaks only to acquire a right to true speech. He is listened to, but also observed as he speaks. He is the accused—that is, already in a category. He is not an interlocutor in reciprocity.”<sup>8</sup> As previously stressed, such is at odds with the dialogical subject of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. The dialogical subject is caught in a movement of question and answer with the other; he is open and exposed to what is said in the context of the event. We already have answers which we have to get rid of on the way to find and re-formulate the questions. What is first demanded of me is that I listen. The relationship with the other is a being-with; there is attunement and solidarity (if not friendship.) Furthermore, for the ethical subject, however, it is the face of the other—not what he says—which addresses me. The nakedness of the face is its vulnerability, which is necessarily prior to any expression, intention or aim.<sup>9</sup> Levinas writes that “the subjectivity of the in-itself is thus like an obedience to an order being carried out before the order is heard—anarchy itself.”<sup>10</sup> I am responsible for everything and everyone, but no one is responsible for me. The anarchy of this relationship is key—for my care is not a pre-justified responsibility nor a social contract: “It is despite myself that the other concerns me”<sup>11</sup>

As Levinas takes the good to be a relation of non-aversion with the other, so too Gadamer’s concern is with the good in human life. Thus, we begin to see how the good as viewed by Gadamer is closely related to Levinas’ notion of a sense beyond being, taken not as an idea but as a movement. For Gadamer, in accordance with Plato, the desire for the good allows us to inhabit the world in the right way. Levinas emphasises that such a desire is not an expression of lack, but rather an act of gener-

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” (1989) in Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater, eds., *The Continental Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1996), 130.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 138.

osity, a movement inspired by the face of the other. He writes that the “desire for the other, sociality, is born in a being that lacks nothing, or, more exactly, it is born over and beyond all that can be lacking or that can satisfy him. In desire the I is born toward the other in such a way as to compromise the sovereign self-identification of the I, for which need is but nostalgia, and which the consciousness of need anticipates.”<sup>12</sup>

For Levinas and Gadamer alike, to be summoned by the good, by this responsibility beyond being and prior to any ethical norms, is what constitutes being human. Levinas writes that being-for-another “is subjectivity itself.”<sup>13</sup> For Gadamer, the subject only exists within this realm of intersubjectivity and understanding. Accordingly, language is the foundation of our sociality. He claims that it is a sort of prejudice to think of language as an activity per se. Rather, it is a kind of connection with the other. It is not the transmission of information, but an *appeal* to the other. If we speak, we presuppose someone is listening and understanding our speech. If we listen, we have to understand and respond to the other. First comes the word, then the fulfilment of the word. The other is touched without any contact—there is no cause and effect. In language we are not objects, but subjects. Further, according to Gadamer, it is through language that we can escape face-to-face direct relationship.

For Levinas, I have a face for the other, not for myself. Only the other has a face for me, and I for them; it is non-symmetrical. It is possible to establish reciprocal relationships, but only in this community of face-to-face relationships, through the third. When the other plays the role of the third, language is responsibility. It is the relationship between freedoms who reciprocally affirm each other. Reciprocity in terms of respect is the condition for ethics.<sup>14</sup> For Gadamer, too, the very model of interaction is a linguistic activity, an asymmetrical link, where one is speaking, the other listening. However, he emphasises that we can overcome this asymmetry through reversal, and conversation ensues.

According to both Gadamer and Levinas, the first act involves the

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<sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” (1972), in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 94.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 111.  
Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 35.

appeal to attention from the other. This is primordial and distinct from the appeal for attention from the object, which comes second and metaphorically. The other can respond to our appeal, whereas the object cannot. This response is precisely our humanity. Whilst it is inescapable that when I *see* an other in the horizon of the world, I see them like objects, we *hear* each other as persons. As previously stressed, if one is speaking, the other is listening, understanding and responding.

Where their positions greatly differ is that for Gadamer, a Levinasian conception of the ethical is ultimately too abstract; too purely ethical, and not sufficiently social and historicized. Understanding, according to Gadamer, is what establishes both the historical and the practical condition for all human relations (the ethical included.)<sup>15</sup> Levinas holds that one encounters the third party—who through power and control allows both parties to be objectified and judged—and thus the call for justice, in the face of the other, who appears outside of the system, and seemingly without a history.<sup>16</sup> However, Gadamer maintains that the ethical cannot stand outside of all context. Responsibility to and for the other, according to Gadamer, does not stop with the other, but rather entails responsiveness to contingent exigencies of social action. In this respect, the good is located in the here and now.<sup>17</sup>

A greatly important connection for Gadamer is that between language and time. Our past is not only our personal past, but rather every culture with which we identify makes up our history. Furthermore, our history somehow exists for us in the present. Language is what makes both the past and the future possible, for it brings together common meanings and enables us to constitute alternative worlds. Indeed, all the worlds of our culture—be it the world of art, science or philosophy—are created by language. For Gadamer, the past and future have double meanings. We usually think that our future is our imagination, situated in the present, and that our past is only to distinguish something as not present. However, the now is constantly moving, and *this* is time. Thus, there is no now, and so it is difficult to see how we can think about the future and the past. The future is constituted as a world by language.

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<sup>15</sup> Bruns, “On the Coherence of Hermeneutics and Ethics,” 48.

<sup>16</sup> Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Bruns, “On the Coherence of Hermeneutics and Ethics,” 49.

Whilst animals live in a constant present, it is because we have language that we are in a position to have a future; we see and hear the world very differently from animals. Similarly, we cannot relate to the past without representations—without language. Nor could the present moment exist without language—as *now* is no more than the contrast of the past and the future. The world connected with the here and now is reflected in language. Language, then, can be seen as the sum of these general meanings by which we relate to the objects and the world. Through identification, we unite different experiences as a whole. As Husserl insists, every unity is possible only because of language—and so, only because of time. We even relate to our younger selves through language, and so also through time. The most important principle of our communication is that the purpose is one, that is, the future is one. Indeed, the future—which is the purpose—is created by language. Whilst we may think that we follow my, or our common purpose, the future of the one is actually produced by the other. Such is at odds with Heidegger’s position that the future is *mine*. Whilst I can try and implement my possibilities of my future in my present, what is important is that there is an other before me. Indeed, Levinas too holds that the other is the future, for ethical actions are directed beyond one’s death. He writes that “there is a vulgarity and a baseness in an action that is conceived only for the immediate, that is, in the last analysis, for our life. And there is a very great nobility in the energy liberated from the hold of the present. To act for far-off things... is no doubt, the summit of nobility.”<sup>18</sup>

Language, according to Gadamer, is a kind of heritage. It presupposes the present and the past of the other—we must *learn* how to speak it. Our future purposes, then, are to a great extent defined by the past—and this past is essentially connected to the other. We are given these purposes, possibilities, this future by the other through language. Thus, the connection of time is not only my own. Time is created by language, and then neutralised by past, present, intentions and future. Our motivations cannot be shared without language; they present a combination of my future and what has already passed. This is the present, the world, which is given to us by language.

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<sup>18</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Meaning and Sense”, (1972), in: Levinas, Emmanuel, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 93.

As previously stressed, whilst Gadamer's hermeneutics entails a practical understanding of itself through language within the whole of the human life-world, for Levinas the relation to other as such stands beyond, detached from any and every context. This relation with the other is what entails Levinas' treatment of the good: "The exceptional, extra-ordinary transcendent character of the good is due to just this break with being and history. To reduce the good to being, to its calculations and its history, is to nullify goodness."<sup>19</sup> The reason Gadamer maintains to the contrary that breaking with tradition is unintelligible is that, for Gadamer, my horizon is a fact of human finitude. Thus my encounter with the other will always be within the horizon I happen to find myself. To a great extent these differences come down to a difference in the views of Levinas and Gadamer regarding what history is. For Gadamer, history is incompatible with totality—it cannot be orders, due to the limit of reason. The so called *fusion of horizons* is not a unification of perspectives but rather a *dialogue* which presupposes the ethical existence—which is one's horizon—as defined by the proximity of others. Everyone has their own perspective of the world because we understand language, which is the world. According to Gadamer's position, through our sociality we can reach something more—*this* is the fusion of horizons. Through dialogue, we find a common horizon in order to develop our culture. Therefore, any language in which we live is infinite in that the infinite dialogue is opened by the truth of our own finitude.<sup>20</sup>

For Levinas, whilst there is nothing outside of time and history, there is more to time and history than the epochal history of being. Ethical actions are for a world to come; they extend beyond our epoch. Indeed, we saw how he pronounces acts concerned only with the immediate as vulgar and base, whilst those concerned with beyond are noble. Levinas describes ethical acts as being-for-beyond-my-death, in contrast to Heidegger's being-toward-death, which he criticises as being too concerned with the anxiety of confronting one's own death (which will always be premature.)<sup>21</sup> The move towards ethics as the first philosophy

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Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Hermeneutical Problem," (1976), in: Kearney and Rainwater, eds., *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, 120.

<sup>21</sup> Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," (1989), in: Kearney and Rainwater,

prioritises one's responsibility for the death of the other—who transcends my temporal existence. It is a move beyond the ontology of Dasein. Levinas writes that “to renounce being the contemporary of the triumph of one's work is to envisage this triumph in a *time without me*... a time beyond the horizon on my time.”<sup>22</sup> It is in precisely this way that the movement of the one-for-the-other is to be seen as a movement towards transcendence, towards the time of the other; it is eternity. The meeting with the other is the first proof that something beyond the world exists. In her 2010 publication, Dimitrova describes how in meeting the other “I become aware of infinity and in this way I am made to realise my own finitude.”<sup>23</sup>

Although Gadamer's conception of the fusion of horizons, in which finitude is the limit, is not entirely incompatible with Levinas' idea of transcendence, we arrive at different consequences with regards to our sociality. For Gadamer there is a phenomenological reduction of the alterity of the other in order to achieve an anonymous objectivity. According to Levinas, however, transcendence means a parting from the contingent world—my encounter with the other is not a movement of recognition within my world, but rather a movement towards the other as *non-identical*. The other is no mere reflection of my own self-consciousness.<sup>24</sup> The other comes to me from beyond the borders of my world, beyond my horizons—his transcendence is almost God-like. In this way, sensibility is taken not as a relation of knowing as seen in Husserl, but of proximity, since the other is outside every reference. Gadamer, then, remains within the realms of ontology. Echoing Heidegger, we respond to the call of Being. For Levinas, however, the call to which we respond is that of the other; it is *human*. Knowledge, then, is not ontological but ethical.

This being said, the other, according to Levinas, is present in and brought to light by a cultural whole (as a text is by its context). In this way, it is possible to describe the understanding of the other as a kind of

eds., *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, 129.

<sup>22</sup> Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” 92.

<sup>23</sup> Maria Dimitrova, “Do We Have to Let Ourselves Be Doomed to Morality?,” in Dimitrova, ed., *In Levinas' Trace*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” 132.

hermeneutics. Where this hermeneutics differs with Gadamer's is that, for Levinas, there is a relation to the other as such which stands beyond the hermeneutical life world. He writes that "concentration on the hermeneutical structure of language and on the cultural effort of the incarnate being that expresses itself, forgets a third dimension...the dimension toward the other, the interlocutor—he to whom expression expresses."<sup>25</sup> Levinas defines the other as sense primordially—by this he means prior to, or on the hither side of any epoch of meaning. "The other comes to us not only out of the context, but also without mediation; he signifies by himself."<sup>26</sup> Perhaps it could be interpreted as a hermeneutics which includes the transcendence of tradition. For Gadamer, however, the claim of the other is not only ethical but also a truth claim, where my responsibility takes the form of understanding rather than ethics. He writes that "Hermeneutical conversation, like real conversation, finds a common language, and that finding a common language is not, any more than in real conversation, preparing a tool for the purpose of reaching understanding but, rather coincides with the very act of understanding and reaching agreement."<sup>27</sup>

Importantly, Gadamer and Levinas both agree with Heidegger with regards to his replacement of the autonomous ego by an openness, receptiveness and responsiveness to the world. According to Gadamer, understanding is a condition of belonging to the world, a mode of being, which is expanded through the fusion of what is other with what is at hand. Experience is first multiplied and then passed on. Whilst I cannot live your life, and you cannot live mine, we can speak about commonalities because we can transmit the *sense*, or meaning (the essence) of our experiences. Thanks to this transmission as such, we can enrich our culture. This being said, language cannot be defined according to its functionality—it is not merely an instrument or tool (in fact, we see how the words themselves prescribe the way in which we can put them to use).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," 95.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>27</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), 388.

<sup>28</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of Hegel's Logic*, (1971), Online version: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/gadamer.htm> (accessed on 05/12/2015)

Gadamer agrees with Heidegger when he says that language is the whole of our life; the house of being: “language completely surrounds us like the voice of home which prior to our thought of it breathes a familiarity from time out of mind.”<sup>29</sup> We can live together, and because of our communication we can share meanings. With an emphasis on forgiveness, Gadamer writes that “only through reconciliation can the otherness—the insuperable otherness that divides man from man—be overcome, nay, raised up into the wondrous reality of the living and thinking in community and solidarity.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, all understanding is self-understanding. It is this openness to the other which is necessary for the ethical encounter. The process by which the truth of a poem is exposed is in this way similar to the unconcealing involved in the ethical relation with the other. The subject is open to the truth of the other just as the interpreter is open to the interpretation of the poem.

Whilst Levinas agrees both that language belongs to the realm of ethics and that the ethical subject is characterised by an openness, Gadamer’s position that the claim of the other is also a truth claim is in stark contrast to Levinas’ call for the abandonment of Western philosophy’s insistence on the primacy of knowledge, understanding and truth. It is important to stress once again that for Levinas, rather than taking the other into my world of understanding, the ethical relation is a movement towards the other as *other*; towards the *non-identical*. For transcendence is the departure from the world of the known. Gadamer, on the other hand, maintains that to contrast *I* with *Thou* already assumes a preceding common understanding, from the very moment we address the other as “thou.” Neither can be understood in isolation. (Indeed, we know very well his accordance with Plato (and Hegel) that there are no single ideas, and it is the purpose of dialectic to dispel the untruth of their separateness.)<sup>31</sup> He writes that “We all know that to say

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Culture and the World,” (1980), in: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays*, trans. By Chris Dawson (Yale University, New Haven: 1998), 15.

<sup>31</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of Hegel’s Logic*, (1971), Online version: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/gadamer.htm> (accessed on 05/12/2015)

‘thou’ to someone presupposes a deep common accord. Something enduring is already present when this word is spoken.”<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, it seems that the problem of this hermeneutical circle, whereby the whole and the parts determine each other, is that separation from the circle is not possible. In a totality created in which the other cannot be known as completely other—we try to grasp the other and pull him into our world. It does not allow the other to speak for himself. The ethical is thus beyond the ontological realm of the said.

The contrast, then, is most significant between Gadamer’s stress on reconciliation and Levinas’ insistence on the movement towards the other as other. As previously highlighted, whilst Gadamer’s hermeneutics is dialogical, Levinas’ ethics depicts communication as heteronomy. Nonetheless, both consider the approach of the other to be a disruptive event, which demands reinterpretation according to hermeneutics, and fulfilment of the ethical call according to ethics. Indeed, both require the subject to open to the demands of the other. Nonetheless, the hermeneutical subject is engaged in a mutual conversation, in which “one partner in the hermeneutical conversation speaks only through the other”<sup>33</sup>; *both* subjects are necessarily altered in the raising up of something new. There is a co-determination of text and reader in which one’s hermeneutical reading of the text, whereby through the imagination of the hermeneutical consciousness the productive questions are exposed, necessarily contributes to its effective history. (Whilst it is clear that language has a telos, for Gadamer, unlike Hegel, there can be no absolute knowledge, nor end of history.) The ethical subject’s movement towards the other as non-identical, on the other hand, sees that whilst my subjectivity as subject is disturbed in my having to respond, the other remains unaltered. Rogozinski writes that “the I’s agonizing opening up to the other, its being skinned alive by him, thus would be answered by this enigmatic closure of the other, who would resist, close himself up to the suffering, to the distress of the I, while at the same time penetrating the I and eroding it into the depths of its flesh.”<sup>34</sup> Such is the potential

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<sup>32</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Hermeneutical Problem,” (1976), in: Kearney and Rainwater, eds., *The Continental Philosophy Reader*, 114.

<sup>33</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 387.

<sup>34</sup> Jacob Rogozinski, *From the Caress to the Wound: Levinas’s Outrageous-*

violence of the ethical.

To a great extent, Levinas turns the direction of the entire history of philosophy upside down. From Ancient Greece to Hegel and throughout modern discourse, the focus is on enriching oneself through the objectification of the other. For Gadamer too, it is *my* horizons which are opened through conversation. According to Levinas, to the contrary, the elevation of the other prevents me from thinking about my own interests. The placing of the other in the first place presents a shift of philosophical paradigms, for our whole sense of life is changed. This should not be confused with a kind of radical altruism, for it does not start from my own ego. The direction is not from me to the other, but rather first I must listen to the other's command, and then answer him. The passivity of the ethical consciousness precedes the formulation of metaphysical ideas about the subject—what is questioned is the justification of the position within being that grasped the here and now. Levinas writes that language is born in responsibility—for in order to say I in the first person, one must respond to one's right to be. This response is to be not only open to question but also to questioning.<sup>35</sup> Fear for the other is for all the violence my existing may cause—it is not fear of my own death, but reaches beyond my self-consciousness. It is fear of occupying someone else's place with the *Da* of my *Dasein*.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to stress that Gadamer's hermeneutics is intentional; it is directed towards language, which is necessarily *in* the world. The project ultimately *aims* (at broadening horizons). It is teleological in this way (albeit not in the direction of moving *towards* the absolute as we see in Hegel.) Temporal distance alienates us from what's been said, and in order to move *away from* alienation, we must strive to go beyond our necessary underlying prejudices. Such, however, cannot be entirely bracketed through phenomenological reduction as proposed by Husserl. Rather, Gadamer agrees with Heidegger that it is our prejudices that constitute our being. They are the "biases of our openness to the world...they are conditions whereby we experience something—

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ness." in Dimitrova, ed., *In Levinas' Trace*, 79.

<sup>35</sup> Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," 130.

*Ibid.*, 131.

whereby what we encounter says something to us.”<sup>37</sup> He describes our readiness to hear the new as determined by our prejudices. Thus, with the concentration being on the interpretation of historical text—that which we have on-hand—the other reveals itself as immanent.

The directedness of the Levinasian ethical relation—which is precisely the responsibility for the other—cannot be reduced to intentionality.<sup>38</sup> Here Levinas disagrees with Husserl. The face of the other is not just an object in our world; the revelation of the face is not a phenomena that can be described. He distinguishes the non-intentional consciousness from philosophical reflection. Philosophical reflection, according to Levinas, takes the transcendental ego as its object and *aims* at grasping the non-intentional lived experience. The Enlightenment is thus taken to be the project of bringing to light dull representations; of reducing intentional consciousness to clear data.<sup>39</sup> He describes the non-intentional pre-reflective ethical consciousness, on the contrary, as homeless: “One comes not into the world but into question.”<sup>40</sup> It is in directing his attention to the *said* that Gadamer attaches language to intentionality. The *saying*, however, is a *beyond of experience*.<sup>41</sup> The ethical subject is opened to the other prior to any utterance. The said is described as insincere and contaminated, it forms a curtain between me and the other.<sup>42</sup>

Despite these significant differences, certain elements of the moment of reconciliation which is so fundamental to Gadamer’s hermeneutics, (a moment in many ways similar to the concept of reconciliation in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*), are, to some extent, also at play in Levinasian ethics. Just as the examination of historical texts leads me beyond my own horizons, so too the ethical command both precedes my facticity revealing a time which was not mine—for the said is no contemporary for the saying—whilst projecting to an unrealised future in which I shall not dwell. However, this reconciliation is not in the form of forgiveness,

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, “The Hermeneutical Problem,” 115.

<sup>38</sup> Levinas, “Entre Nous,” 71.

<sup>39</sup> Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” 127

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 129

<sup>41</sup> Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 71.

<sup>42</sup> David West, *Continental Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 185.

as Gadamer holds, but rather is “to aim at time beyond the horizon of my time, in an eschatology without hope for oneself, or in liberation from my time.”<sup>43</sup> It seems that in the moment of forgiveness Gadamer seeks to understand—to grasp—what has been said in order to project towards to future—in this way, transcendence is made immanence. Levinas, however, describes the other as “both graspable and escaping every hold.”<sup>44</sup> As we have seen, the alterity of the other is not something I can understand without reducing the other to the third, which is inside the world. The ethical relation, revealed by the face in a present which is now past, transcends all tradition and experience. “Culture is neither a going beyond nor a neutralisation of transcendence; it is, in ethical responsibility and obligation toward the other, a relation to transcendence qua transcendence. It can be called love. It is commanded by the face of the other man, which is not a datum of experience and does not come from the world.”<sup>45</sup> It is in precisely this way that Levinas’ metaphysical ethical, as the first philosophy, is not ontological. The other is graspable only because the other is the future.

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<sup>43</sup> Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” 92.

<sup>44</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 223.

<sup>45</sup> Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 161.