In response to Jeffrey Andrew Barash: Memory and the Immemorial in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

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Dear Jeffrey,

The question you are raising - "Why does Levinas so much insist on the radical division between the times of memory and the immemorial time?" - is really a central one. Your article is a good reason and, in a certain way, a challenge which gives me an opportunity to sort out the solution I myself have been looking for.

The dichotomy between the assembled into the whole of Being - either by individual or collective memory, on one hand, and the immemorial, on the other, which is not just what is forgotten, but is what has never been memorized, what is not memorized, and what could not be memorized, is correlative to all principle dichotomies that Levinas introduces. A huge gap separates:

1)		2)
Immanence	-	Transcendence
Essence	-	Beyond essence
Being	-	Otherwise than being
I	-	Other
Archē	-	An-archical
Ontology	-	Ethics
Cognition	-	Good
etc.[1]		

In the Levinasian construction, the terms in column 2 have acquired a double status. When inside the Totality they are opposed to their logical/dialectical oppositions (in column 1), they receive a meaning

[1] This list of dichotomies is, of course, incomprehensive.

through their place in the System of worldly interests. However, besides these meanings through the reference to the illuminating totality, they take on meanings in a dialogue. Then, all these contents are "*animated with metaphors, receiving an overloading through which they are born beyond the given*."[2]

When beyond is involved in a metaphor, it leads to other contents which are simply absent from the limited field of the Ego-centered discourse totalizing from the perspective of the Self. The authentic dialogue is maintained not as a conversation of the soul with itself,[3] that is, a monologue, but with that, which signifies of itself - the Other. The diversity of meanings that were united thanks to the *conatus essendi* of (my) being, are situated and orientated in another direction - toward the Other.

Levinas asks: "*Does not sense as orientation indicate a leap, an outside-of-oneself toward the other than oneself*?"[4] Radicalism of dichotomy between memory and the immemorial is dictated by one's desire or perhaps effort to leap beyond himself. In this leap, the sense of the entire being is at stake. What does it mean to leap beyond ourselves? In brief, this means expiring my time for the time of the Other. However, how is this possible, since the time of the Other is always its own and by this way: the immemorial for me?

The outside-of-oneself is the exteriority of the beyond. Its wonder is due to the elsewhere from which the Other comes and into which withdraws. The withdrawal does not coincide with the going toward the elsewhere as to a term but to the absolutely absence - the immemorial. The beyond is not "*another world behind the world*"; it is not "*a simple background from which a face solicits us*"; "*the beyond from which a face comes signifies as a trace*."[5]

In comparison with Plato, Levinas understands dialogue in a different

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2 Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense" in *Levinas: Collected Philosophical Papers,* translated by Alphonso Linges, (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), p. 75.

3 For example, the conversation between memory and imagination, the Ego and the Self, the transcendental subject and the empirical one, etc.

4 Ibid., p. 90.

5 Ibid., p. 103.

way. In Athens, the dialogue is a conversation among equal partners, free citizens of the police, who dispute their arguments on a given topic and the truth of reason is at stake in their competition. For Levinas, a conversation of Plato's type is only seemingly a dialogue because Socrates only "accouches" the truth. Socrates hears in his collocutor only what it seems he has known for ever and what is contained in the question raised by him. What reaches the interrogator from the outside, actually, comes from inside and is rather reminiscent. The otherness of the other cannot be of any importance, cannot be heard and accepted there, where "know thyself!" is the prime order and any cognition is the knowing reason in me (Socrates' *daimon*). For Plato, the reasonable is *eidos*, i.e. idea, which is common, sharable, and rediscovered or imposed (due to its truth) on the collocutors. Plato's dialogue is not a conversation with the Other, who is part of the crowd, but is a conversation about the eternal ideas and reaches as far as God (Good) and finally means that this is a conversation of the soul with itself. According to Levinas, my relation with Good (God) is never a direct one, but always passes through my relation with the Other; however, this path is not dialectical as it cannot assimilate otherness and leave it behind for the sake of the teleology of the One. In Levinas' philosophy, a person cannot speak to the Supreme One otherwise than speaking to the lowest one, that is, the face of the other human being naked in front of death. God (Good) is not the mediator between the Other and myself; rather, the face of the Other is the mediator on my way to God. Face marks the border of my exit to God. Regarding the border, I am always on this side; I am always in this world. Face as a frontier features a double status: it is both local, like me, and a stranger coming from the outside. Face is a twofold entity: on the one hand, it is this form, this nose, forehead, lips, etc., but on the other hand, it is "*invisible in the visible*."[6] On the road to God, the Self follows the trace read in the face of the other man. Like Kant, Levinas leaves God aside and does not allow reference to him in discussing and settling human issues.

The pioneer in considering human history and culture as dialogical is probably not Plato but Martin Buber. The tradition of monological philosophy assumes the I-It link, that is, a subject-object relationship, as a

[6] The shortest definition of face given by Maurice Blanchot.

comprehensive model, while in the dialogical philosophy the I-You relationship is privileged. Classical German philosophy, the most developed form of monological philosophy, assumes that any thinking and movement of spirit moves around the Subject, being reflection and self-reflection. In Buber, however, the I-You relationship, which is the event of meeting, is incommensurable with the knowledge in the form of I-It word. The I-It word is the experience, i.e. the world of the Self - it is inside the Self because *"the world has no part in the experience. It permits itself to be experienced, but has no concern in the matter. For it does nothing to the experience, and the experience does nothing to it.*"[7] In Buber's philosophy I-Thou relationship both precedes and exceeds subject-object sphere. Levinas expresses this difference between I-You and I-It words stressing that "*man is the only being which I cannot meet without expressing the meeting itself. A meeting differs from cognition exactly in this*."[8]

While monological philosophy deals with cognition and activity, dialogical philosophy pays attention to communication and its various forms. While earlier the very process of communication was considered as a kind of cognition and practice, now the very practice, cognition (and even pure thinking) are themselves considered to be a form of communication. Earlier, speaking was interpreted as one of the functions of the Self-subject; today, we witness how speaking leads on different roads directing us "outside." When thinking about thinking, that is, "I think", featuring evidence and certainty, is substituted with "I speak", the Self's attention is not concentrated anymore only on the object because the Self is not alone on the stage anymore, but yet another character of the drama appears - the Other. For a dialogue at least two persons are needed: the one who issues signs and the one who should receive them; an addressor of the word, on the one hand, and an addressee, on the other. In terms of its fundamentality, an activity (cognitive or practical) is incomparable with communication. Communication is primary in relation to the purposefulness and

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7 Martin Buber, *I and Thou.* Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, Edinburg : T.& T. Clark, p. 5.

8 Emmanuel Levinas, "L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale? " *Entre nous. Essais sur le pensee-à-l'autre* (Paris: Editions Grasset), p. 19.

instrumentality of actions and interactions. In a conversation motives, meanings, and the directions of behavior are determined. *"I speak"* is implied in each *"I make"* and even in *"I think"* and *"I am"*. Before one objectifies and transcends himself in his deeds, one learns about the transcendence, including the transcendence of the world of objects, thanks to the meeting with the otherness of the other, which is the source of any understanding.

Levinas differs from Buber because he believes that there is an original inequality between I and You and, quite likely, that the phrase "I and You" is misleading. Levinas proposes a more adequate phrase, "the Other and me", where difference and asymmetry are stressed: the Other, being a face, is the addressor of the appeal which I hears as the chosen one to respond to. We are not speaking about narrative forms of speech, including a historical narrative, where the Self occupies the position of storyteller and determines where the story begins and ends, what are facts, causes, and their interpretation as well as how events follow each other; we are speaking about a prescription where the Self plays the role of addressee. Responding to the appeal, the Self is not in the nominative but the accusative case. The question is not about the end of synchrony with its dialectically implied interdependent terms, but additionally a surplus of diachrony. Levinas understands diachronic temporalization as a contest against experience being a source of supreme meaning - that is, dethroning the Same and depriving it of its priority. It is about making to hesitate this sovereign Self, who identify himself with the universality of Reason. This Self can doubt anything but not itself and its right to exist. This imperialistic Self tries to assimilate the Other into its own world (even if the world is not understood as always the same cosmos but as moving history). However, this attempt to close the Other within the totality of the world always fails - the Other escapes and leaves behind himself only a trace. The Other goes where no thought can accompany him, he abandons the world's horizons.

In Levinas' philosophy the Other has the status of the Absolute, of an agency according to which all other meanings are organized. However, unlike the traditional interpretations where the Absolute is eternity (eternal duration, eternal being, etc.), for Levinas the Other is an Absolute due to its mortality, vulnerability, uniqueness, perishability and temporality of

existence. The appeal of the Other as a "being toward death" is a supreme command. According to it, the contents of memory, knowledge, experience, and history are organized once and again. This is a Commandment above all commandments, a Covenant above all covenants, a Prescription above all prescriptions, an Order above all orders. It is not a principle, archê, but anarchy. Precisely with this anarchy the Self has to comply and not by certain moral norms. Not because, as Sartre would probably say, in the concreteness, uniqueness, irreversibility of any human situation, "there is no sign either here on the earth, or there in the skies" to suggest my response, but because the face of the Other is an expression of an unavoidable and endless heteronomy. Here the Self is attached to the responsibility for what happens in the world in the very moment when it happens. The Self cannot avoid responsibility - it comes upon him. He takes it not because expects reciprocity or reversal of relations, but because he cannot hide or flee, even the refusal to respond is a kind of response. Communication implies not assembling of in-different, although similar to each other, elements in a certain totality, but non-in-difference of the one to the other exactly because in the event of the meeting they are not equal and tantamount partners. Levinas says that they are not even contemporaries. The said lags behind the saying.

This change in philosophy (a shift in priority from activity to communication) can be summarized in Levinas' words: "We" is not a plural of "I". The Other is not a second I; we both are not particular cases of universal Reason - in communication we are not transcendental subjects each reduced to "I think, that accompanies all my representations." The Self is "an individualized society" who here and now is responding to the presence of the Other, being in a position to use the whole resource of experience. In Modernity, the thought that the Other is the privileged one is not allowed because automatically, almost instinctively, it is identified with the postulate of domination and submission. While according to Levinas the freedom of the Other is a superior position to which my existence serves even in cases when I do not want and sometimes I even do not realize this. In the impossibility to escape from responsibility we see an interference of Good, and here the phrase "Good is in spite of us" becomes meaningful. This kind of relation is care for the Other and not enslavement by the Other;

it is not my choice whether to respond to the Other; rather, I am the chosen one and the hostage because of the Other's freedom.

In order to be in accordance with Levinasian philosophy, Kant's definition of freedom has to be rethought to restore the rights of heteronomy. My behavior and relationship to things in the world achieves its meaning, that is, its direction, not according to the law which the Self assigns to itself but in the response to the Other in complying with its presence/absence. But the Self has nothing else to rely upon and use as a resource, except what is gathered in the totality of existence and what coincides with the memorable. On this account, there is no discord between my position and yours, Jeffrey. The ethical cannot be derived from a historical source, but we need to retain an intermediate space between the Other and me. This intermediate space is abided by the Third, by all third persons - he, she, they.

In Levinas, the question is not about responsibility, which thanks to reflection and verdicts, including the verdict of history, is determined after the deeds are done, but, rather, about my sensibility as a moral subject and about giving a preliminary consideration to what my actions would mean for the others. While Kant poses Self as the beginning, in Levinas, the beginning is posed in the Other. In Levinas' philosophy, human being is not defined anymore as a "rational animal," unlike in ancient Greece and in German Idealism, but as a "being that has heard the Word," that is man in the Biblical culture. However, universalism (e.g., as we see it in Greek and Christian philosophy) as the basic principle is refuted because, according to Levinas, there is no original equality between the Other and me; I always have one more responsibility than the Other - I am always responsible for him while his responsibility to me is his private business, as if I have made one more step towards him than he has toward me; as if man can walk passing over himself. Kant's imperative, laying the foundations of Modernity, launches the necessity of universalizing the maxim that I myself follow. According to Kant, this is possible when it is an expression of rationality of the human nature as such. From here follows that Self coincided with its will (he is the lawgiver and the executor) and, at the same time, he is judging this will. Besides, when it is universalized, the maxim of my own behavior claims to spread over others as being valid in the same

degree for them. However, such a claim for imposing universal moral legislation on behalf of the Self on others could be associated with danger: ignoring the otherness of the other and exercising violence over him. Pascal pointed out that the concern for the common more likely implies hate to the other and not love and respect for him. I love the Other because he is similar to me. If I love the Other because he is similar to me, I love not the otherness of the Other, but myself in the face of my own likeness. If the Other is reduced to a meaning ascribed by me according to a given categorization by its belonging to genera and classes, then, he is defined in the same way as we territorially define objects through their place in the whole. However, while the pure thing is, in Heidegger's words, "non-orientation-toward-nothingness," the Other is always a "being-toward-death." The true intrigue between the Other and myself is not place but time.

The appeal that can be read in the face of the Other, who is a mortal, finite, and vulnerable, being, authorizes me, in my capacity of rational being, to act and respond. The Other invests reason and freedom in me. This means that the Self takes autonomously the decision how to act, but his autonomy will be a reply of heteronomy springing from the otherness of the Other. Freedom is not a foolish spontaneity, caprice, arbitrariness, but is protection of the freedom of the Other and of his right to be Self; that is, of his right to be himself. In the position of responding, the Self is not going to take a decision as an autocrat or tyrant, but interrogate his own domination and justice. The face puts under question the righteousness of the world with which we naively identify ourselves in our natural attitude, taking it as Alfred Schutz says for the field and object of my actions. Taking the Other for a part of the given, obvious, doubtless, and self-understandable world as well as typifying it, I objectify and degrade him to the status of an object and allow instrumentalization, exploitation, and domination over him. If man is posed in a social category which he cannot accept as relevant for defining his private situation, he will feel that he is not being treated as a human being anymore with his intrinsic freedom. He will be degraded to an interchangeable exemplar of a typified class. He turns out to be alienated from himself - just a representative of his typified features and characteristics.

In order for the Other not to be faceless/depersonalized, I have to

respond to his appeal not only in words but in deeds too. Only the divine word is an instant creation while human beings need time in order to transform words into deeds. Time, however, does not flow as a river flooding, as Hegel believed, but always, as Heidegger stressed about the particular Self, time is wanting. Time streams not in spite of human resistance but as human resistance against nothingness and death. However, when we are speaking about the death, the immediate question is about the death of others because nobody could be a spectator or witness of his own death; for my own death I can judge only indirectly relating to others. Exactly because the Other is a being-toward-death he touches me not in indicative but in the imperative: "*In the direct vulnerability of the face, in the bottom of this weakness, a voice can be heard, which orders a commandment directed to me not to stay indifferent to that death*." A commandment is truly understood when it is fulfilled. By the activity of the Self the word is carried out, the meaning of things are embodied, time gets space dimensions, upheaval comes, the links of the historical world are tied, untied, and re-tied over and again.

It might be a good idea to take a look at Hegel about activity and history as he is hailed as being the greatest connoisseur in this field: "*Activity presupposes a material already present on which it acts, and which it does not merely augment by the addition of new matter, but completely fashions and transforms. Thus that which each generation has produced ...is a heirloom to which all the past generations have added their savings ...To receive this inheritance is to enter upon its use. It constitutes the soul of each successive generation, the intellectual substance of the time; its principles, prejudices, and possessions; and this legacy is degraded to a material which becomes metamorphosed by Mind. In this manner that which is received is changed, and the material worked upon is both enriched and preserved at the same time. This is the function of our own and every age: to grasp the knowledge which is already existing, to make it our own, and so doing to develop it still further and to raise it to a higher level. In this appropriating it to ourselves we make it into something different from what it was before.*"[9] In Hegel's philosophy of history the

[9] G. W. F. Hegel. *Lectures on History of Philosophy,* "Introduction", translated by E.

instrumantalization is my main attitude toward the historical Other. Levinas sarcastically notes that according to Hegel's pattern everyone is represented by the heritage he has left even before he dies.

But the load of the heritage, which ceaselessly increases, threatens to overwhelm us with no chance to proceed further on. In Nietzsche's *On the Use and Harm of History* attention is paid to this danger. In Nietzsche's opinion any history, no matter if it is monumental, antiquarian, or critical, can be used against life in such a way as to prevent the new to germinate: the dead ones bury the living ones.

Actually, Levinas is lead by the similar motive as Nietzsche: not to allow the Same, the already assimilated, that is, the experience, the memorized, to suffocate what is Other, to destruct alterity, transforming it into mine-ness, ascribing some sense to it in my system of coordinates, prejudices, intentions, goals, benefits, etc. When the Other is approached with the luggage (which is our stock of knowledge and all our possibilities) without being in a position (as Gadamer's hermeneutics suggests) to put it in front of us, the otherness would be neglected and the Other mortified. In order to obtain anything qua inheritance, the first condition is not to suffocate the heir in the constricted arm of history, personal or collective.

Entities exist in the human world according to their meanings. Meanings, however, emerge in the signification which is needed because of the Other. The Other by herself/himself is the first meaning, the supreme relevance and all other meanings are necessary in order to be transferred to it. Even when, as in a written text, the writer is the first reader, the discourse would be senseless without the roles of the addressee and the addressor. In a monologue, these two roles exist and are different, but they are played by the same actor. The monologue is derived from dialogue and not vice versa. Furthermore, a monologue, in fact, is an internalized dialogue. The dialogical meanings are the primordial ones and command the assembling of my experience. The contents of what has been experienced are deposited as something said-after-being-said. These deposited meanings start arising when the Self hears the call of the face of the Other even before he has understood the call. The abstractness of the face disturbs immanence

S. Haldane, (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 3.

without settling into the horizons of the world. Unlike the things, which by themselves are self-contained and move without orientation toward nothingness, causing effects, the face leaves a trace behind, withdrawing from the world and heading to what is beyond. The trace is not an intentionally produced sign, which borrows its meaning from the world's order; the trace calls for opening, reconstruction, and reconstitution of meanings - in turning upside down the significance of causes and effects, of happenings and events. These operations of turning upside down, however, are the "trade mark" of memory and history. The trouble is that in memory and history, the Other is turned into a Third: she, he, it, they.

In practice, I have hospitably met the face of the Other if I have allowed a past which is not mine to put under question the righteousness of my world with its firm, self-apparent meanings. If I assume the Other only as my past, then I am modeling it according to the interests of my day, modernizing it and identifying myself with it. In my ignorance and forgetfulness, I have forgotten about the others and presume that my Self as the beginning of its actions, is the center of any past, present, and future. My imperialistic Self strives to eternalize itself, to persist "for ever and ever," to turn its world into an empire and as autocratic Lord to dominate over this past, in which the others abide. However, awareness of my transience that I can see in the eyes of the Other, dispelling the delusion that I am an infinite and imperishable being or the eternal origin as well as the foresight that I am a created being, looking for my origin outside me, premonition of the end, the acute experience of limits, being situated here and now unlike there and then, etc., does not allow me to identify retention with the past, protention with the future, and the moment now with the present, and even less with eternity. There is a future which does not belong to me and when other people will be living without me; there is past which is not my past and belongs to people who have lived once; there are passed epochs which cannot be understood in their meaning if interpreted as steps leading on the ladder of history upwards as far as the last step on which I have stepped or which are "we ourselves," our values, our ideals. What surrounds my finite world of a created and mortal being, no matter how and in what degree I am trying to extend its horizons, is the infinity of the beyond.

That which has never been, cannot be, and will not be memorized is

the very withdrawal of the other beyond, his transcendence transcending all meanings and ideals, spaces, and boundaries. No matter what images I keep, what memories I recollect of it, the attempts for resurrection are always palliative and I cannot save him from his death as such. But walking in the trace, reading it, and relying on it as if overhearing an appeal from the Beyond, I am led and guided and this changes meanings of things in the world. Does not the life of memory and history consist in this change of meanings? Are not they the only reservoir where meanings of things and happenings are preserved, interpreted, and turned upside down? But as a resource at my disposal, this reservoir is incommensurable with the size of the Beyond where the others have disappeared from my view. My view can accompany them only as far as the horizon of the world, but not beyond the resources of the world.

In view of limits of the world's resources, I am not in a position to invite "everyone" for dinner even for a single day in order that they all have sufficient food. "Everyone" is an impersonal collective noun which does not imply anyone in person. Universal justice is actually injustice. There is no chance for conversation when to the otherness of the others is refused admittance, if their difference is denied, and when a complete tolerance in the sense of indifference is practiced towards them. If we are all equal and in a state of in-difference to each other, what would be the reason to talk? Could we be together at all?

The Other is not free in the same way I am free. As Levinas emphasizes, his freedom is superiority. In front of him and for him I respond with responsibility from which it is impossible to escape. In my care for his otherness, the more I fulfill my duty the more I get in dept; the more responsible I am, the guiltier I feel; the more I give, the more I am surprised: look, how rich I have been and how much more I can offer on the table! The depth of my world coincides with the height on which the Other has been elevated.

For Levinas, this is the reason why passivity of the Self is more passive than any passivity that is opposed to activity; good is better than that good which I commit in response to evil; anarchy is a more original order than any other order, opposed to disorder; the Other does not slip away into another world behind this world but in what is beyond, which is no longer

being but otherwise-than-being; the Transcendence of the Other is more transcendent than the transcendence of the world of objects and is never transformed into immanency; the immemorial is not what hasn't been memorized or forgotten, but what has never been, neither is, nor could be in memory or history. There are meanings which are not determined by the logic of things inside the totality, but by their significance in time - in eschatological time, which does not coincide anew with constructed and reconstructed times of memory and history. It is the immemorial time, or maybe, a *liberation from my time*.[10]

[10] Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense" in *Levinas: Collected Philosophical Papers,* translated by Alphonso Linges, (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), p. 92.