

Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, and Adriana Cavarero: from Acoustics to Vocal Expression

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Abstract: In recent years, we have witnessed a rewriting of the canon of accepted traditions from the perspective of absent voices. I consider the act of rewriting as itself part of the acoustic genealogy of thought. In it we can recognize not only an attempt to introduce an alternative historiography, but a theoretical mobilization to revise the power structures in existing narratives. The rewriting of canons cannot and should not be identified solely with the analysis of ideologies. Yet is that not exactly what we understand today as the task of criticism? That is, exposing the relations in representative functions, and to this extent an analysis of ideologies. Thinking is not merely unmasking ideologies, and we should not limit the voice to exposing ideologies. The gestures of rewriting the dominant canon were preceded by a general interest in the voice in both the performing arts and philosophy¹. The thematic of the voice appeared to be an invitation to re-engage a specific practice of thinking, one characterized by the return of the political after decades of general depoliticization and a crisis of political representation in democracy. The following pages will focus on the emergence of the acoustic dimension of thinking within the clashes of twentieth-century Western metaphysics. Often the pursuit of an intensely critical approach leads to an encounter between well-defined philosophical boundaries and disciplinary challenges, in which the elements of acoustics become central.

Keywords: general depoliticization, elements of acoustics, narratives, alternative historiography, rewriting of the canon

¹ See Sonia Boyce *OBE RA*, Great Britain, Golden Lion for Best National Participation, 2022, La Biennale di Venezia, Milk of Dreams. See also Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

1. Thinking and Listening: Martin Heidegger's fundamental ontology

Heidegger's philosophy is characterized by poetic etymologies, the invention of a philosophical use of language that includes the very term *Da-sein* (being-there), which relocates semantically the root of the verb "to be" to indicate the temporal horizon for the intelligibility of Being-in-general. In these philosophical inventions we can discern the first feature of acousticity as primarily the poetic act of a philosophical lexicon, one that resounds in multiple acts of understanding. It is not simply in pronouncing those new concepts that meaning is formed; rather, thinking itself is invited to dwell in the acoustic. In his forceful distinction between Being and 'beings' Heidegger prevents ontology from being reduced to the categorization of existents. He states that the starting point of an inquiry into Being requires the establishment of a fundamental ontology and that the entity to take on the task of this inquiry is Dasein, "the being for whom Being is an issue." This is not circular reasoning but rather a "relatedness backward and forward" in which "what we are asking about Being bears to the inquiry itself as a mode of Being of an entity." I am 'thrown' into the world, and carry the burden of a certain facticity. I find myself already disposed as moods (*Stimmungen*) of anxiety, for example, as the authentic awakening of my condition as a being-towards-death.² Moods and mental states are not external or internal, objective or merely subjective. The first characteristic of these moods is the fact that we are thrown into circumstances which are beyond our control, from birth to death. We submit to pre-given conditions and, according to Heidegger, the very structure of human existence is determined by our thrownness into the world. The second characteristic is that "a mood assails us." A mood does not come from inside me but "arises out of being-in-the-world as a whole." We need to distinguish between a state of mind (disposedness) and the reflective apprehending of something 'within,' and think of states of mind in their characteristic of *disclosure*. A mood has a certain consistent 'tone' and discloses our being-in-the-world as a whole unifying the otherwise bewildering number of present features; it is this *submission to the world which allows*

² See Richard Kearney and Mara Rainwater, eds., *The Continental Philosophy Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

*things to matter to us.*³ The fear, joy, and so forth in the situation into which we are thrown dictates the possibilities available to us and orients our action. A mood (in German, *Stimmung* originally meant *vibration* – the same term appears in Kierkegaard’s masterpiece *Fear and Trembling*) is an ‘attunement,’ a way of being tuned to things in the world and tuned by situations in the world. Without this we do not have the basis for action. In his very concept of a fundamental ontology Heidegger decides to use an acoustic term. It is thus in the very basis of his existential analytic that we already have evidence of that transition to the acoustic that will become apparent in the second phase of his philosophical work.

Our existence is also described as a sort of interval inscribed in a temporal horizon as being-towards-death. A pre-reflective understanding of Being-in-general engenders the hermeneutic circle. The dynamic of a past-future projects the present as charged with potential. This situates, activates that pre-understanding as a form of ‘interpretation,’ and makes clear that the question of the meaning of Being cannot be formulated otherwise. The question of understanding is central to the structure of being-in-the world. *Understanding* for Heidegger is a key term in his radical criticism of the classical metaphysical mode of thinking (Descartes-Kant-Husserl) in which *what* we understand dominates over the question of how we understand. All attempts to reduce understanding to brain functions or mental representations are futile; understanding and interpretation ultimately are not brain states, they are ways of acting in the world.

The second phase of Heidegger’s work, dedicated to the history of Being, pays particular attention to the question of language, poetry and the work of art. And it is only within the realm of language and art that we see the explicit use of acoustics, where thinking is described in terms of listening to Being. For Heidegger, truth in art does not reside in a correct representation. Thinking is the relation of Being to man, not the other way around. It is not a product, a consequence, or a cause. It is an offering which consists in the fact that in thinking Being comes to language; language is the house of Being, in it man dwells. Those who

³ Cf. Mark Wrathall, *How to Read Heidegger* (New York and London: W.W. Norton Company, 2005).

think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home.⁴ Thinking as a clearing of Being, envisioned by Heidegger in this last period, is an acoustic phenomenon. When thoughts fall silent Being returns as a resonance. Thought is a form of listening which involves effort, like speaking, yet it is as if the phenomenon called thought is both produced by effort and at the same time comes from somewhere outside, a realm of language that may or may not bestow on us the grace of presence; it could be said that thought is akin to poetry or perhaps that poetry is the protean form of what we call thought. Are phenomena that do not take place in language thought? Are they separable from language? Overcome by emotion, one chooses whether to call it joy or sorrow. This is a genuine question, when one despairs how does one know for sure that one is not, in reality, happy? There is thought and there is the feeling of thinking, defined by Heidegger as a mood. It is the return of thought as a resonance. It is possible to have the feeling of thinking without conceiving a thought; it is possible to have a thought without the feeling of thinking, in which case it is something like a dead thought, but a dead thought may be brought to life at any time, as the map of words we are born into contains headstones marking the place from which immortality might spring, or as a book might be inert in our hands for ten years and then one day we pick it up again, just to see, and it lights up for us. Are vibrations that we can't hear still to be counted as belonging to the realm of sound? Is the experience of hearing where there is no sound still acoustic? How separable are hearing and sound? What happens in the body, for instance, the roaring of the blood, the beating of the heart, or the sense of listening to thoughts that come from a realm into which we are as it were dropped but still detached from ... is it enough that something that is not human may hear these vibrations? Does thinking produce a tuning?

2. Thinking and the Other: Emmanuel Levinas' transition to ethics

In his seminal 1961 work *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Levinas rejects the ontological framework prioritized by phenomenology and believes that only an ethically grounded philosophy can reveal the infinite transcendence contained in our relation to the Other. At the

⁴ Ibid., p. 217.

core of ontology is the totalization of being and the return to the same. In order to introduce the urgent question of refounding philosophy on the basis of the relation to the Other, and not as a refrain of the same, Levinas resorts to the violent image of war:

Not only modern war but every war employs arms that turn against those who wield them. It establishes an order from which no one can keep his *distance*; nothing henceforth is *exterior*. War does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same. [...] The visage of being that shows itself in war is fixed in the concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy.⁵

Thinking implies a relation that takes exteriority as a primary consideration: a place able to welcome the encounter with the Other where individuals are not reduced to derivatives of totality and where unicity is not sacrificed to objective meaning. In order to overcome totality, Levinas introduces infinity as an eschatological notion outside of history, in which the very notion of time is displaced and located beyond historically or ontologically circular temporality. In the essay “Is Ontology Fundamental?”⁶ Levinas states that both Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, with its discovery of the intentionality of consciousness, and Heidegger’s existential analytic of Dasein as ‘being thrown’ into the world contribute to the same understanding: in order to understand being as such we need always to link it to our existence in this world. Thus, it is not simply a theoretical attitude but concerns the whole of human behavior. The totalization of thinking resides in the fact that all knowledge is composed of relations between different beings, and that this implies an understanding that these beings and relations exist. “The whole man is ontology,” Levinas says: “His scientific work, his affective life, the satisfaction of his needs and his work, his social life and his death articulate, with a rigor that assigns a determined function for each of these

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), p. 21; emphasis added.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 1-11.

aspects the understanding of being, or truth.”⁷ Being is disclosed in each aspect, making the philosophical preoccupation the pressing and radical attention to everyday life.

The ambiguity of contemporary ontology lies in the fact that, even though Heidegger rejects the transformation of ontology into the philosophy of existence, such a possibility is nevertheless inscribed in his conception of ontology. Philosophy and life merge. To understand being is to exist, and this leaves us in the comic, or tragic, condition of finding ourselves on the terrain of the same, unable to orient our actions. There is something more fundamental in our understanding and desire to know that cannot be reduced to or caught in the circularity between existence and understanding. There is a need for exteriority, for difference, and for an irreducible relation to the Other. To understand a particular being is to place oneself outside of that being, and in keeping one’s relation to the particular there is always the horizon of Being to be disclosed, which is something that Levinas reads as universal, and is in that sense continuous with the history of Western philosophy. Levinas’ criticism of ontology presents instead an ethical conception of truth, one in which the relation to the Other is the fundamental condition both for subjectivity understood as a welcoming of the Other, or hospitality, and for an understanding of truth separate from Heidegger’s *aletheia* or clearing of Being.

The welcoming of the face and the work of justice, which condition the birth of truth itself, are not interpretable in terms of disclosure. Phenomenology is a method for philosophy, but phenomenology, the comprehension effected through a bringing to light, does not constitute the ultimate event of being itself.⁸ In order to break with totality, and with the reduction of the relation to being to the understanding of being, Levinas introduces infinity and the irreducible Other. Our relation to the Other is of such a kind that it cannot be reduced to our understanding of the Other. That relation does not affect us by the means of a concept: “The other is not first an object of understanding and then an interlocutor. The two relations are merged. In other words, addressing the other is inseparable from understanding the other.”⁹

The relation to the Other is irreducible; it is not a relation to a con-

⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

⁸ Ibid., p. 28.

⁹ Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?,” p. 6.

cept or to an object, it is not the clearing of Being, and no pre-understanding precedes that relation. Levinas' task is to show, particularly, that the relation to the Other is irreducible to comprehension, in that it is not an ontological relation. In the concrete situation of speech in its various modes, such as speaking to the other, listening to the other, calling, prayer, and invocation, I do not reflect on the Other but actively engage with the relation to alterity first defined by Levinas, both theologically and philosophically, as an ethics based on the relation to the Other. Levinas asks questions which bring us to a new task confronting philosophy which ontology cannot perform. The irreducible encounter with the face of the Other is no longer a relation to Being or the condition for the disclosure of consciousness; instead, a more basic condition challenges the primacy of ontology. It is precisely on the terrain constituted by the primacy of ethics that the acousticity of thinking emerges as the passage from temporality to exteriority.

In order to make this transition from time to relation, and in order for the voice to appear on the philosophical stage, the notion of space also needs to be present. Space appears both as a relation between myself and a Third (Levinas) or as a gap (Arendt) in the reversals of Western metaphysics. And both of those ideas, the one introduced by Levinas, the other by Hannah Arendt, are important for the vocalization of the logos. The question of thinking cannot be posed within the framework of an ontology that necessarily ends up as a totality. Both Arendt and Levinas deploy the notion of totalization in the realm of the history of thought in which its procedures are historically grounded in Western metaphysics, and thereafter entangled in the relation to politics. Response becomes the first language, according to Levinas, and our responsibility consists in being 'for-the-other.' In his analysis of interpersonal relations where we need 'to not forget' irreducible otherness, and to be aware of the presence of a Third (which is very different from universal objectified relations), Levinas provides an intersection of the ethical and the political which he explains in terms of the 'third party.' The 'third party' is: 1.) different from the Other; 2.) also present in the Other; 3.) and 'he,' 'she,' 'they' – is also the other of the Other. This is where Levinas' ethics makes its final transition, introducing space instead of time as the condition of an authentic process of thinking. The irreducible encounter with the Other is necessarily plural. Levinas affirms the personal responsibility of preserving the awareness of the irreducibility of the encounter with the Other; at the same time, he introduces a third party which

cannot be forgotten or ignored, and takes great care that the account of this relation avoids universalization. He introduces the relation to a third party – She/He/They – as a moment of justice and as a corrective moment. I can fail in my recognition of the encounter with the Other, but I cannot be oblivious to it, or ignore it without committing injustice. Justice here is a corrective, that is, an engagement with a plurality which justice itself cannot ensure or make us forget: that first language, that response to the origin of right or the uniqueness of the Other.¹⁰

The question of uniqueness will also become a fundamental term in Adriana Cavarero's *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. As she writes, the theme of uniqueness is decisive in what she perceives as the attack on Western metaphysics by Levinas and Arendt. Nevertheless, for Cavarero, their philosophical thinking remains oblivious to the voice. Language and thinking, even if placed in a spatial relation as acousticity, are still bound to the visual. She explains that the place of speech in Levinas is different from the place of interlocutors and that difference has the status of transcendence:

uniqueness transcends speech and the verbal system of signification. This “being in front of” is defined by Levinas as the face of the other—an expression that designates the irreducible uniqueness of every human being as a face that regards me; indeed, as the “face of the one who regards *me* par excellence.” The horizon is therefore visual.¹¹

3. Thinking and the Voice: Adriana Cavarero's philosophy as vocal expression

Exteriority remains confined to a visual horizon. The history of metaphysics should in fact finally be told as the strange history of the devocalization of logos.¹² The exclusion of voice has been central to the history of logic. According to Adriana Cavarero, that exclusion played an

¹⁰ See Maria Dimitrova, *Sociality and Justice: Towards Social Phenomenology* (Ibidem: Stuttgart, 2016).

¹¹ Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 27.

¹² Ibid., p. 40.

important role in the definition of truth in videocentric terms. Voice appears from the very beginning as a term associated with the animal and non-rational aspects of life. In her philosophy, Cavarero traces the fundamental difference between the Hebrew tradition and the Greek tradition in relation to the voice. She observes that in the classical era, *phone*, the Greek word for voice, applied not only to the animal and the human but also to other sounds. And all these sonic phenomena were distinct from speech: “This confusion of voice and sound [...] seems to require the vocal to be measured first of all against the whole realm of sounds instead of depending right away on the system of speech.”¹³

The separation of voice from speech is later modulated and definitively compromised by the Aristotelian definition of *logos* as ‘*phone semantike*.’ Voice is included in thinking under the specific difference of signification. In this way, it is only the signifying voice, in its capacity as a bearer of meaning, that is inscribed in thinking; it does not figure as a corporeal element. Voice is captured in speech only as a signifying voice, which means that voice is equated to the pronouncing of words with meaning. Although the suggestion might look a little bizarre, it is basically that equivalence between the voice and words first pronounced and later kept in the mind that will dissolve the voice into the mental activity of thinking. And, according to Cavarero, there is an inherent ambiguity in the term ‘*logos*’ that oscillates between speech and thinking. Quoting Levinas, “*logos* as discourse is completely confused with *logos* as reason”¹⁴, she underlines that the logocentrism he had already denounced concentrates on those aspects which etymologically refer to “speaking” and “binding,” where “in its ordinary meaning, *logos* refers to the activity of the one who speaks, of the one who links nouns to verbs and to other parts of speech. *Logos* consists essentially in a joining together of words.”¹⁵ The oscillation between discourse (language) and reason (thinking) in some manner assigns to language the qualification of being primarily a semantic organization. As Cavarero notes, this relates directly to Aristotle, who, in the *Poetics*, speaks of *logos* as ‘*phone semantike*’ (signifying voice) and the understanding of language as a system of signification.¹⁶ Of primary importance, as Cavarero

¹³ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

astutely observes, is the interaction of that construction with another fundamental definition of Western philosophy provided by Aristotle, one that characterizes the human's difference from other living beings on the basis of language – as *zoon logos echon*, which literally means “the living creature who has *logos*.”¹⁷ This brings us to the consequence that the rationality of man is deeply connected to his signifying voice. But it is exactly the ‘signifying’ that marks his difference and separates man from the other animals; their voices are only a *semeion*, a sign of pleasure or pain:

The voice as prior to speech or independent of speech is therefore simply an animal voice—an *a-logic* and *a-semantic* phonation. And yet, even in the animal, it is already ‘sign’ or *semeion*, almost as if the voice could be nothing but a sign, nothing but the function of a nonvocal reality.¹⁸

It is in referring to a passage of the *Sophist* that Cavarero shows that, for Plato, thinking and *logos* are the same and are described both as dialogue (*dialogos*) and *dianoia*. Thinking (*dianoia*) is silent inner speech, a dialogue (*dialogos*) “without voice that the soul makes with itself.”¹⁹ The second movement of thought corresponds “to the flux of the soul that comes out of the mouth together with the voice.”²⁰ Cavarero maintains that this is not simply a descriptive or metaphorical play in which “thought appears as devocalized *logos* and *logos* appears as vocalized thought.”²¹ It is the conceptualization of thinking as devocalized *logos* that describes thinking as something internal, a movement ‘from the soul to the mouth’ that establishes thinking as prior to voice, as an externalization of the silent dialogue of the soul with itself: a sort of Narcissistic procedure that excludes the vocal and arrives at vocalization not through vocal and bodily experience but rather as speculation. Voice is presented here within a speculative function that “flows outward through the mouth and takes a voice, or is vocalized.”²² This brings us to Cavarero’s fourth point regarding devocalization, which she

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 44; Cavarero is quoting the *Sophist*.

²⁰ Ibid.; again quoting the *Sophist*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

describes as a prevarication of the visual and the subordination of the vocal inscribed in Western metaphysics.

Something counterintuitive is at work here that we need to take into account, and it is precisely the fact that devocalization takes place in the act of vocalization, of utterance. It is by assigning to the voice a mere function of utterance that it becomes basically philosophically insignificant; the real place of signification is voiceless. The battle of knowledge will not take place in the realm of the voice. The word that is meaningful, which says something about something, that is, the predicate, is here to be understood as the final stage of devocalization which takes place in the act of vocalization. This is also the where the written confirms its importance as a stable, eternal, unchangeable substance, whereas the voice is invisible and permeable. What is important, in Platonic terms, is the otherworldly idea, which in Aristotelian terms can be viewed as the incipient concept, a function operative in a discourse to which we can apply rules and whose truth can be established. But in every transition from the word to the concept, or vice versa, philosophically we pay the price of a lost, if not simply excluded, corporeal vocal experience; that is, then, the importance of communication and its delivery: it is the loss of ourselves, of the very uniqueness imprinted in our voices.

Conclusion

Cavarero considers the devocalization of logos as a loss, not strictly in terms of the dichotomy of the oral and the written, but because it fundamentally excludes what is unique in us. It is the cancellation of what is unique in communication. In the communication of the *phone semantike* we communicate our uniqueness in the form of the foundation of all that is communicable. In that universalization, there is the loss of the corporeal, and Cavarero proposes a vocal ontology of uniqueness in which it is not attention to the vocalization of thinking that we need to restore; a new clear path opens before philosophy understood as vocal expression but also as a presence of the corporeal and the political. There are many possible ways of walking that path. And I am proposing one possible course, which connects philosophy with performance. Cavarero asks: In what manner can the effects of the devocalization of the logos, this silencing, be contested? She advances a method that is “faithful to the vocal phenomenology of uniqueness, and it consists in listening to speech as it resounds in the plurality of voices who—each

time and always addressing themselves to one another—speak.”²³

The suggestion is clear: to think of philosophical practice as both something deeply rooted in the matrix of life and as a collective practice that includes plurality in its very core. Both lines of inquiry connect philosophy to a live performance. A thinking that connects to the body and manifests itself in listening as a relation already inscribed in thinking, one given as what Luisa Muraro, another leading Italian philosopher, calls the matrix of life.²⁴ It is in this sense that we must look in more detail at the question of the symbolic order of the voice, and especially of the symbolic order of the mother, introduced by Muraro, to whom Cavarero indirectly refers in one passage:

During the first crucial months of life ... vocalic relationality takes its time and its pleasure before handing itself over to the system of language. The maternal tongue is not only the language that we speak because we learned it from our mothers. It is also, before this, the wordless language of vocalizations that the mother exchanges with the infant.²⁵

The second step will be to look at how philosophy as a vocal expression indicates thinking as a collective practice. What voice contributes to philosophy is the basis that allows a maturing of philosophy as a collective practice of thinking, which does not mean simply an assemblage of subjects, or speaking voices, but a complex procedure of the embodiment of thinking that includes relation, uniqueness, and responsibility in its very core. It is what, in the Hebrew tradition, transpired as a generative principle which is in some manner present in the question that Hannah Arendt brings to philosophy: are we able to think something new, and is there a way of thinking that is not a totalizing procedure?

What I am contending is that the intuition of philosophy as a process of vocalization of the logos, and the rewriting of the traditional canon so as to include absent voices, is deeply related to the practice of the feminist movement and of *Rivolta Femminile* in the late 1960s and

²³ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁴ See Luisa Muraro, *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2006).

²⁵ Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, p. 170.

1970s in Italy, and to the practices of *Autocoscenza*.²⁶ Mine may be perhaps another of those attempts at rewriting canons, or simply, perhaps, a way of scrutinizing experiences that have been registered as failures or disruptions. But the voice is not simply a philosophical turn. It is mainly a practice that connects thinking to bodies: in their uniqueness, politics and the realization of having a voice. “Speech, understood as speech that emits from someone’s mouth, is not simply the verbal sphere of expression; it is also the point of tension between the uniqueness of the voice and the system of language.”²⁷ It is exactly at that point that thinking bonds to performativity: to its transformational capacity rooted in the voice. “The task of the voice is therefore to be a pathway, or better, a pivotal joint between body and speech.”²⁸ But from all this another way of thinking about philosophy emerges, and above all another way of practicing it.

²⁶ See *Non credere di avere diritti. La generazione della libertà femminile nell’idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne*, Libreria delle Donne di Milano (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1977).

²⁷ Cavarero, *For More than One Voice*, p. 14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15