Levinas's language

Let me begin with the observation that there is a profound complicity between what is said in Levinas's *Otherwise Than Being*, and how it comes to be represented.¹ For Levinas, representation plays a role subordinate to the ethical responsibility that inspires it.² If representation is understood both as the outcome of Levinas's own attempts to write, to communicate, to manifest or bring to light his philosophy, and as the results of others' efforts to interpret it, a question arises as to what ought to be the aim of such interpretation. There is an intricate relationship between the way in which Levinas's language works, and what he wants to say. To take seriously Levinas's language is not only to notice how it takes effect, but also to think about what it would mean to speak on Levinas's behalf.

What does it mean to try to explain Levinas's philosophy, to put oneself in the position of answering for him, or to anticipate objections that might arise in the face of his philosophy? What could it mean to

---

¹I am indebted to the graduate students at the University of Memphis for their challenging and astute reception of Levinas in the courses I have taught on his texts in the previous two years, which has helped me to formulate my thoughts here. I would also like to thank my colleague, Robert Bernasconi, for reading and commenting on the paper.

²The word 'representation' carries a particular weight for Levinas. He says, for example, 'The assembling of being in the present, its synchronization by retention, memory and history, reminiscence, is representation; it does not integrate the responsibility for the separated entity': Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* or *Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 140; as *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà l’essence*, 2nd edn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 179; hereafter cited as OB plus page no. and AE plus page no.
take up a Levinasian position, to be faithful to his philosophy — supposing that one has understood it and what it might mean to have understood it must itself remain in question? Levinas says: 'In the saying [le dire] of responsibility, which is an exposure to an obligation for which no one could replace me, I am unique' (OB: 138-9; AE: 177). Given Levinas's persistent affirmation that 'I am irreplaceable, what should my response, as his reader, be? If I cannot take Levinas's place, stand in for him, speak for him, how should I position myself in relation to his work?

While the tradition of Western philosophy has typically construed the ethical relationship as derivative and secondary, Levinas claims to approach my responsibility for others as 'irreducible' (OB: 135; AE: 172). That is, responsibility for others is not reducible to a part in a system that would be representable, and that therefore could be parcelled out, so that others could stand in for me, could be substituted for me (see OB: 136; AE: 174). Levinas emphasizes the non-coincidence of the self, its inability to gather itself up and be in control of itself as if from the beginning, as if it were only a free subject, as if it were master of itself, author of its own destiny, as if its responsibility to the other were a matter of free choice. 'The I approached in responsibility is for-the-other, is a denuding, an exposure to being affected, a pure susceptiveness. It does not posit itself, possessing itself and recognizing itself; it is consumed and delivered over, dislocates itself, loses its place, is exiled, relegates itself into itself' (OB: 138; AE: 176).

One of the questions motivating this paper is the concern that by construing ethical responsibility as asymmetrical and unequal, Levinas is violating the essence of the egalitarian or democratic ideal that many of us hold dear. What accounts for Levinas's insistence on the inequality of my relation to others, the incommensurability of this relation, and how can this inequality be thought 'in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression' (OB: 177; AE: 223)? Even to conceive of my responsibility to the other as a relationship is to reduce the I and the other to reciprocal terms (see OB: 138; AE: 176, and OB: 160; AE: 205). Levinas prefers to describe my obligation to the other as 'substitution', where the

---

3Levinas, Otherwise Than Being/Autrement qu'ètre.
4The words 'dénu dation' and 'perd sa place' are italicized in Levinas's original text.
subject is a 'hostage' (OB: 136; AE: 136). But in emphasizing that I can never do enough for the other (OB: 138; AE: 175), that my commitment increases in the measure that I answer to it (OB: 139-40; AE: 178), does Levinas not place impossible, unreasonable, intolerable demands on the subject? Does he go too far in his insistence on the infinite responsibility I have for the other, in making me responsible even for the persecution of the one who persecutes me (OB: 166; AE: 212)? Levinas denies that 'the alienation of the same who is "for the other"' involves 'slavery' (OB: 135; AE: 172). I want to suggest that unless we take account of Levinas's language — particularly the way in which the saying and the said function in his work — we will not understand how Levinas construes the difference between alienation and slavery, between inequality and oppression, between responsibility for the other and domination by the other, between bearing witness to infinity and being constrained by a superior. Consequently, I will focus on how language works in Levinas's philosophy, and then go on to address the role of the 'third party', which I take to be fundamental for any attempt to come to terms with how Levinas construes politics and the state — the public face of morality. By elucidating first the function of language, in order to prepare the way for a discussion of the third party as Levinas sees it, I hope to go some way towards answering the question: how can Levinas's philosophy be understood as a philosophy that puts into question the claims of equality without endorsing the very oppression and domination that it seeks to alleviate? I will suggest that there is a necessary betrayal involved in the very attempt to do philosophy, and that this betrayal concerns the very function of language as thematization. It is the task of language to betray what it also expresses — and in the function of language as expression there lies hope.

To fail to pay attention to the way language is put to work in Levinas's philosophy is also to fall short of understanding the claim that his work makes for itself — a claim that in the end is made not on its own account, but precisely for the other. To reduce what Levinas's texts say to a content, a theme, or a thesis is to refuse to acknowledge the efficacy of the distinction between the said and the saying. Of course, as Levinas often reminds us, such a reduction is unavoidable — thematization is

5Levinas says 'The sign is not posited for itself' (OB: 153; AE: 195).
inevitable’ (OB: 151; AE: 193). Indeed, it is not merely inevitable, it is also necessary. The saying calls for the said. Responsibility requires justice (see OB: 45; AE: 58). Ethics needs philosophy.

The alternating movement of philosophy

The role of philosophy, as Levinas understands it, is no simple one. Philosophy follows an ‘alternating movement’ that Levinas compares to ‘that which leads from skepticism to the refutation that reduces it to ashes, and from its ashes to its rebirth’ (OB: 165; AE: 210). Philosophy alternates between serving justice, and reducing justice to being. Philosophy must thematize, it must convert the saying into the said, but it must also ‘reduce that betrayal’ (OB: 156; AE: 198). Levinas says: ‘This reduction always has to be attempted, because of the trace of sincerity which the words themselves bear and which they owe to saying as witness, even when the said dissimulates the saying in the correlation set up between the saying and the said’ (OB: 152; AE: 193). The movement of philosophy is a double movement — or rather an infinite iteration of the oscillation from saying to said and from said to saying. There is betrayal, and there is a reduction of betrayal: ‘The philosophical speaking that betrays in its said the proximity it conveys before us still remains, as a saying, a proximity and a responsibility’ (OB: 168; AE: 214).

Due to the alternation of betrayal and reduction — which Levinas also calls an ‘enigmatic ambivalence’ (OB: 152; AE: 194) — philosophy cannot rest content in the simultaneity of consciousness, as if it could array all its ideas for appraisal, like a merchant who displays wares for purchase. Just as skepticism returns despite its refutation, so philosophy must be prepared to ward off repeatedly the tendency of the saying to congeal into the said, or of responsibility to turn into a relationship in which the face no longer appears. The subject cannot gather itself up without remainder, cannot collect everything together once and for all, cannot assemble or incorporate itself adequately under the sign of the transcendental — as if it were a free origin, as if it were a consciousness capable of recuperating everything. Such a subject — able to recall everything, able to catch up with itself, able to coincide with itself — would integrate even the responsibility for the other, whereas for Levinas the subject can never effect such an integration, can never dispense with its obligation to others. The subject is born in the
beginninglessness of an anarchy and in the endlessness of obligation' (OB: 140; AE: 178).

**Ambivalence, ambiguity and absorption**

The time of philosophy is diachrony. 'Philosophy is called upon to conceive ambivalence, to conceive it in several times' (OB: 162; AE: 206). Called to thought by justice, says Levinas, philosophy 'synchronizes in the said the diachrony of the difference between the one and the other, and remains the servant of the saying that signifies [this] difference' (OB: 162; AE: 206-7). Philosophy thus 'says that of which it is but a servant, but of which it makes itself master by saying it, and then reduces its pretensions in a new said' (OB: 126; AE: 162). At issue here is what Levinas refers to as 'the very ambiguity of every said' (OB: 152; AE: 194), an ambiguity which serves as the touchstone for his entire discussion (see OB: 62; AE: 78). The ambiguous nature of language consists in the tendency of the said to absorb the saying, together with the insistent reference of discourse to an outside that resists inclusion in the said. In his earlier philosophy — for example, in *Time and the Other* — Levinas had often seen the need to reject an alternative that he sometimes expressed in terms of an opposition between idealism and realism. He sought to articulate a relation between the same and the other in which alterity is not absorbed by sameness, and otherness does not absorb the subject. In either case, the possibility of radical transcendence is eliminated. In *Otherwise Than Being*, he insists that there is a meaning that resists and goes beyond the absorption of the saying by the said. That is, despite the absorption that occurs, there is still a meaning to be found that not only escapes the fixity of the said, but breathes into the said the spirit of its meaning, giving propositions and statements their meaning in the first place.

Although there is a certain inevitability about the turning of the saying into the said, and although language — in so far as it constitutes a

---


7See, for example, TO: 41; TA: 20, TO: 67; TA: 52, and TO: 77; TA: 65.
system of signs — consists in the elements that form a structure, language bears a meaning beyond its resolution into themes, propositions and assertions. On the one hand there is 'the nominalization of the statement, which cuts it from the proposition it makes to another' (OB: 62; AE: 78), and on the other hand a 'reference to an interlocutor permanently breaks through the text that the discourse claims to weave in thematizing and enveloping all things' (OB: 170; AE: 217). Language would thus 'exceed the limits of what is thought' (OB: 169; 'AE: 215). It admits an 'indirect discourse' (OB: 171; AE: 217), one in which the saying remains 'indifferent to the said' (OB: 161; AE: 205).

Since 'the saying is both an affirmation and a retraction of the said' (OB: 44; AE: 56), the philosopher must loosen the 'grip of being' (OB: 44; AE: 56). The philosopher's task is to reduce the said, while retaining an echo of the reduced said in the form of ambiguity, of diachronic expression' (OB: 44; AE: 56). Thus Levinas comments on his own attempt to communicate in writing: 'And I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all the discourses are stated, in saying it to one that listens to it, and who is situated outside the said that the discourse says, outside all it includes. That is true of the discussion I am elaborating at this very moment' (OB: 170; AE: 216-17).

**Interuption**

Derrida has noted the peculiarity of Levinas's language, the unique demand it makes on the reader. 'Nearly always with him, this is how he sets his work in the fabric: by interrupting the weaving of our language and then by weaving together the interruptions themselves, another language comes to disturb the first one. It doesn't inhabit it, but haunts it' (AM: 18; EM: 29). I want to focus for a moment on the notion of interruption to which both Derrida and Levinas appeal. Levinas says:

---

8See Levinas's reference to inhabitation at OB: 138; AE: 176.

in relating the interruption of the discourse or my being ravished into discourse I connect its thread.

The said thematizes the interrupted dialogue or the dialogue delayed by

... silences, failure or delirium, but the intervals are not recuperated. Does not the discourse that suppresses the interruptions of discourse by relating them maintain the discontinuity under the knots with which the thread is tied again?

The interruptions of the discourse found again and recounted in the

... immanence of the said are conserved like knots in a thread tied again, the trace of diachrony that does not enter into the present, that refuses simultaneity. (OB: 169-70; AE: 215-16)

Levinas acknowledges the susceptibility of every saying to its said, the inevitability of this absorption, whereby interruptions are woven together, related to one another, narrated in a story. His own prose, despite his constant vigilance, is not immune to the absorption of the saying into the said (see OB: 62; AE: 78), or to the neutralization of the interlocutor that takes place in this conversion. The unnarratable other loses his face as a neighbor in narration’ (OB: 166; AE: 211), and this is just as true for Levinas’s attempt to communicate the irreducibility of the ethical relationship as it is for any other philosophical enterprise. Aware of the ever-present danger that the saying be allowed to congeal into a said, and become fixed there, apparently an eternal truth that takes itself to be fully present, equal to itself, coinciding with itself, conscious of its own freedom, mastery, origin, power, Levinas asks:

Are we not at this moment in the process of barring the issue that our whole essay attempts, and of encircling our position from all sides? The exceptional words by which the trace of the past and the extravagance of the approach are said - One, God - become terms, reenter into the vocabulary and are put at the disposition of philologists, instead of confounding philosophical language. Their very explosions are recounted.

But this account is itself without end and without continuity, that is, goes from the one to the other, is a tradition. It thereby renews itself. New meanings arise in its meaning, and their exegesis
is an unfolding, or history before all historiography. (OB: 169; AE: 215)

Levinas does not see his work as definitive, but as provoking new interpretations, as taking up a position only to be deposed, displaced, dislocated, by other philosophers who are thereby charged with not letting his saying rest in a said, or allowing it to become a static, fixed, lifeless statement — reduced to a thesis or proposition that bears no relation to the other to which it was addressed, and by whom it was inspired. As Levinas says, books ‘call for other books’ (OB: 171; AE: 217).

An abuse of language

If we are to take our cue from Levinas, the expectation that others will interpret his work is not a command in the sense of a pure said. It ‘enigmatically commands me, commanding and not commanding’ (OB: 161; AE: 205). We find here the resonance of Isaiah’s words, often quoted by Levinas, ‘Here I am’ — a phrase from which, Levinas says, the ‘word God is still absent’ even though in this phrase ‘God is for the first time involved in words’ (OB: 149; AE: 190). ‘Here’, says Levinas, ‘there is an inversion of order: the revelation is made by him that receives it’ (OB: 156; AE: 199). The word God is a ‘said unique of its kind’ (OB: 151; AE: 193), since it ‘gets its meaning from the witness borne, which thematization does betray in theology which introduces it into the system of language, in the order of the said. But this abusive statement is at once forbidden. The limits of the present in which infinity betrays itself break up. Infinity is beyond the scope of the unity of transcendental apperception, cannot be assembled into a present, and refuses being recollected’ (OB: 151; AE: 193). Infinity can be registered only in a trace, in ‘proximity, in signification, in my giving of signs’, in ‘my saying without said, preoriginary saying which is said in the mouth of the very one that receives the witness. Its signification has let itself be betrayed in the logos only to convey itself before us’ (OB: 151; AE: 193). Thus Levinas calls it an ‘abusive word’ (OB: 156; AE: 199). The ‘abuse of language’

\[10\] This phrase recurs throughout the text of Otherwise Than Being, appearing first in the preface (OB: 9; AE: 10), and subsequently at key moments; for example, OB: 56; AE: 72, and OB: 126; AE: 162. D. H. Brody notices the importance of what Levinas calls ‘abusive language’ at OB: 44; AE: 57 in an article which came to my notice while
156; AE: 198) that takes place consists of the ‘indiscretion of said’ through which subjectivity is stated ‘despite its foreignness to the said’ (OB: 156; AE: 198). Levinas says:

The revelation of the beyond being is perhaps indeed but a word, but this ‘perhaps’ belongs to an ambiguity in which the anarchy of the infinite resists the univocity of an originary principle. it belongs to an ambiguity or an ambivalence and an inversion which is stated in the word God, the apex of vocabulary, admission of the stronger than me in me and of the ‘less than nothing’ nothing but an abusive word, a beyond themes in a thought that does not yet think or thinks more than it thinks. (OB: 156; AE: 199)

We have already seen that philosophy must negotiate the ambivalence of language, the ambiguity of the said, by continual alternation between betrayal and reduction. Levinas says: ‘Philosophy, which is consigned in the said, converts disinterestedness and its signification into essence and, by an abuse of language, to be sure, says that of which it is but a servant, but of which it makes itself master by saying it, and then reduces its pretensions in a new said’ (OB: 126; AE: 162).

The saying that is for ever subject to betrayal is a bearing witness to the other in a word that is my own — God, infinity, one. Levinas says:

It is the coming of the order to which I am subjected before hearing it, or which I hear in my own saying, it is an august command, but one that does not constrain or dominate and leaves me outside of any correlation with its source. No structure is set up with a correlate. Thus the saying that comes to me is my own word. . . . ‘Before they call, I will answer.’ 11 (OB: 150; AE: 191-2)

**An event that cannot be named**

What, then, does Levinas seek to accomplish with this language that uncovers interruptions, even while converting them into a said,

---

I was editing the current paper, and which raises some of the themes I discuss here about how to read Levinas, and how to write about him. See D. H. Brody, ‘The Logic of Ethical Ambiguity in Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence’, Research in Phenomenology xxvii (1995): 177-203, see esp. p. 184.

11Levinas quotes this phrase from Isaiah 65: 24.
thematzing them, stringing them together into a coherent discourse? He tells us: 'This book has exposed my passivity, passivity as the-one-for-the-other; it transcends essence' (OB: 141; AE: 179). But he well knows that 'The saying is fixed in a said, is written, becomes a book, law and science' (OB: 159; AE: 202), that 'In the writing the saying does indeed become a pure said, a simultaneousness of the saying and of its conditions' (OB: 171; AE: 217). And this is why philosophy is called for, why the saying calls for philosophy (see OB: 44; AE: 56), why philosophy must renew itself, why there is an urgent task for philosophers, and why Levinas would rather risk the charge of utopianism than allow the said to absorb the saying once and for all. This is why Otherwise Than Being recalls 'that what took place humanly has never been able to remain closed up in its site. There is no need to refer to an event in which the non-site, becoming a site, would have exceptionally entered into the spaces of history' (OB: 184; AE: 232). There is no need to refer to such an event, because to do so would be to reduce it to an event — to an instant in the succession of instants, to the time of continuous history, where an instant is comparable with any other cross-section of time. There is no need to refer to such an event because there is another reference from which this saying acquires its energy — it refers not only to an event, a discrete historical moment, an act, or a period of time that can be consigned to the past in the neat phrases of historians, but also, and more importantly, to an interlocutor. Without naming this exception to history, Levinas makes its presence felt, eliciting our response through 'indirect discourse' (OB: 171; AE: 218).

Philosophy finds itself at the service of justice, but its very strength — its systematic thematization — is also its weakness. It is a betrayal of what it nonetheless conveys. The risk of being misunderstood is one that must be taken — otherwise philosophy reverts to a communication that takes itself to be equivalent to information, to knowledge, to a said. 'In the writing the saying does indeed become a pure said' (OB: 170-1; AE: 217). The danger that Levinas's philosophy will be reduced to a set of propositions — so many theses to be refuted by his critics — is a risk that he accepts in committing himself to paper, in writing books. For,

---

12In the original text, these words are italicized: 'what took place [lieu] humanly has never been able to remain closed up in its site [son lieu].'
as we saw, 'books have their fate; they belong to a world they do not include, but recognize by being written and printed, and by being prefaced and getting themselves preceded with forewords. They are interrupted, and call for other books and in the end are interpreted in a saying distinct from the said' (OB: 171; AE: 217). That Levinas's saying will remain unheard is an ontological possibility, but an ethical impossibility — and thus he does not abandon hope.\footnote{I am using the phrase 'ethical impossibility' in the sense that I take Levinas to use it in note 2 to chapter 5 (OB: 198; AE: 173).}

\textit{Subversion of essence}

To hear in Levinas's language only the articulation of a position — one which is to be distinguished from that of Hegel, Heidegger, or Husserl, for example — or to take it upon ourselves to defend his position, would be to diminish the meaning of Levinas's saying, to reduce it to the level of the said. To allow the saying of responsibility to echo in the system of meanings that he assigns to a series of terms — obsession, signification, substitution, proximity, diachrony, subjectivity — would be not so much to repudiate the priority of essence, as to permit another meaning, a meaning that goes beyond. essence. In his own writing Levinas admits to — even aspires to — philosophy in the sense that it has acquired for itself in the West: 'It is not by chance, through foolishness or through usurpation that the order of truth and essence, which the present exposition itself claims to hold to, is at the first rank in Western philosophy' (OB: 156-7; AE: 199). But if Levinas still wishes to lay claim to philosophical exposition, he also wishes to undercut its confidence in certain truths that remain undisturbed even by some of the most apparently wayward disciples of Western philosophy. 'Phenomenality,' says Levinas, 'the exhibition of being's essence in truth, is a permanent presupposition of the philosophical tradition of the West' (OB: 132; AE: 168). For Levinas, even if there is a sense in which being's essence holds sway, this does not indicate that 'all meaning proceeds from essence' (OB: 176; AE: 223). Precisely what Levinas puts in question is 'the reference of all signification to essence' (OB: 156; AE: 198). What he contests is 'the ultimacy or the priority of the ontological problem' (OB:
140; AE: 178), asking if there is not heard a voice coming from hori-
zons at least as vast as those in which ontology is situated’ (OB: 140; 
AE: 178). Levinas’s interest lies not so much in refuting the primacy of 
ontology — which would be impossible — as in exposing the ‘subversion of essence’ (OB: 170; AE: 216 ) that occurs despite primacy, 
thereby affirming a meaning that is not circumscribed by essence, but 
which inverts it.

Everything shows itself

We have seen that Levinas finds a meaning in ethical responsibility that 
goes beyond phenomenality. That which appears, and is represented 
through signification, as a being - God for example - does not exhaust 
its meaning. ‘The statement of the beyond being, of the name of God, 
does not allow itself to be walled up in the conditions of its enuncia-
tion. It benefits from an ambiguity or enigma’ (OB: 156; AE: 199). The 
same incapacity comes to the fore in Levinas’s articulation of goodness, 
which cannot be contained by essence any more than can God. Levinas 
says: ‘Goodness will indeed show itself [se montrer] in ontology meta-
morphosed into essence, and to be reduced; but essence cannot con-
tain it . . . everything shows itself [tout se montre]’ (OB: 137; AE: 175). 
The phrase ‘tout se montre’ is one that Levinas takes up repeatedly in 
Otherwise Than Being, and sometimes more than once within a few 
sentences. In the following passage Levinas claims both that everything 
shows itself, and that whatever is shown is inadequate to the infinite, to 
saying, to responsibility. He says: ‘subjectivity . . . is . . . stated by an abuse 
of language through which in the indiscretion of the said everything is 
shown [tout se montre]. Everything is shown [tout se motre] by indeed 
betraying its meaning, but philosophy is called upon to reduce that be-
trayal, by an abuse that justifies proximity itself in which the Infinite 
comes to pass. But this remains to be shown [mais cela reste à montrer]’ 
(OB: 156; AE: 198). Everything shows itself, but what motivates this 
showing still land always) remains to be shown. What motivates the 
showing of being, the appearance of phenomena — representation — 
is justice. Levinas says: ‘But it is for justice that everything shows itself 
[tout se montre]’ (OB: 161; AE: 205); ‘But everything shows [tout se 
montre] itself for justice’ (OB: 163; AE: 207); ‘justice . . . requires . . . 
phenomenality’ (OB: 163; AE: 207); ‘Everything shows itself [Tout se
montre] and is said in being for justice’ (OB: 163; AE: 207).14

With the repetition of the phrase that ‘everything shows itself for justice’ Levinas accomplishes the unsaying of the showing that is the only way for the saying to be acknowledged — even if it is also necessarily dissimulated by its inevitable conversion into a said. This insistent assertion of justice as the reason that everything is shown thus both achieves and betrays the saying — a constant oscillation that marks the very movement of philosophy as a reduction, a betrayal, and a further reduction - without end, like the infinite return of skepticism. ‘The return of skepticism,’ says Levinas, ‘despite the refutation that puts its thesis into contradiction with the conditions for any thesis, would be pure nonsense if everything in time were recallable, that is, able to form a structure with the present, if the saying were rigorously contemporaneous with the said, if everything [tout] in the past could be evoked and shown [se montre]’ (OB: 171; AE: 217).

Contradiction

There is no contradiction ‘without reflection’ (OB: 156; AE: 199), Levinas tells us — no contradiction without time, since reflection is ‘after the event’ (OB: 156; AE: 199). Contradiction ‘does not break out between two simultaneous statements, but between a statement and its conditions, as though they were in the same time. The statement of the beyond being, of the name of God, does not allow itself to be walled up in the conditions of its enunciation. It benefits from an ambiguity or an enigma’ (OB: 156; AE: 199). Levinas characterizes this situation as ‘a dilemma in the said, but an ambivalence in the saying’ (OB: 154; AE: 196). ‘It is a dilemma or an alternative if one sticks to the phenomena, to the said, where one passes successively, without being able to stop, from the affirmation of the Infinite to its negation in me’ (OB: 154; AE: 196). But it is an ambiguity or enigma that is retained in a trace if one allows the saying to reverberate throughout the succession of affirmation and negation conducted by the logic of propositional assertion. Levinas says: ‘the-one-for-the-other … shows itself [se montre] in the said, but does so only after the event, betrayed, foreign to the said of

---

14There are variations on this theme elsewhere in Otherwise Than Being; for example, ‘nothing would ever have shown itself’ (OB: 175; AE: 221).
being; it shows itself in it [s’y montre] as a contradiction’ (OB: 135; AE: 173). This is why the time of philosophy, of the saying is diachronous, why philosophy concerns several times, and is not simply the result of the thematizing consciousness that presents all its ideas in a simultaneous present.

‘The third party introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction’ (OB: 157; AE: 200).

The third party

The third party is introduced by Levinas as a ‘problem’ — as the reason philosophy is necessary. If it were not for all the others, if there were only the neighbor, there would be no problem, no need for philosophy. But in fact, of course, ‘The others concern me from the first’ (OB: 157; AE: 202) — and so there is a problem from the first, that of bringing responsibility to justice, introducing justice into responsibility, acknowledging the equality of the I and the other with everyone else. Levinas says: ‘justice can be established only if I, always evaded from the concept of the ego, always desituated and divested of being, always in non-reciprocatable relationship with the other, can become an other like the others’ (OB: 160-1; AE: 204-5). So, while the accent of Levinas’s philosophy might seem to be on the exclusive nature of my relation to the other as that which gives rise to philosophy, to justice, he must also recognize the claim of others — of other others, of the ‘Other and the others’ (Autrui et les Autres), as he puts it in a subheading of Totality and Infinity (TI: 212; Tel: 187). In doing so he admits that, in the final analysis, I am equal to all the others, and that there is a legitimate concern for myself. In rare instances we find this acknowledgment in Otherwise Than Being: ‘My lot is important’ (OB: 161; AE: 205). Or again, ‘To be sure — but this is another theme — my responsibility for all can and has to be manifest itself also in limiting itself. The ego can, in the name of this unlimited responsibility, be called upon to concern itself also with

---

itself. The fact that the other, my neighbor, is also a third party with respect to another, who is also a neighbor, is the birth of thought, consciousness’ (OB: 128; AE: 165).16

Although Levinas recognizes that my lot is important, and that concern for myself is legitimate, since I am in the end equal to all the others, he adds an important caveat: ‘But it is still out of my responsibility that my salvation has meaning, despite the danger in which it puts this responsibility, which it may encompass and swallow up, just as the State issued from the proximity of the neighbor is always on the verge of integrating him into a we, which congeals both me and the neighbor’ (OB: 161; AE: 205). If I had a choice, Levinas says, I would choose myself before the other. But it is precisely the condition of not yet being free, of not having a choice, that Levinas seeks to uncover in the notion of the subject as hostage. He says that the ‘condition of being hostage is not chosen; if there had been a choice, the subject would have kept his as-for-me, and the exits found in inner life’ (OB: 136; AE: 173).

The third party ‘interrupts the face to face of a welcome’ (OB: 150; AE: 191), as a ‘necessary interruption’ (OB: 160; AE: 204). But, as Levinas warns us repeatedly, we should not imagine that the third party is an empirical other who comes to join, or to intervene in, the couple united as face to face. ‘It is not that the entry of a third party would be an empirical fact’ (OB: 159; AE: 201); ‘In no way is justice a degradation of obsession . . . a degeneration that would be produced in the measure that for empirical reasons the initial duo would become a trio’ (OB: 159; AE: 203); ‘the third party does not come empirically to trouble proximity’ (OB: 160; AE: 204). Why is this so? Because ‘The others concern me from the first.... My relationship with the other as neighbor gives meaning to my relations with all the others. . . . This means concretely or empirically that justice is not a legality regulating human masses. . . . Justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity’ (OB: 159; AE: 202-3).

---

16Levinas makes a similar point in the preface: ‘The act of consciousness is motivated by the presence of a third party alongside of the neighbor approached. A third party is also approached; and the relationship between the neighbor and the third party cannot be indifferent to me when I approach. There must be justice between incomparables and a synopsis, a togetherness and contemporaneoussness; there must be thematization, thought, history, and inscription. But being must be understood on the basis of being’s other’ (OB: 16; AE: 20).
Thus Levinas affirms the importance of justice as a relationship between equals, but above all he reiterates that justice cannot occur without the saying from which it proceeds. He says: ‘It is . . . not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled land which is to be set up, and especially to be maintained) proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all, and if it can do without friendships and faces’ (OB: 159-60; AE: 203). To return to a question I posed at the outset: how does Levinas’s philosophy eschew the confirmation of the very structures of domination that he seeks to put into question? The answer is paradoxical — in a sense he does not. Philosophy itself is culpable of betraying the very responsibility it seeks to illuminate. Conceptually, the distinction between the saying and the said cannot sustain itself as a permanent and indelibly clear distinction. If philosophy betrays the other, it also betrays itself inasmuch as it is the servant of the saying. The betrayal of philosophy is both a betrayal of the other accomplished by philosophy itself, and a betrayal of philosophy by its other. Will we betray the task of philosophy as Levinas sees it, as philosophy betrays it?

There is an infinite betrayal accomplished by language — a betrayal of language by language itself. The saying is betrayed by the said, and the said gives way to the saying — continuously. Or perhaps not so much continuously, but repeatedly — intermittently, diachronically, incessantly, insistently, remorselessly, without stopping for breath. What is of interest here is the chiasmatic turning of language into its other — despite its logic, language says other than what it means to say at the level of coherence and meaning. Ethics cuts through ontology, interrupts it, effaces itself. The diastasis, the separation, that is thereby effected, opening a space and closing it up, is a spacing that orchestrates the images on which Levinas draws — the rhythm of breathing, the taut snug skin, the taut stretched belly of maternity. Inhalation turning into exhalation, spaces without any space. There is no room to breathe, nowhere to go, no escape from the ethical call of the other. No retreat. To ask what this ‘means’ is somehow beside the point. If we have not understood what it means to be responsible for the hunger of others, perhaps we have not understood what it means to be humans capable of asking for meaning. Does this degenerate into unfashionable humanism? Levinas addresses the question, referring to the difficulty of conceiving of the difference between inequality and oppression ‘in a
world where infidelity to Nietzsche... is... taken as blasphemy' (OB: 177; AE: 223), and he answers with the question 'Can one understand the subjectivity of the subject beyond essence' (OB: 177; AE: 223)? And this remains a question for us. Can we?

Let me close by recalling the close association that Levinas finds between the infinite reduction and betrayal that he sees as the task of philosophy, and the process by which skepticism re-asserts itself, despite its refutation. 'The permanent return of skepticism does not so much signify the possible breakup of structures as the fact that they are not the ultimate framework of meaning, that for their accord repression can already be necessary. It reminds us of the, in a very broad sense, political character of all logical rationalism, the alliance of logic with politics' (OB: 171; AE: 217). The event that cannot be named is nonetheless an event that informs Levinas's most profound philosophical reflections. We can attach labels to it, we can name it the holocaust, but language cannot contain what exceeds and defies representation. Events can be — and have been — sanctioned and justified by politics. This is why politics, allied with the reason that celebrates as its highest court of authority the logic of non-contradiction, can never have the final word. This is why ethics calls for philosophy. It is why intellectuals 'can no longer leave peoples to their customs... nor even to their redemptive systems, which, abandoned to their own logic, are implacably inverted' (OB: 184; AE: 232). I do not think that the need for intellectuals to address the question of ethics indicates on Levinas's part the unthinking universalism or ahistoricism with which his philosophy is sometimes confused. To be sure, the face of the other cuts across history, it interrupts our conventional ethics, and this interruption is not only capable of turning into a faceless dictum — there is a sense in which it must do so. But by marking this turning of my response to the face of the other into a static principle that can take on the status of a universal, Levinas is by no means unequivocally endorsing universality. On the contrary, he is insisting on the need to bring it into question wherever and whenever there is a tendency for it to silence all other meanings. Referring us to the words of Jehuda Halevy, Levinas says, 'God speaks to each man in particular' (OB: 184; AE: 232), and since God appears to us only through others, each appearance is irreducible to a general concept of God.
A final cautionary note: there are no guarantees as far as Levinas is concerned. No one can know with certainty what might happen in the future, and no one can know how definitively to ward off evil. We cannot ascertain a full coverage of insurance (see OB: 119; AE: 152) against the possibility of evil. Levinas can remind us of the face that sustains discourse, of the interlocutor that supports and motivates my language, but that is all he can do. He can write books, but he cannot guarantee that they will be understood. He must take his chances. 'To require that a communication be sure of being heard is to confuse communication and knowledge, to efface the difference' (OB: 167; AE: 212). No one can know what will happen in the future. But we can try to understand what has happened in the past, why it happened, how it could have happened — and we can imagine how it might have been, and how it might be, different.