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The Contradiction of Representation in Levinas's Command of the Other and the Possibility of
Responding through the Dialogicality of the Self

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1

Table of Contents

I.   Introduction to the Problem of Responding to Levinas's Command

In his work, *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas criticizes the tradition of phenomenology for failing to prioritize the Other in ethical discourse. Phenomenology is primordially a science of consciousness and the conscious being, so perhaps it is to be expected that the whole tradition is more interested in the self, called the Same in Levinas's work, rather than the Other; however, this comes with a handful of complications for the Other. In such theories, the Same is isolated from the Other and makes ethical deliberations in a vacuum without consideration for the Other. As well, the Other is simply left powerless to the whims and will of its analogue.   As intuitive as it may seem that the Same ought to be the priority of a science of consciousness, Levinas believes that the phenomenological tradition is misguided and also implicates the presence of an unethical trend in the whole philosophical milieu. He thinks that the priority of the conscious being mirrors a form of epistemic egoism that inevitably leads towards the representation of the Other from the Same's own narrow perspective. This implies a sort of epistemic annihilation of the Other and the end of ethics. To remediate this ethical mistake, Levinas attempts to dismantle the hegemony of the Same by positing the Other as possessing the higher priority in the ethical relationship, concretizing it as a being in need of servitude and developing the ethical command it expresses to the Same.

This ethical command initiates the whole of Levinas's ethics, but it is quite unlike any command ever experienced before. The command of God resounds like a thunderous roar and is backed by the threat of the fires of hell. The king and commander issue a coercive command that every soldier is wary to disobey lest they desire to be labelled as a traitor and feel the full wrath of their country. However, the command of the Other possesses none of these qualities. It is wholly different from a command in a position of power: it is a powerless command.

However, this immediately raises the question of how a powerless command can command anything at all. Furthermore, the Other's command is not understood through auditory perception: it makes no sound at all. Instead, the command is inscribed in the appearance of the Other's face. It is not a spoken command but a visible one. Of course, this is not to say that the Other's command is written in black ink across its forehead. That would be utterly preposterous, but it would point to the command as a perceivable phenomenon. Levinas's command is one which both appears in the face yet does not appear at all. This leaves one wondering what exactly is the command expressed by the face. Levinas's own explanations may provide little help in answering these questions, for he implies that the face is both pure expression and inexpressible: a paradox which yields few clues as to the content of this command. Furthermore, Levinas is also going to say that we can never truly get an adequate idea of the Other that represents its being accurately, and this is cause enough to question how Levinas expects the Same to apprehend an accurate command from the Other's face in the first place.

In this essay, I will explain how Levinas's duality of language constructs an idea of the Same's priority over the Other, and it will then be shown how he intends to flip this priority in favor of the Other and ethics in general. The observations made in this section will be important for understanding the command of the Other and the phenomenology of the Face. However, it will also be shown that Levinas's characterization of the command is inadequate for what he is trying to accomplish. His command is simply not intelligible enough for the Same to be held responsible for recognizing the command as it stands by Levinas's own description. However, rather than throw out Levinas's ideas entirely, I will attempt to salvage them by investigating his own exemplifications of the ethical relationship, language and paternity, to show how the Other is not so absolutely Other that it cannot enter into a relationship with the Same. Furthermore, I

4

will explain the possibility of this relationship by constructing identities for the Same and Other that are dialogical in nature. This requires that Levinas's conception of the absolute Other will have to be reconsidered and perhaps abandoned, for the dialogicality of the Same and the Other will point towards something shared between their identities. This may prove an issue for Levinas's ethics because the absolute Other is an important feature of it, but finding a shared quality between the two figures will render the Other's command intelligible and the ethical relationship possible.

In undertaking this project, several works will be synthesized with the argument. Levinas's own *Totality and Infinity, Collected Philosophical Papers,* and *Ethics and Infinity* will provide the source material for this essay. Levinas's own writings and translations can often seem inadequate in representing his positions, for his paradoxical and abstract language can often leave one wondering what he really means, so several secondary sources explaining his positions are also included. Diane Perpich and Michael Morgan offer insights into Levinas's work by itself, and Catherine Chalier elucidates the contrast between Levinas and Kant's theories.

While discussing Levinas's work, Kant and Heidegger will become relevant to the explanations. Both the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Being and Time* are cited because of this. Kant's *Groundwork* will be important in understanding Levinas's conceptions of autonomy and heteronomy which are developed in conversation with Kant's writings. As well, much of Levinas's disagreements with phenomenology are geared specifically towards Heidegger's concept of disclosure taken as an attitude about the world. Heidegger's *Being and Time* will be used to exemplify Levinas's disagreements with the phenomenological tradition.

In the final part of this essay, I will attempt to resolve the question of the command and its contents. Using Levinas's own conception of transcendence, I will show that the Same and

the Other necessarily have shared features of their identities which enables one to respond to the command of the Other. This will also require taking several writers' concepts of the self and self-consciousness and using those conceptions to reconstruct the identity of the Same and the Other as they exist in dialogue with each other. Both Hegel and Sartre offer philosophical approaches to the nature of the self in relation to others. George Herbert Meade also offers a similar view from a humanist psychological perspective.

II.   **The Asymmetry between the Same and the Other as Represented through Levinas's Epistemic Set of Language**

Levinas's great concern with phenomenology begins with this specific attitude that the Same takes towards the world which Levinas believes leads to the *reduction of the Other to the Same*. This reductive attitude originates from a special priority that phenomenology attributes to the Same over the Other. However, when Levinas explains this reduction, he uses two very different sets of language to paint a picture of the problem. The first of these sets demonstrates the reduction qua epistemology; the second qua ethics. The command of the Other is supposed to act as an ethical counterweight to this reduction, leading to an ethical relationship rather than an oppressive one between the Same and the Other. To apprehend the command of the Other both of these philosophical sets are going to have to be evaluated.

In its being-in-the-world, Dasein finds itself in a state of concern with its own being. Heidegger writes, "Dasein is an entity for which, in its being, that Being is an issue" (BT 191). Dasein here is understood as virtually interchangeable with the Same. Such a concern for its own being leads to a concern for the world in which it navigates. Thus, the Same's own concern about the world leads it to an attitude of disclosing the possibilities of the objects within this

world. This attitude is one towards the uncovering of truth. Heidegger notes that the Greek word for truth, ἀλήθεια, literally translates as "uncovered" (BT 219). Thus, the mode of disclosure acts as a means of uncovering the meaning of the world for the Same's own appropriation. According to Heidegger, in the uncovering of meaning, the objects are revealed as ready-to-hand. The disclosure of an object as ready-to-hand reveals to Dasein its potential possibilities for use. In other words, this aspect implies a *totality* of relationships within the world (BT 69). Using Heidegger's own example, a hammer disclosed as ready-to-hand reveals its potential for myself of using it to drive a nail through a piece of wood or to pry one out. The disclosive attitude taken about the world seeks to understand everything in terms of how Dasein can use it for some specific goal. Essentially, everything becomes understood through its potential utility for Dasein.

Levinas challenges this notion of disclosure and uncovering as a primary mode of being. He says that this mode of disclosure taken about the world is not the ultimate "event of being," not our main purpose in life (TI 28). Taken as an ontological attitude, disclosure serves to conceptualize the Other as an object to be possessed for the Same's own ends. "Possession is preeminently the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine" (TI 46). Levinas believes that this phenomenological attitude requires that the world must be reduced to the very same understanding, the Same's understanding. Revealed as a mere tool, the Other's being is determined by the Same, not the Other way around. Hence, the reason why Levinas names this epistemic phenomena "the reduction of the Other to the Same." Through this disclosive attitude, the Same seeks to possess the world in its totality, identifying everything in relation to its own self for its own purposes. Such a reduction proves contradictory to ethics for the Other's value is surely not exhausted in its utility for the Same. Yet, this totalizing attitude

seems to present the entire world merely as a tool for the Same's enjoyment. This seems more akin to egoism than ethics for Levinas.

Totality is an issue for Levinas. By taking a totalizing attitude towards the world, the Same reduces everything to itself. The problem here is not only the reduction of the Other but the uniqueness that the Same must be able to recognize in itself yet fail to see in the Other. The Same recognizes itself as self-standing: its being is seen as evident and dependent on nothing. The Other's, all others', beings are justified only through their relation to the Same. Levinas's writing illustrates a sort of exceptionalism in the Same's attitude in which it classifies the Other in reference to the universal yet represents itself as untouched by it.

> It must on the one hand consist in the thinking individual positing himself in the totality, so as to be a part of it – in defining himself, that is, situating himself with respect to other parts, in acquiring his identity from what distinguishes him from the other parts with which he is compromised; but, at the same time, it must consist in remaining outside, in not coinciding with his concept, acquiring his identity not from his place in the whole, but from himself – in being *me*. The individuality of the ego is distinguished from every given individuality by the fact that its identity is not constituted by what distinguishes it from others, but by its self-reference. (CPP 28)

From this, the egoism of totality is made apparent. The ego, the Same, isolates itself from and positions itself outside of the world. The relationship and opposition it has to the world fades; it does not identify itself in opposition to the world any longer. It merely is (TI 126). The Same recognizes itself as special and irreducible to the world from its own perspective, but the Other is disclosed in its place within the world. The Other becomes known and understood through its relation to the rest of the world and potential relationship with myself. It is absorbed by the totality.

By the totalizing conception of the Other, the Other is merely understood as a particular in relation to the multiplicity of the world. As a particular, the Other is not understood through

itself but is recognized as one among the many. In reducing the Other to the totality of its

relationships, the Same ironically represents itself within totality as the standard with which the

rest are compared, but it still segregates itself from the rest. "The same is in relation with the

other but in such a way that the other does not determine the same; it is always the same that

determines the other" (TI 124). Totality reduces the Other to a mere alter ego, a copy of myself.

As an alter ego, the Other is seen as just an extension of my own ego and reasoning: I determine

the Other and assign it to a category, but my own being is not exhausted in the Other. Here can

be found a hierarchy among the two: the Same precedes the Other. The Other is merely

understood through the Same.

Levinas disagrees with this attitude towards the Other. Perpich writes of Levinas's

account, saying that the Other's difference from me is not what he aims at getting at; instead,

Levinas points out that the Other's uniqueness is far more important (EEL 19). In totalizing the

Other, the Same dissolves this uniqueness and categorizes the Other as an alter ego, but the

Other's singularity remains regardless of this totalizing act; the Other is beyond totality. The

Other cannot be conceptualized as a particular among the universal or categorized in the Same's

terms: it possesses a singularity that is beyond the universal and its being is irreducible to the

Same. This is not to say that the Other does not exist in relationship with the rest of the world.

Instead, Levinas is trying to say that the Other resists being categorized *only* in terms of its

relationships. The Other, as singular, cannot be reduced to any one understanding. This is why

Levinas refers to the Other as possessing the quality of *infinity*. Infinity resists the constraining

force of totalization.

The imagery of infinity is used because it brings to mind a quality of the irreducibility of

the Other. Infinity cannot be counted to, cannot be attained, cannot be reduced to a single

9

concept. We can conjure up a conception of infinity, and we can represent it with symbols. However, the gap between the representation of infinity and infinity itself is always apparent. This means that a representation of totality will be altogether inadequate for defining the Other. Because of this, Levinas has to disagree with the phenomenological preference given to the Same and totality. The Other's being is not merely reducible to its position and relationships within the world. The disclosive attitude appears entirely absurd in light of Levinas's criticisms. Inanimate object can be reduced to their readiness-to-hand, but people cannot be encompassed entirely by this term. Something about being human is far more relationships within the totality. Thus, infinity more fully captures the irreducible nature of the Other.

The structural hegemony of totality over infinity in phenomenology is indicative of the priority given to the Same over the Other. In the epistemic power that the Same is given over the Other, the Same maintains its moral high ground within its own singular identity. All the while, it represents the Other within the plurality of the world. As unique and singular, the Same is exceptional; the Other, mundane. In this representation, there is nothing about the Other that commands the Same's attention, nothing that demands respect. The Same is the one who commands in this situation. It is the unique subject, the agent of arbitration. Through totality, the Same is free to dominate and exercise its own will over the universal while the Other possesses no right against the Same's transgressions. However, the Other cannot be totalized being beyond the understanding of the Same. Levinas's understanding of this suggests that the Other cannot be reduced to our own idea of it, that it cannot be adequately represented by a mere idea at all. In lacking the ability to reduce the Other to the Same, the Other claims an epistemic priority over the Same and an ethical resistance against the Same's attempts at reduction. A discourse with the Other ought to be taken with a sense of humility and an understanding that the

Other is always absolutely Other and beyond our abilities of representing it. This is one of the ways in which Levinas seeks to upset the priority of the Same over the Other.

III.   The Asymmetry between the Same and the Other as Represented through Levinas's Ethical Set of Language

In the ethical set of language Levinas uses to describe the Same's asymmetrical relationship to the Other, the terms he uses come from a distinct Kantian origin which has shaped the phenomenological view of the Same and the Other. In Kant's conception of ethics, the agent is commanded through the moral law, and Levinas utilizes both of his concepts of ethical legislation for the purposes of his own argument. Kant and Levinas agree that the will is commanded by the moral law, but they disagree over where this moral law comes from.

Kant's ethical legislation is that of autonomy. Autonomy is the property of the will that it has of being a law to itself (GMM 44). This means that the rational agent internally discovers the ethical law and commands said law to itself without any external input. "[The] moral law is not alien to the subject, it is not imposed on the subject by an external source," Chalier further explains of autonomy (WOID 64). Autonomy makes the ethical law accessible to the subject without any interaction from outside the subject's own reason. It is a will that is justified in itself, not by the ends it intends to bring about. Ethics for Kant is something that demands ethical thought from the moral agent; the agent must possess a specific kind of will in order to act ethically. If the agent is made to act without first reasonably considering what it ought to do, then it is as though no ethical act has occurred at all. The subject, even if it has fulfilled the moral patient's needs, cannot be said to be ethical unless it possesses an ethical intention to act. Kant's ethics is not a means of performing good acts but of having the right reasons for acting,

11

and that starts with the self. Thus, the self has to command itself the ethical law. Possessing the right reasons for acting literally implies the relationship between autonomy and reason. Chalier writes, "In every circumstance, only the person who acts with the pure intention of doing his duty, without giving in to his inclinations, and solely out of respect for what duty commands, can be deemed moral" (WOID 28). In autonomy, the rational agent discovers the moral law through reason, commands the moral law as the maxim of its will, and comes to make ethical decisions in its discourse. So long as the rational agent commands itself through a law discovered by reason, it can never be accused of neglecting its moral duty. It does not need to consult anyone but its own reason. Through autonomy, the ethical law is derived from only one source: the rational agent's own reasoning. Thus, the command comes from the Same.

Kant's autonomy implies its opposite. If autonomy is the law of the self, then its opposite, heteronomy, is the law of the other. Of heteronomy, he writes "the will in that case does not give itself the law, but the object does so because of its relation to the will" (GMM 45). He says the law in heteronomy is commanded by the object of the will. The law can be commanded by an external force like God or an authority figure, or it can be compelled by one's own primal urges. Both commands represent maxims unfounded by reason and are thus external to the will. This represents an issue for Kant because it does not base the law in reason but externality. A law of externality qua externality would require that the commands of others be obeyed for the sake of their being from mere others. Kant cannot accept such a law because it would necessitate an obedience to authority regardless of how reasonable said authority would be. "The intrusion of alterity, in the form of the violence of sensible inclinations, or of the tyrant's will, or of the admiration for other people's behavior, destroys the sole principle of morality, namely, autonomy" (WOID 72). Here, Chalier's words show Kant's distaste for

heteronomy. Heteronomy is derived from an inclination towards externality rather than reason alone.

Levinas disagrees with Kant because of autonomy's implications for moral responsibility. In autonomy, the Same is held responsible to itself and its own moral reasoning; however, the attention paid to the moral agent and its reason is the flaw in Kant's ethics according to Levinas. Chalier explains this problem, "the moral subject does not directly perceive the humanity in the person it respects, but its respect is nevertheless addressed to that humanity and not to a person bearing a singular name and face" (WOID 31). There is no response to the Other's cry for help, but rather a response to the universality of the Other's humanity. It is treated abstractly in its personhood rather than as a concretely unique Other. The vulnerability of the Other is not considered at all: the Other is merely conceptualized as one among many. Furthermore, Chalier explains that autonomy "appears necessarily to lead to an encounter with the other as alter ego — a reasonable being like myself — and not as an alterity" (WOID 68). Instead, through autonomy, what is at stake for the Same are its own principles for acting, its intentions. It is a responsibility to the self and one's own principles rather than the Other that characterizes Kantian ethics.

In order to get at an ethics that takes a responsibility towards the Other into account, Levinas is going to have to adopt his own heteronomous command. Through heteronomy, what is at stake in the encounter is the Other's own wellbeing. The Same is made to listen and respond rather than determine its own course of action. However, Levinas is in agreement with Kant on the issue of heteronomy as obeying the command of an Other for the sake of its being Other: it would justify the obedience to a tyrannical Other. While Levinas's command does compel the Same in virtue of its Otherness, it is a very singular kind of Otherness which Levinas

allows within his ethics. It is the vulnerable Other, the orphan, the widow, the stranger whose singularity alone is capable of breaching the autonomous Same and forcing it to question its own freedom.

The duality found in Levinas's language has been shown to represent a two-fold shift in the priority given between the Same and the Other: one epistemic and one ethical. Before Levinas, the phenomenological and Kantian traditions historically granted the epistemic and ethical agency to the Same as both the conscious subject and the rational agent. Through the epistemic totalization of the Other, the Other is denied its singular identity and is understood as a mere alter ego of the Same. The Other's being is reduced to an extrinsic relationship with the Same. Through autonomy, the Same fails to be held accountable to the Other. The ethical responsibility of the Same is not defined by a response to the Other's call. Instead, the command of the Other is ignored entirely, leaving the Same to decide how it must act. Both the epistemological and ethical cases reduce the Other to some arbitrary standard that is ultimately conceived of by the Same.

This gives the Same a monopoly over the representation of Others and the ethical law which has enabled the Same to recognize an exception in itself that it neglects to grant to Others and also lets the Same rationally discover the ethical laws that it wills. In either case, the Same seems to exist within its own closed system: nothing is allowed in, and no one is allowed to convince the Same of otherwise. In this prior philosophy, the Other possesses no opposition or resistance to my freedom; it is merely to be represented and determined. The Other's command serves not as a source of ethics but of information that the Same uses in its own ethical legislation. Its only purpose is to serve as a query which the Same poses to itself and answers by

itself. The Other becomes little more than an exercise for the Same's ego. Levinas challenges this representation of the Same and the Other.

Alternatively, he wants an ethics which gives the Other the ability to ethically resist the Same in the encounter. He seeks to give the Other priority over the Same within the ethical relationship. In this way, the Same remains the subject in question who possesses the ability to act ethically or destroy all ethics in its discourse with the Other, but the Other is not merely an object to be determined. Instead, the Other is made to be recognized for its subjectivity and singularity while the Same is forced to recognize that it has no right to disclose the meaning of the Other as a mere cog in the machine of totality or to discover the ethical treatment of the Other through reason. Specifically, it must ask itself whether it has the right to ignore the Other, to reduce the Other to a mere conception. In this discourse, the Same recognizes the impossibility of determining or ignoring the Other. It finds itself in loving servitude to its vulnerable and powerless "master." In Levinas's ethical relationship, the Other eclipses and surpasses the Same.

This shift in priority is desirable for a system of ethics for several reasons. The question of ethics almost always deals with the relationship between the Same and the Other, but previous ethical theories place the ethical power in the hands of the Same and reason: the Other usually does not get a say in how it is treated. Levinas's ethics make the Other into a subject as well as the source of the ethical command. His ethics is driven by the being in need, the Other. The Same possesses the capability and agency to help the Other while the Other possesses the impetus for ethics to occur. Another reason why Levinas's way is preferable is because it recognizes the Other for what it is, namely something that is not so easily recognizable. This is to say that it does not assume what the Other wants as a system of universalized reasoning might.

Instead of assuming what the Other needs, the Same is made to listen to its call for help and respond accordingly. In ethics, the Other is given the benefit of not being reduced and determined by the Same.

There can be no doubt of the ethical content in such a system: the Same is made to listen to the Other's cry for help rather than ignore it. However, the Other does not cry for help. It makes no noise at all, and if the command is silent then what is the Same hearing? As it turns out, this command of the Other is not a true audible command, not given through speech. Instead, it is expressed in the Other's visage, their face. Chalier writes, "The encounter with the defenseless nakedness of the face takes hold of [the Same], shakes the pride and self-assurance he feels as a now-liberated man" (WOID 77). It is in the expression of the Other's face that the Same is commanded and forced to question its own freedom. This proves problematic for anyone who wants to know what this commands means because Levinas then goes on to say that the face is inexpressible. The command of the Other then appears as the paradox of an inexpressible expression, one that the Same needs to be able to recognize in order for an ethical attitude to emerge.

Levinas's entire ethics rests upon the Same's recognition of the Other's command. However, there seems to be the inherent issue of how the Same can come to get an adequate understanding of the command at all. It would appear that any representation of the Other's command might fall back into Levinas's original problem of reducing the Other to the Same. It is thus the task of this essay to elucidate this problem and potentially find a solution. This will require addressing the secondary literature to develop an understanding of how others have come to understand the problem of Levinas's command as well as analyzing Levinas's own works to find context clues towards a meaning.

IV.   The Command of the Other and the Problem of Responding to that which

        cannot be Represented

The command of the Other leads to a problem for Levinas's philosophy because of the ambiguity of its content as well as the dubious possibility of its being understood by the being commanded. As has been briefly touched upon, these problems arise in the command partially because the it is not verbally given to the Same. Despite this, Levinas suggests that the content of the command mirrors that of the fifth commandment: thou shalt not kill (CPP 55; EI 87; TI 199). However, because this meaning is not directly conveyed through words, the question remains of how the Same is supposed to be able to stumble upon this specific signification of the command. It seems too difficult of a requirement to hold the Same responsible for apprehending the command of a being which resists all apprehension, yet it seems unlikely that Levinas would intentionally render it impossible for the Same to be able to respond to such a command.

Instead of a verbal command, Levinas conceives of a visual command: one that is found in the Other's face. Here, the term "face" is not to be taken literally. Levinas makes the distinction, Perpich writes, between the physical qualities found in faces and the face as he describes it (EEL 55). As features of a face, one finds eyes, a nose, ears, a mouth, creases, blemishes, and other sorts of marks that go into the making of each particular face, but this literal face is apprehended as the object of cognition. It only gives the Same some facial features to cognize. The face as Levinas wants it to be understood is not merely a collection of traits to be compared but rather a presentation of the Other as the Other (TI 202; DL 66). It is the self-presentation of the Other and also the presentation of its own otherness and alterity. The face is representative of the uniqueness of the Other and paradoxically of its own inability to be

represented. There is even some relation in this conception of the face to the physical qualities found in a physical face. The physical features that go into our own literal faces allow us to be recognized and identified from other people. Thus, both accounts of the face serve to identify the Other, allowing the Same to grasp at the Other's identity. However, the account of the face as a collection of features makes the face out to be an object of representation. Levinas avoids this with his conception of the face as a phenomenological presentation of alterity and singularity.

It has been stated that the command of the Other is not a true command from a position of power. It is a powerless command, but what does this mean? Morgan writes, "what makes the epiphany of the face ethical, then, is that intrinsically it involves a claim — what I have called "plea and command" — on me by the other person's suffering, to her claim upon me and her "election" of me" (DL 78). Levinas also uses the term "election." The Other does not command me with an aggressive force; instead she compels me with an ethical force derived from her own vulnerability. The Same is elected in the encounter to heed the command "thou shalt not kill." It has been chosen by the Other.

How then can such a presentation be indicative of the command "thou shalt not kill"? We have said prior to this question that the alterity of the Other presents an infinite resistance against all attempts at representation. This representation attempts to reduce the Other to a mere concept and negate the Other's being. The reduction of the Other to the Same acts as a form of epistemic negation and annihilation. However, Levinas sees that the logical progression of this metaphorical annihilation ultimately ends in a literal act of annihilation: murder. Murder, he says, acts to completely annihilate the Other, but in Levinas's description of murder, the act comes off more as a last resort. "Murder exercises a power over what escapes power" (TI 198).

In being resisted, the Same comes to recognize the impossibility of representing the Other, of

dominating the Other. The Other quite literally escapes the Same's attempts at reduction through

its own irreducibility. Thus, the Same is powerless to dominate the Other but not powerless

entirely to act (DL 71). To kill the Other despite one's own inability to exercise their power over

the Other would act as a way to hold onto what little power the Same still has. But this is the

purest form of egoism: rather than accept that it is powerless, the Same can hide the evidence of

its powerlessness through the murder of the Other. The command issued by the Other seems to

follow a declaration. First, the face expresses the phrase "you are powerless to dominate me"; it

is categorical, a statement of fact, and this statement is implied by Levinas's description of the

Other as defying all attempts at representation. Then, the command is given, "be content in your

powerlessness, and do not annihilate me." This is just another way to say "thou shalt not kill."

The command takes account of the Same's desperation to cling to what little power it still has. It

recognizes that the Same will resort to murder if it means maintaining some semblance of power.

While these phrases seem to do justice to the command expressed by the face, there still

seems to be little reason to believe in the Same's ability to recognize and understand the contents

of the command. After all, Levinas's original intent was to shatter the traditional power of

representing the Other by one's own reason. Perpich writes of this conundrum found in

Levinas's ethics and enumerates three main features of the encounter with the face. The first is

that the encounter does not lead to a meaning-producing act or a representation of the Other. As

Perpich writes, "the face is neither perceived nor known." Second, the encounter leads to an

inadequate conception of the Other and its command. Finally, the encounter with the face

shatters the freedom of the Same and elects it to its ethical responsibility to serve the Other (EEL

58). The face is what binds the Same to its ethical obligations, yet there is no meaning-producing act to be had by the Same.

For Levinas, the inadequacy of representation appears to be what calls upon the Same to its servitude, but it is entirely unclear how the face calls upon and commands the Same without first being conveyed through a representation. After all, if the command of the Other is meaningful, then it would require a meaning-producing act to access the command in the first place. "To encounter a face, Levinas tells us again and again, is to encounter someone who *counts as such* rather than in a calculable quantity. But in order to count in any sense, the other must become *countable*, and here the betrayal of singularity inevitably begins as the other becomes just one more singular being among others" (EEL 70). As Perpich explains, the very distinction Levinas makes between a "particular" and a "singularity" becomes blurred by his very own language. Understood as a singularity, the Other retains its uniqueness and Otherness, but through the encounter the Other is made out to be countable; it becomes just one face among the rest which reduces the Other to representation. This is contrary to his notion that a singularity is only understood in itself; once it becomes counted as such, the incomparable uniqueness which makes his ethics possible reveals itself as unique only in comparison. If understanding the command of the Other requires that the singularity of the Other is reduced to a particularity, then the Other is yet again subsumed by totality and reduced to the Same.

Derrida, Perpich notes, also has some issues with Levinas's characterization of the Other's alterity. Drawing on the Husserlian notions of alterity, Derrida identifies two different forms of alterity: that of thinghood and that of otherhood. For Husserl, the latter is predicated in the former. In the former, the perception of the Other as a thing is incomplete because the subject does not see it from all spatiotemporal angles. Because of this, the Other as a thing

appears in its alterity by the impossibility of seeing it circumspectively. It appears in its alterity as only a partial appearance. Its alterity is recognized through the incompleteness of the perception (EEL 71). The alterity of the Other as transcendently other is predicated on this former alterity, but this first requires a partial representation of the Other as it appears in its alterity. Derrida says that this requires that the Other must be seen not as an *alter*-ego or as a modification of my own self but as merely *another* ego in the world. As another ego, the Other would exist as another origin within the world which would prevent it from being reduced to the Same. Thus, Derrida's criticisms reveal the problem of representing the Other as a double-edged sword. If it is represented as another ego, the command of the Other would be intelligible but would enable the reduction of the Other to the Same. If the Other is left unrepresented, Levinas's ethical claims are verified and the Other maintains its uniqueness, but the command is rendered incomprehensible for the Same (EEL 72).

Perpich and Derrida's arguments suggest that the issues of the accessibility of Levinas's command can be avoided by simply representing the Other and its command. By representing the Other and its command, the Same would be able to assume its ethical responsibility to the Other by realizing its being elected to serve the Other. This would imply a kind of justice towards the Other through the recognition of the uniqueness and otherness of the Other, yet such a perspective might render Levinas's entire purpose, the ethical treatment of the Other, a moot point. By representing the Other as an ego, the Same returns to its epistemic primacy and assumes the phenomenological attitude of disclosure towards Others. Levinas's lack of support for such an attitude has previously been explained above, and one can understand why he considers reducing the Other to the Same's conception of it as an unethical act. Besides Levinas's original concerns about representation, would it not be the case that the Other would

21

be treated unethically if the command were not understood at all? According to Perpich, Derrida

gives reason to believe that the Same might end up committing an act of violence on the Other

regardless of whether it represents the Other or not (EEL 72). If this is the case, then ethics is

tragically doomed to result in one of two possibilities: reducing the Other to representation or

being blind to the Other's desperate cry for help.

Derrida and Perpich identify a dilemma in Levinas's theory in which the Same is left

with two choices, neither of which will lead to the ethical treatment of the Other. We can say

that if they are correct in this tragic assessment of Levinas, then they might be implying the

possibility of the impossibility of ethics. However, it is the intent of this essay to disagree with

this conclusion. Instead, it will be shown how the Same can get at an adequate understanding of

the Other's command. It will be shown that the issue of representing the command is really due

to how Levinas has segregated the Same and the Other, making it impossible for the Same to

ever achieve an ethical relationship with the Other. Levinas sets up the Other as an absolute

Other in order to establish the ethical exigency with which it can resist the Same's attempts at

reduction, yet the very issue of this is that it prevents the Same from being able to respond to a

known command due to its own ignorance of what is expressed in the command. Perhaps, the

answer lies in the characterization of otherness in the Other. In its current state, the infinite

alterity of the Other provides an irreducibility at the cost of incomprehension. A better answer

would then have be able to maintain the irreducibility while excising the incomprehensiveness or

get around the need for comprehension entirely.

V. Transcendence and the Possibility of Responding to the Other's Command through Language and Paternity

As stated previously, the absolute otherness and alterity of the Other prevents it from being reduced to the Same, and this also means that the Same and the Other cannot be compared and do not share any similarities with each other. Otherness implies that they are completely different from each other. Despite this, it is not apparent that Levinas even agrees with this understanding of the absolute Other. He dedicates a significant portion of his works to explaining alterity and otherness and their importance with the schema of his ethics, yet he also represents his conception of transcendence with examples that seem to at least partially contradict his own notion of alterity. Transcendence itself perhaps would not even be possible if the Same could not grasp at otherness. Morgan writes, "The self, the I, in normal, everyday life, experiences intimations of otherness, and then in social life I experience "traces" of a primordial relationship between itself and the particular other person" (DL 62). It seems unlikely that the Same would be capable of entering into such a relationship with the Other if it were truly an absolute alterity. The very dialogue experienced through encounter seems to imply something shared between the Other and the Same. It will be shown through the examples of language and paternity that the alterity of the Other is not so radically Other that the Same cannot grasp anything from it. Essentially, it will be argued that the Same and the Other have more in common with each other than Levinas's concept of the absolute Other suggests.

Language, for Levinas, is transcendence itself and is the ethical relationship and the infinite separation between the Same and the Other (EEL 68). Thus, language must also precede any representation (DL 64). Because of this language already implies an ethical relationship with the Other before any reduction can occur, and this relationship is characterized by the

distance and asymmetry between the Other and the Same. Despite this distance, one central

characteristic of language is that it is a collection of symbols in which others possess a mutual

understanding of. Levinas says that language is the distance between people, but sharing a

language, if anything, is what truly allows people to close the distance between each other.

Morgan sketches this paradox, saying that there are two features needed in language, "first, the

otherness or separateness of a dialogical partner or interlocutor, another person to talk with; and

second, universality or commonality" (DL 74). There is both a distance which separates, and a

commonality which brings together. Levinas recognizes this commonality found in language.

He says that language "is the offering of the world to the Other. Transcendence is not a vision of

the Other, but a primordial donation" (TI 174). When we speak, we are entering into a dialogue

with the Other, a relationship in which I put my own meaning forth and give it to the Other.

Levinas continues to use this concept of language as an "offering" to the Other albeit cryptically.

Perhaps, in language, the Same has already renounced any intent to destroy the Other by

attempting to communicate. Levinas writes, "Language does not exteriorize a representation

preexisting in me: it puts in common a world hitherto mine" (TI 174). In this way, dialogue is

not merely a machine for expressing my own thoughts: it is the transcendent act itself. Language

renders my world in common with the Other's.

 Levinas offers another example of his transcendence which also seems to imply the

commonality between the Same and the Other. This example is Levinas's conceptions of

fecundity and *paternity*. Fecundity is lexically understood as fertility and the ability to produce

progeny. As a technical term, Levinas seems to use it to describe a sort of perpetuation or

expansion of my own self in Others (TI 277). However, he does not describe this perpetuation in

the way of biological reproduction.

> The son is not only my work, like a poem or an object, nor is he my property. Neither the categories of power nor those of knowledge describe my relation with child. The fecundity of the I is neither a cause nor a domination. I do not have my child; I am my child. Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being Other *is* me, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me. In this "I am" being is no longer Eleatic unity. In existing itself there is a multiplicity and a transcendence. In this transcendence the I is not swept away, since the son is not me; and yet I *am* my son. The fecundity of the I is its very transcendence (TI 277).

Here, fecundity seems to imply the potency towards the extension of one's own being; the Same can see itself in the child through the paternal relationship. Through paternity the Same becomes Other to itself, yet the Other is not subsumed into the Same's identity. Levinas says, "I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject" (EI 101). In paternity, the Same becomes the Other but the Other retains its uniqueness (TI 279). By this, Levinas avoids the reduction of the Other to the Same while expanding the Same's being into the Other. By recognizing itself as the child, as Other to itself, the Same can open itself up and give its world to the child.

Perpich also notes this detail in Levinas. She writes, "to have a child is to have a part of oneself *in* that child; it is to have become other than or other to oneself…The child is an event that accomplishes being at the same time as it makes being *plural*" (EEL 36). This understanding of parenthood seems to find intuitive support in everyday life. The choice to become a parent is an ethical one, and the raising of a child comes with incredibly demanding obligations towards that child. Parents are generally expected to want to provide their child with the best possible life, otherwise they are seen as failing to possess the proper parental attitude. Yet parenthood is more than just the assumption of obligations; part of being a parent means accepting the otherness of the child as part of one's own being. Parents often live vicariously through their own children, they rejoice at the child's successes, lament with them at their

25

failures, and use their own experiences to help the child make the best possible decisions. The

justification for these acts is often a cliché one: "I do not want *you* to make the same mistake *I*

made when I was your age." Even more cliché, when the parent's love devolves into reduction,

the child breaks free with the usual statement: "No, dad, it wasn't *my* dream. It was *yours*."

Paternity, and transcendence as a whole, represents the Same's becoming the Other and

recognizing its own otherness while also making their two worlds one in common, yet it is

always in danger of falling back into reduction.

The very act of transcendence involves the merging of two worlds that are infinitely far

apart from each other: the Same and the Other's. By giving its world to the Other through

dialogue, the Same can enter into the ethical relationship with the Other. It seems strange to then

call the Other the absolute Other when it is capable of such a commonality with the Same. Thus,

this phrase may need to be abandoned to prevent contradiction in Levinas's ethics. Now, there is

also the question of how it is possible to put the Same and the Other's worlds in common, and

the answer to this may have been previously answered by other thinkers. As shall be shown, the

Other is a necessary figure in constructing the Same's own identity. This is because the very

nature of the self is dialogical: it exists and is constructed in dialogue with others. This feature

of being allows the Same to give its own world to the Other in future encounters.

VI.   Dialogicality and the Construction of the Self as in Dialogue with the Other

This notion of the dialogical self can be traced back to the formative years of

phenomenological thought. Hegel, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, explains how self-

consciousness is negatively derived from a relation with the Other. In explaining his concepts of

the Lord and the Bondsman, Hegel writes, "they exist as two opposed shapes of consciousness;

one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live for or to be for another" (PS 115). Here, Hegel is understood as referring to two conscious beings: the Same and the Other in Levinasian terms. Through discourse with each other, self-consciousness emerges in a more objective light as the self recognizes that it is an Other for the opposing conscious being. It takes recognition by the Other to first become aware of one's own objective self. The bondsman, as Other, forces the lord, as Same, to question itself. It is through this relation with the bondsman that it is made to see itself in a more objective perspective (PS 116-117). Through dialogue with the bondsman, the lord's own being is reflected back to itself in what appears to be the same way in which the child reflects the Same's being. Self-consciousness emerges from taking the Other's perspective towards oneself. Thus, one must first enter into dialogue with Others before they can become conscious of their own self.

Sartre also gives an account similar to Hegel's Lord-Bondsman dialect. In his keyhole example, Sartre explains how one comes to recognize the possibility of being treated as an object and positing the Other as a subject. In this example, one is spying on another, believing that they are completely invisible to any onlooker. However, at the sound of footsteps, one recognizes that they are being watched by another too. Sartre says that in recognizing myself as being watched, I too am forced to see my own self (BN 347-349). Coming to the understanding that I am being watched allows me to recognize myself as the object of another's gaze. This is analogous to Hegel's Lord-Bondsman dialect in that it requires taking the perspective of the Other to recognize the self. In a sense, there is also a similarity with the face of Levinas's Other. The Other's face compels the Same to see its own inability to represent and to question its own freedom while the Other's gaze causes me to question my own being: I am more than pure

subjectivity for I am seen. Both Levinas's face and Sartre's gaze act as an existential accusation

of the Same's own freedom and being. By this, it is meant that the Same recognizes the

impossibility of getting away with its transgressions; it has been seen by the Other and is being

judged.

Sartre seems to deny the possibility of consciousness being affected or at least partially

created by anything other than consciousness itself, yet his own distinction between the moments

of consciousness, the *I* and the *me*, seems to point towards the role that the perspective of the

Other takes in my own existence. "The me, as such, remains unknown to us. And this is easily

understood. The *me* is given as an object. Therefore, the only method for knowing it is

observation, approximation, anticipation, experience" (TE 86). The *me* is the objective self

while the *I* is the subjective self. As an object, the *me* is not immediately given but is discovered

through a relation between the *I* and the *me*. We need to be careful with the term 'object'

because Levinas is trying to avoid viewing the Other as an object, yet the Other is undoubtedly

the object of consciousness for the typical phenomenologist. What Sartre is trying to posit is that

the ego itself can be both a subject and object. The *me* acts as an object which can be 'seen' by

others, thus to 'see' the me of our own ego is to take the viewpoint of Others. Later, Sartre

describes the *me* as the "object of inadequate evidence" for anyone's perception, including the

ego's (TE 96). Here, Levinas's language of 'inadequacy' is useful. If our understanding of our

own *me* is inadequate, then there is something about the *me* that is undoubtedly formed in

relation to the Other.

George Herbert's Meade's humanistic psychology seems to echo this understanding of

the self as well. Meade also understands a self which exists in relation to otherness, one

composed of moments that both assume and respond to the multiplicity of being (MSS 142).

Despite their similar views, it seems incredibly unlikely that either Sartre or Meade were aware of each other's writings since *Mind, Self, and Society* was published several years after Meade's death and two years before Sartre's *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Nonetheless, their theories are almost identically Hegelian. "The 'I' is the one that responds to the attitudes of the others; the 'me' is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes" (MSS 175). The *I* is the self present in conscious decision making. This *I* can make judgements and decisions in spite of the *me* and also the attitudes of others. It is not socially constructed and seems to possess free will. Meade's *me,* on the other hand, is the moment of consciousness which arises from one's internalization of others' attitudes towards his or herself. The *me* arises not from one's own conscious will, but from assuming the very perspectives that Others take towards one's self. Meade says that the I-me self is socially constructed through play (MSS 153-5). At a very young age, through mimetic games, we assume the roles of others and develop this capacity for the other's perspective. Thus, it is through a relationship with others in which our own selves are constructed.

Between Levinas's understanding of language and paternity and Hegel, Sartre, and Meade's descriptions of self and self-consciousness, there is a case to be made for the role of the Other in the formation of the self. In being a self, part of the Same's being is characterized and defined by the attitudes and perceptions of the Others around it. Grossen and Salazar Orvig write that "subjectivity and intersubjectivity are not two separate entities in interaction; they are intermingled and one cannot be defined independently of the other" (DDSS 493). Levinas seems to imply this when he says "subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another" (EI 96). From both psychological and philosophical approaches, the self appears as dialogical in nature. This is to say that being a self means to have at least part of one's being constructed in

dialogue with Others; it is through interaction, conversation, and encounter with other beings that our own selves begin to crystallize. Thus, to be the Same means to already possess the alterity of the Other within oneself. This multiplicity of being is shaped by the context of dialogue: to be a parent is to be partially constructed by the child, to be a friend is to be in dialogue with the friend, etc. Dialogicality responds to the uniqueness of the situation and the Other. This dialogicality of being is ultimately what enables the Same to put forth its own world through language and to be called upon and respond to the Other's command.

This brings the conversation back to the role of language itself in the ethical relationship with the Other. In the encounter with the Other, the Same is forced back upon itself, but why? As was demonstrated earlier in this essay, Levinas sought to shift the priority of the Same and the Other. The prior relationship possessed an asymmetry in which the Same held a primacy above the Other. In such a relationship, the Same lives in an entitled position while the Other is set apart. However, in the reversal of asymmetry, the Other is nominated to a position of height while the Same is the accused and elected. Morgan says that "the face as persecution, moreover, is an *accusation*" (DL 83). In accusation, the Same is not "pointed out" as the guilty being (passive), but the Other "points out" the Same (active); Sartre's keyhole example comes to mind. In being accused, the Other calls out the Same, letting the Same know that it is being watched and judged, and the Same is forced to respond to the accusation. The Same is put into the accusative case, the *me*; it loses its primacy as the subject by becoming an object for the Other. In accusation, the Other does not force the Same to respond; however, the Same cannot let the accusation go unanswered. When accused, the defendant must present its case; in the same way, the Same is compelled to react to its accusation. Through reduction, the Other is merely seen as an obstacle placed in front of the Same to be overcome. After the accusation, the Other appears

behind the Same in the position of the commander. Even the intentional structure of the relationship between the Same and the Other appears as dialogue. It is through this dialogue with the Other in which the Same is accused that the Same receives this command and becomes conscious of its own transgressions against the Other.

The problem of representing Levinas's command is a complex one. To respond to a command, it seems obvious that the command must first be represented and cognized in order to be adequately responded to, but this would negate all of Levinas's ethics by the reduction of the Other to the Same. Language, for Levinas, appears to solve this issue because it occurs before all representation. In the same way, Levinas uses the phrase "ethics as first philosophy" because he believes that transcendence occurs before both metaphysics and epistemology. As has been shown, the command is responded to through dialogism. In encountering the face, the Same finds itself as being accused by the Other. This shakes the Same, unsettles it, turns its attention to its own transgressions, and dethrones the Same from its primacy of being. The Same is made to recognize is own being as an object for the Other. Through dialogue, the Same achieves a heightened sense of self-awareness and recognizes its own being as partially constructed by the Other. Through dialogue, the boundary between subjectivity and intersubjectivity become blurred, for subjective experience always finds some determination in intersubjectivity. Since dialogue occurs before any representation, this allows the Same to listen to the Other's command and respond to it without a reduction of the Other to the Same. Through language and dialogue, the Same is capable of that primordial relation with the Other, of that ethical donation: the making in common of the world. In this way, it has been shown how the Same is capable of responding to the Other's command without first committing an act of violence. In doing so, we have prevented Levinas's ethics from contradicting itself.

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