

The Relevance of Particularity in an Ethics of Alterity:
An Investigation of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida

Charles Ng

A Thesis

In

The Department of Philosophy

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts (in Philosophy) at

Concordia University

Montreal Quebec, Canada

June 2010

© Charles Ng, 2010



Library and Archives
Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file *Votre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-71029-6
Our file *Notre référence*
ISBN: 978-0-494-71029-6

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.


Canada

Abstract

The Relevance of Particularity in an Ethics of Alterity:

An Investigation of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida

Charles Ng

This thesis is an exploration of the role that the particularities (i.e., sex/gender, race/ethnicity, etc.) of the Other have in generating ethical responsibility. According to the meta-ethical claim put forth by Emmanuel Levinas's critique of Martin Heidegger's ontology, ethics is taken as the primordial issue of existence. The reason is that the correlated issues of meaning and identity are a result of the alterity that ensues from the exposure to the Other's face. This *radical* otherness, which resists our ability of comprehension, gestures to a sense of *vulnerability* that articulates the *mortality* of existence. The Other's death then becomes a possibility that calls us to responsibility.

To this, Jacques Derrida provides *suggestions* to Levinas in regard to the issue of this *radical alterity*. Derrida's claim is that if we hold steadfast to the incomprehensibility of the Other, then such an entity is prevented from ever appearing within the horizon of understanding, and remains *hidden* as a relevant issue. Ethics is possible only insofar as the Other in some way *appears*, and thus Derrida proposes that *ontological violence* must minimally be committed for a relationship with alterity.

This emphasis on the *appearance* of the Other means that there is some tangible quality that allows the contact with him/her. *Différance* will be helpful in understanding how we can approach these particularities according to their *historical* significance. It will then be argued that these particularities *mediate* our exposure to alterity, and are constitutive for ethics.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mom, dad, and sister for all their years of endearing support. Without you, this project would have been utterly impossible. I cannot express in any quantity of words my love and gratitude for your presence in my life.

I would also like to take this moment to thank all those who I have encountered, and had the pleasure of meeting throughout my time on this world thus far. My experiences would be nothing in your absence. Unbeknownst to you, you have all made an insurmountable contribution to who I am today, which ultimately shaped the thoughts that are to follow. Of course, there are too many names to name at this moment, and for fear of forgetting anyone in particular I will keep this acknowledgement anonymous. But then again, I am sure you probably know who you are anyway! Cheers to the numerous times spent chatting instead of sleeping, laughing rather than working, and thinking while also listening. May there hopefully be forever many more to come!

I would like to acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for the financial funding provided by the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship that enabled the completion of this project.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter I – An Exposition of Levinas’s Ethical Standpoint	7
1.1.1 In the Same Vein as Levinas: An Obligatory Passage Through Heidegger	9
1.1.2 Exactly Whose Death is it? Levinas over Heidegger	15
1.2 The Death of the Other	20
1.3 Being as Ethics	25
Chapter II – Appearing as Other: Derrida’s Questions to Levinas	32
2.1 The Levinasian Other	35
2.1.1 Alterity and the Face	35
2.1.2 Violence Against the Other	39
2.1.3 Levinas and the Emergence of the Third Party	43
2.2 Derrida’s Response to Levinas	47
2.2.1 Transcendental Violence: Radical Alterity and the Use of Language	47
2.2.2 ‘Aporias’: Insufficiency and Multiplicity of Language	50
2.2.3 Hospitality and the Welcoming of the Third	55
Chapter III – The Importance of Particularity in Ethics	61
3.1 Why the Particularities of the Other?	64
3.2 Différance	70
3.3 Particularities after Différance: an Ethics via Particularity	78
Bibliography	90

Introduction

In terms of the discussion of the ‘other’ within traditional ethical discourses (i.e., utilitarianism, deontology, etc), ‘it’ is usually presented as some universalized entity devoid of any particular characteristics. For instance, the utilitarian is generally concerned with maximizing general ‘happiness’ rather than attending to one’s particular needs – arguably, the former is how the latter might be fulfilled – whereas the deontologist might be focused on deriving universal maxims that remain consistent universally, regardless of the disparity that exists between individuals within a population – a good moral agent might be one who abides perfectly according to these maxims. It could be said that these systems have often disregarded an individual’s particularities as being a relevant issue in constructing their respective discourses. However, by ignoring such pertinent qualities of the other, it appears that we receive an inapplicable set of maxims that misguide our ethical lives; the terms presented evidently apply only to *universalized entities, and no one in particular.*

My intention is to argue that the particular differences in which we discover the other’s appearance provide us with a basis in guiding our ethical decisions. This focus on particular differences is an attempt to steer away from a traditional form of ethics, which relies on inapplicable categories in order to derive ethical responsibility. It would seem that the goal of an ethics that accounts for the differences of the other would be to articulate obligations and responsibilities by embracing such traits, rather than concealing their importance, and thus deeming them as irrelevant. The main concern of this thesis is to explore *how* these particularities might inform and situate ethical possibilities. This is not to altogether deny that universal categories play a role in ethics (such as a capability

of *suffering*, or *vulnerability*), but rather that the enactment of such possibilities as commanding some ethical import is the result of noticing and forming a relationship with the particularities that reveal the presence of the other. This shift to understanding the importance of particularities will require doing a *meta-ethical* investigation. This type of project has been developed to a large extent by the reconciliation Jacques Derrida provides between the conflicting views of Martin Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas. In following Derrida's deconstructive framework, I hope to uncover the origins of our obligations and responsibilities towards the Other¹.

Unlike some of these classical accounts of ethics where we are confronted by universal maxims and moral codes of behaviour, a meta-ethical project consists in, among other things, investigating the *source* of ethical responsibilities. That is, meta-ethics is mainly focused on uncovering how some facet of reality can in the first place be deemed *as ethical*, and thereby exploring the reasons why such an understanding then holds us accountable. Taking seriously *existential* and *phenomenological* observations, the method used will thus be predominantly *descriptive*, and it will be discovered that ethics is the result of how the world becomes meaningful. In exploring the abovementioned perspectives of Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida, we will find out that the issues of meaning and identity are also intimately tied together. What is common with these three perspectives is that meaning and identity are derived from the fact that there is, in one way or another, an unaccountable element of reality that is beyond the present. This connection, at least in Levinas's case, functions to oblige us ethically to the Other.

¹ The capitalization of 'Other' is employed by Levinas to highlight its primordial significance over the 'other.' The latter can be taken as a sort of 'difference' that can be prone to conceptual assimilation by the Ego, whereas the former is that which is always beyond our consumption. Furthermore, the Other always refers to the one who calls me to ethical responsibility, and is a *personal* Other who possess a human *face*. This convention of using the capitalized 'O' will be maintained throughout the remainder of this thesis.

For Levinas, this realm that lies beyond us resides solely in the exposure of the Other. As such, Levinas puts forth a view where this dependence on the Other's *alterity* provides a context for the emergence of ethical responsibility. As will be developed within this thesis, this sense of alterity is found in the exposure of the *Other's death*. The death of the Other functions to open up a set of possibilities beyond the realm of my existence by gesturing to the *mortality* of existence. This perspective is largely a response to Heidegger's ontological investigation where *Dasein's own death* is taken as the site for the emergence of meaning and identity. This change in trajectory functions to privilege *ontology over ethics*. However, in taking the implications of the experience of death seriously, Levinas shows that death is not in any case *mine to die*. Because it is taken as the moment that *denies* all other experiences, there is no way that Dasein is able to encounter this event on its own terms as revealing the stakes of existence. Instead, we can only experience death through the Other's *vulnerability*. Because of the vital connection between the relationship with the Other, and the origins of meaning and identity, Levinas holds the primacy of ethics. This debate between Levinas and Heidegger on how death is experienced will be developed in the first chapter of this thesis. We will see that in understanding what is demanded of death, such a possibility can only be expressed through the face of the Other.

The task of the second chapter will be twofold. In the first place, there will be a development of how Levinas understands this Other. To put this issue in a succinct manner, Levinas's Other is found *outside* of the realm of our understanding. In developing the binary distinction between the Other and the Same, we are told by Levinas's writings that the two are irreconcilable, and remain utterly exclusive of each

other. The Other will be said to reside in the realm of intangibility. Any attempt of the Other to cross over into the Same is considered a *violation* of alterity. What is at stake here is a sense of *radical alterity* that is constitutive of delineating our ethical situation. As such, no matter how hard we try, we cannot adequately capture the essential structure of the Other. This becomes the basis of how the Other holds us hostage, and thereby generates a fundamental ethical command; the possibility of the Other's death expresses the claim of 'do not kill,' which overwhelms us from the initial encounter of his/her face. It must be noted here that in attempting to capture the alterity that characterizes the Other into the rigidity of a concept *always* leads to a *violent destruction*.

Secondly, once an understanding that the exposure of the radical alterity of the Other is an immediate revelation of the vulnerability of existence that generates ethical responsibility is reached, there will be an exploration of Derrida's rejoinder to Levinas's Other. In a defense of Heidegger and the role of ontology, Derrida points out that the Other must *manifest* or *appear* to some extent for the Other to become relevant. At the very least, the Other must emerge from within the horizon of appearance because without this, such an *issue* could not even become apparent in the first place. This otherness must be torn from its abysmal alterity, and illuminate in some way as *being* other. Derrida's contribution to this debate is that the initial point of contact of this otherness is through acknowledging the *particularities* that in some way express the Other's presence. Derrida suggests to Levinas that there must be a *betrayal* of the Other in order for him/her to appear as a relevant issue. This *violence* is necessary because otherwise there could be no ethical discourse that would emerge in the first place. To hold steadfast to Levinas's perspective is to annihilate ethics altogether – since there would be *no* Other available

with whom to have an ethics – and becomes the ultimate violence against the Other. As such, for an ethics to appear at all, it is necessary that *ontological violence* be thwarted against this Other. This violence is the origin of ethics, and is inescapable for the possibility of otherness. Due to this contingency, according to Derrida, ethics in Levinas's sense of an original relationship with the Other *is* (ontological) violence.

Using Derrida's work, what I will attempt to show in the final chapter is that this inquiry goes beyond Levinas insofar as it presents a possibility for ethics to arise in the first place. Since Levinas's Other cannot even appear according to his own criteria, the ethics that results from this premise is conflicted by its shortcomings. On the contrary, through notions that arise in Derrida's work, such as *différance* and the 'co-original third,' an ethical situation requires that, inasmuch as they become the sites that permit the possibility of otherness, we must pay close attention to the particular differences that distinguish and make relevant the Other: *alterity only appears through our relation with these particularities*. Such differences that situate the Other – viz., gender/sex, race/ethnicity, etc. – provide a basis for an exposure of otherness that is constitutive for our pursuit of ethics. Following Derrida's reading of Levinas, my goal by the end of my thesis is to articulate a conception of ethics, contrary to antecedent classical systems, where we account for the importance of particular differences in approaching and dealing with the Other. Without acknowledging these particularities of the Other, which allow for the possibility of the emergence of alterity, we could not have an ethics at all. How *différance* can help such an endeavour is by presenting an *otherness within the Same* (to remain consistent with the vocabulary of Levinas), which thus allows for the *appearance* of alterity. Furthermore, in reading these particularities of the Other according to the

aporetic relation signaled by *différance*, it will be suggested that these traits must not only be acknowledged, but also constantly be *negotiated* according to our social context. Ethics then requires us to make *compromises* in how we understand the Other, and as such, ethics is *always already a politics*.

Chapter I – An Exposition of Levinas’s Ethical Standpoint

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger claims that Dasein, no matter what it does, must always relate to and interrogate the question of its Being. Here, Heidegger employs the term *Dasein* in order to indicate the sort of potential Being that *we are in our very existence*, which differs from that of other objects; our Being stands out inasmuch as we are able to deliberate on the decisions made in everyday existence. Authentic Dasein, which is characterized by *mineness*,² exposes the determinative ontological structures that confines and conceals its possibilities of existing in the world, and thereby projects itself beyond such categories in its very Being. Authenticity suggests that the issue of Dasein’s existence is never settled, and is thus continually a process that is *ahead-of-itself*.³ If Dasein, as a term that gestures to the character of our Being-in-the-world, can be taken as *a personal or appropriated* experience of the world, then the central theme in Heidegger’s inquiry appears to revolve around some ‘Ego’ or ‘first-person perspective’ as the site where we uncover the ontological roots that are constitutive for our Being. Contrary to Heidegger’s position – where Dasein is concerned about its *own* possibilities for its existence – Levinas’s initiative is to show that the issue of one’s own being in the world can *only* arise from the *call of the Other*.

The main task of this preliminary chapter is to unfold Levinas’s understanding of ethics as the fundamental basis in which we encounter our being. Unlike Heidegger who,

² Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, ¶ 9. See more specifically page 68 in the English pagination. Dasein is characterized differently from other entities in its ability to make a decision according to its own situation.

³ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 279. Heidegger uses the phrase of *Being-ahead-of-itself* to describe the temporal structure of Dasein: “there is always something *still outstanding*, which, as a potentiality-for-Being for Dasein itself, has not yet become ‘actual’ [...] that there is *constantly something still to be settled*.”

in following the footsteps of Husserl by endorsing a sort of *transcendental Ego*,⁴ emphasizes Dasein's role in setting up its own basis for existence, Levinas argues that it is the Other who singularizes the Ego, and creates the conditions for existential possibilities. Before there is any issue of *Being-there*, the Other *situates* the Ego as an existing self. This pivot from Dasein to the ontological priority of the Other signals the contingency of the Ego's *awareness as an Ego*. To put this another way, the 'I' who appears as a potentially existing entity can only manifest itself according to the Other who puts this 'I' into question; there is no Ego in isolation, but rather the Other is always presupposed in its emergence. In order to follow through with the goal of this chapter, it will first be necessary to unpack Levinas's reading of the significance of death in Heidegger's philosophy. The purpose of this is to show that taking up one's own death authentically opens up the co-related issues of meaning and identity, which differentiates the Being of Dasein from that of other things. From here, I will give an account of Levinas's critique of Heidegger that favours rather the death of the Other as the transcendental condition for existential possibilities, which sets up the primacy of ethics over ontology.⁵ In the closing portion of this chapter, I will discuss what is at stake in this Levinasian analysis of our being, and argue, along with Levinas, for the priority of ethics: our being is first and foremost an ethical relationship with the Other.

⁴ Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations*. The idea of a *transcendental Ego* is developed in this work. Husserl argues that there are always intentional structures that are constitutive of our phenomenological experiences of the world. The horizon of meaning that sets up our experience of an object demonstrates that the Ego always brings something to the phenomena itself (i.e., we take some object *as such and such*). For this reason, the Ego appears as the site where experience of the thing in question is even initially possible.

⁵ Cohen, Richard A. "Levinas: Thinking Least about Death: Contra Heidegger." This article provides a comparison of the way that Heidegger and Levinas both approach the phenomenon of death.

1.1.1 – In the Same Vein as Levinas: An Obligatory Passage Through Heidegger

In spite of the disparities between Levinas's work and Heidegger's, Levinas had always acknowledged his indebtedness to Heidegger for reawakening the issue of Being as an ongoing question (that is, retaining being *in its verb sense of 'to be'*).⁶ The ontological difference, developed by Heidegger, distinguishes *beings* (namely, already present objects in the world) from Being itself, favouring the latter as the *manifestation of Dasein*. Heidegger argues that this active sense of Being as manifesting or emerging has been concealed since the inception of the technical interpretation of thinking we get from the Greeks.⁷ By using the term Dasein, the primacy of returning to this more original sense of Being illuminates a basic *incompleteness* at very root of our existence that opens up the realm for meaning and identity to appear. We learn from *Being and Time* that Dasein's fundamental Being lies in a process of *temporality*.⁸ In fact, Levinas maintains this claim to a certain extent in his own work in generating the idea of *alterity*, which is a constitutive feature of the Other. This point of Levinas's position, however, will currently be set aside, and elaborated further in the subsequent chapter. For the moment, it will be important to understand how this incompleteness gets unfolded in Heidegger's project so that we can delineate the context for Levinas's emphasis on the Other. Among other ways, one's *own death* points to the *temporal* structure of Dasein, which is indispensable to it as an unfinished Being.

⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity*, see section on Heidegger, 37-44.

⁷ Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 16. Heidegger writes that, "the inceptive philosophy of the Greeks turns into a philosophy of nature, a representation of all things according to which they are really of a material nature. Then the inception of Greek philosophy, in accordance with our everyday understanding of an inception, gives the impression of being, as we say once again in Latin, primitive [...] it must be said that this interpretation forgets what is at issue is philosophy."

⁸ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, ¶ 69.

To begin, it must be maintained that death in this case is not just a mere happenstance of our existence. Both Heidegger and Levinas's respective projects are not necessarily concerned with the *instant* of death itself. Rather, taking death authentically means that it characterizes Dasein as a *mode* of its Being-in-the-world: "death is like a return of being in itself [...and] is not what marks some final instant of *Dasein* but what characterizes the very way in which man is his being."⁹ The discourse of death is concerned with something *beyond* the mere *biological contingency*, but instead presents to Dasein a sense of *finality* in its Being. Unlike a piece of fruit that *expires*, Dasein's Being is guided by such an inevitability of this fate. The existential trajectory of an apple, for instance, remains unaffected by the fact that it will rot away, and eventually decompose. The apple does not attempt to *adjust* its possibilities according to this finality; in fact, this thing does not *attempt* anything at all, but rather we could say that it remains idle and indifferent in its Being. As we will see, Dasein's death, on the other hand, illuminates the question of its own Being, which makes its possible existence into an issue. The 'return of being' opens up the suggestion that Dasein becomes reflective of its very situation. Ontologically, then, death is taken as the basis on how Dasein projects its Being-in-the-world.

I have mentioned that Heidegger suggests that the Being of Dasein is marked by the structure of existing ahead-of-itself. Insofar as Dasein exists vicariously with temporality, this indicates that the issue of its Being *always comes as potentiality* rather than *as a completed actuality*. That is, Dasein's Being is characterized as a *constant process of becoming*; this sort of existence is distinctive insofar as it is always caught up in time, and thus what it *is*, in fact, is *yet to be determined, and always to come*. To

⁹ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 50-1.

borrow a term from Levinas, the Being of Dasein is never completely *totalized*, and thus its existence as possibility remains to a certain extent *incomplete*. Levinas writes that:

In *Dasein*, inasmuch as it is, something is always *lacking* [*my emphasis*, C.N.]: precisely that which it can be and become. To this lack, belongs the end itself; but the end of being-in-the-world is death.¹⁰

Dasein is not some 'thing' that is given all at once, but rather, according to its temporal existence, such an entity develops and changes in the unfolding of its very Being.

Dasein's existence as lacking suggests that there is something beyond that which is given in its mere presence. Since there is always more to come, Dasein is not reducible to some closed set of tangible qualities. Namely, we cannot encapsulate Dasein according to some essential feature that we might deem it to be. *Being in temporality* means then that there must always remain an incoherent and inconceivable aspect of Dasein's Being, since its existence is referred to *what lies ahead*. Furthermore, without a rigid essential structure that fixes Dasein to an absolute particular form, what Dasein can potentially become remains infinitely open to question since what it *is* at any particular given moment is never conclusively definitive of it as *a being*. Temporal existence precisely suggests that Dasein's becoming is left unknown, and such possibilities are not disclosed in advance of the process of Being.

Death would become, in a sense, the *furthest point* of Dasein's lacking. This seems to pose a double significance: on the one hand, it is the site that marks the annihilation of any further possibilities of existence, where Dasein is stripped of Being and becomes *no longer*. Dasein encounters death as an impossible structure because it is the very site where all the possibilities 'to be' are exhausted. On the other hand, death

¹⁰ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 35.

becomes constitutive for the possibility of Being inasmuch as it can be taken as the *lack of lacking*, which, as a logical corollary of a double negation,¹¹ can imply a site for Dasein where a *plentitude*¹² of existential potentiality manifests. It is only insofar as Dasein can cease to be that it encounters its possibility of existing. Being can only be made into an issue for Dasein because of this connection with finitude; the finality of death *limits* Dasein to a *particular* existence in the world. Thus, Heidegger writes that, “[d]eath is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein.”¹³ Since dying is a real possibility, and annihilation is thereby lurking, Dasein *cares*¹⁴ about the issue of its Being because there is a potentiality of *no longer being*. Dasein realizes its existential contingency, and is urged to take a hold of the available possibilities as solely its own. Death then functions to *situate* Dasein in a relationship with its *own* existence: Dasein can be understood as *being-towards-death*.¹⁵ Here, Dasein emerges to itself from within the world as a *Being-there*, which leads to the appearance of the issue of *selfhood*.

According to Levinas, Heidegger understands death as an event in which Dasein is able to identify itself as an entity in the world:

¹¹ Although conceiving a ‘lack’ of something does not necessarily entail a negation of it, the logical structure of negation seems to be helpful in understanding what is going on here. If we take B as Being, then $\sim B$ can be the lack thereof. Therefore, death might be conceived in this sense as $\sim \sim B$, or in other words B. Perhaps more accurately would be to use B’ since this example is not implying a return to the *same* initial state of B.

¹² I use the word ‘plentitude’ to signify the possibilities of Dasein. This is perhaps in an attempt to anticipate Levinas by suggesting an active sense of being that is derivative from passivity. Death seems to set up the potentiality of Dasein, and points to an open-endedness of the futurity of being, which appears to mark a level of abundance.

¹³ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, 294.

¹⁴ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, ¶ 40-1. Heidegger uses care in a technical sense to denote the Dasein’s primordial Being-in-the-world. Because of the ontological priority of this mode of existence, authentic Dasein, who is concerned with its *own* Being, is overcome with anxiety when scrutinized into Being according to Its possibilities.

¹⁵ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, ¶ 51.

Death thus shows itself as a possibility without any possible substitution [...] In dying, the ontological structure that is mineness, *Jemeinigkeit*, reveals itself [...] since] in my death I die the death that is my fault.¹⁶

What is at stake here is the awareness of oneself *as an existing Ego*, for it is the 'I' that is in the position to interrogate the question of Being. One must appropriate death as one's *own*, and realize that no one else is able to die in my place. *My* death allows for a relationship to *my* possibilities of existence. For Levinas to point out the issue of 'fault' in Heidegger's conception of death suggests a level of existential *responsibility*: the onus is put solely on me to undertake my being according to my impending death. This indicates an identification of the self within the context of the world since it is Dasein *who stands out to itself as the entity that navigates the world*. As such, in the process of becoming, existential possibilities are revealed as being *mine*. Death forces Dasein to put itself forward as the central standpoint while carrying out its dealings because it *is the one who exists*. Primordial Being-in-the-world is therefore manifest from *within* the perspective of Dasein, and since when dying one is faced by a horizon of annihilation, Dasein takes *itself* as the foremost locale of Being. In death, there is an *accusation*¹⁷ of Dasein, which singles out its own Being to itself as the utmost pertinent issue at hand. Dasein is compelled 'to be' by this character of mineness; Dasein exists as its *own* self, and this is how it directs itself in the world.

Through singularizing the primacy of the 'I', death then characterizes the utmost pertinence of each of *my* possibilities. Since Dasein's existence is limited by its death, a level of finality characterizes each decision that contributes towards its process of

¹⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 39.

¹⁷ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, ¶ 58. Heidegger discusses the sense of guilt associated with Dasein's appropriation of its existence that comes from authentically caring about its death.

becoming; by succumbing to death, what I decide to do up until that point could be the final possibility I undertake. Not only does this identify Dasein to itself as a sort of Ego, but this also sets the stage for the issue of meaning to arise. In Being, Dasein must *decide* its own existence, and due to the finitude placed by death, the stakes of the choices made must be taken wholeheartedly; Dasein cannot turn its back on its Being-in-the-world. The possibility of death places an ardent impetus on Dasein to carry out its possibilities as *endeavours* rather than passing them off as irrelevant. As such, each instance that contributes to Dasein's possibilities has an insurmountable worth associated with the issue of its Being. Here, the notion of worth is not necessarily to suggest an evaluative set of value-laden terms, but instead denotes the origin of meaning in the most general sense: namely, the *issue itself* coming up *as being an issue*. In another way, what Dasein engages itself with is taken to be *relevant*. Dasein's concern with its Being-in-the-world brings to light the question of Being itself, and thereby renders such an issue as significant for Dasein in some way. By holding steadfast to the pertinence of one's own Being-in-the-world, which sets up the situation for Dasein to identify itself, the world is then presented as meaningful insofar as it provides a context for Dasein to interrogate the question of its Being.

Through a brief encounter with Levinas's understanding of the role of death in Heidegger, we find that it becomes the site where the question of Being can arise for Dasein. As being-towards-death, Dasein is forced to come to terms with its finitude. This not only provides the opportunity for Dasein to identify itself within the position of taking hold of its own existence, but also locates the site for meaning to arise by opening up the possibilities of dealing with the question of Being itself, which is in fact

constitutive for the promise of the former. The emergence of self-identity, and the possibility of the significance of the world seem to be inseparable due to their correlation with death. In order for death to serve such a function for Dasein's Being-in-the-world, it must be maintained that dying is always one's *own utmost possibility*: death is not a *shared* phenomenon. As such, death singularizes Dasein in its Being as *Being*. For Heidegger, death is presented as an event that remains *radically exclusive* to Dasein. Existential responsibility therefore only concerns Dasein according to its own terms: there is no necessity on an appearance of another Dasein for death to do its part. As we will see in what follows, Levinas denies this framing of death, and rather vouches for the *death of the Other* as being the only experience that can generate self-identity, and set up a world of significance.

1.1.2 – Exactly Whose Death is it? Levinas over Heidegger

From the last section, I had given an overview of the key parts of Heidegger's conception of death that are crucial for developing Levinas's position. Death provides a context for the possibility of meaning and self-identity to arise. On this, for the most part Levinas is in agreement with Heidegger. The dispute arises on how death is situated and experienced in order to take on such a transcendental status. For Heidegger, it is clear that death is always one's own, which suggests that the site of identity and meaning is situated within Dasein's existence itself. Insofar as Dasein is characterized as ahead-of-itself and towards-death, there is no need to look *elsewhere* in deriving an unsettled aspect of experience that sets up the conditions 'to be.' Instead, the futurity of Dasein's temporal existence suggests that Being itself can reveal this incompleteness which is constitutive for the emergence of issues such as identity and meaning. In refuting this, Levinas puts

forward a perspective that death, on its own terms, is a happening that in fact resists appropriation, and can *never* be directly experienced by the Ego in isolation.

Approaching death authentically comes about in a paradoxical manner inasmuch as it is at once a happening that unpredictably comes to us (namely, we cannot precisely pinpoint exactly *when* this phenomenon will happen), and at the same time, it is the site that allows for us to make Being into an issue; we have no grasp of it, yet it is constitutive of our existence. To the former point, Levinas writes that the unknowable aspect of death:

[I]s correlative to an experience of the impossibility of nothingness [... and] signifies that the very relationship with death cannot take place in the light, that the subject is in relationship with what does not come from itself.¹⁸

Because in dying we are *denied* our being as such, that is to say, cease to exist and prevented from further experiences, we cannot actually *ever apprehend our own death*.

Heidegger seems to take this character of death – viz. the undecided and impending futurity – as the condition for Dasein’s Being-in-the-world. Dasein exists according to its forthcoming, and what lies ahead is never already decided in advance. Holding true to the uncertainty of death, however, suggests that *nothing* can be illuminated to the Ego postmortem because all possibilities of its existence would have been exhausted. As such, contrary to Heidegger, who holds that one exists *towards-one’s-own-death*, we are actually unable to establish any further relationships because *forming them in general* become no longer possible after one dies; one’s own death is precisely where possibilities of existence are inhibited rather than enabled. In fact, this is the basis on which Dasein gets overwhelmed by the stakes involved with its existence, and is thereby urged into action. Death functions to place Dasein in relation to its own

¹⁸ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*, 69-70.

finitude, which is constitutive of its Being-in-the-world. Instead, Levinas interjects that death cannot be understood as some 'thing' that Dasein has the ability to strive towards. On the contrary, its 'appearance' destroys the very basis that makes such striving possible. It could be said that according to this annihilative nature, death is presented as an existential enigma insofar as it escapes any attempt of correspondence with Being itself. According to Levinas, Heidegger misconstrues the nature of death by suggesting that Dasein's primary Being-in-the-world attains a meaningful relationship with this inconceivable aspect of existence.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas goes further to describe the very structure of death, and how the terms from Heidegger's project misunderstand how we are most primordially exposed to it:

Death, in its absurdity, maintains an impersonal order, in which it tends to take on a signification— [...] Death threatens me from beyond. [...] I can absolutely not apprehend the moment of death; [...] My death comes from an instant upon which I can in no way exercise my power [...] and] is a menace that approaches me as a mystery; its secrecy determines it— it approaches without being able to be assumed, such that the time that separates me from my death dwindles and dwindles without end, involves a sort of last interval which my consciousness cannot traverse, and where a leap will somehow be produced from death to me.¹⁹

As annihilation, death marks a moment where one becomes absolutely helpless and powerless over one's ability to exist altogether; we lose control of our being precisely because we *are no longer*. We can only deal with our existence insofar as we *are existing*, and there remains some *unexplorable* realm of possibility that is presented in death

¹⁹ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*, 234-5.

because the result is that of no longer *being*. In this way, death *alienates*²⁰ the self from its being. Heidegger would suggest that the concern that arises from dealing with this unknown aspect of an impending death opens up the existential mode of *anxiety*,²¹ and thus Dasein's existence is guided according to this.

Levinas, on the other hand, suggests that:

[D]eath does not announce itself in the immanence or worldliness of subjectivity through the mood of anxiety [...] rather, is first intimated in the phenomenon of suffering [...] the sense of one's own mortality, this comes first in suffering.²²

Because the event of death is precisely the moment of *no longer existing*, it cannot come up as an issue for Dasein solely from within the terms of Being. An *immediate* relationship with *death itself*, which is implied in Being-towards-death, is therefore utterly impossible. In this way, death can only be experienced *indirectly*. Levinas rightly points out that when one is faced with death, it is only in the exposure to the *mortality* of existence that we can have contact with finitude: "the physical pain of suffering brings one closer to death than a psychological fear of or anxiety before death."²³ Although it could be argued that fear can be induced by our vulnerability, it must be maintained that such modes of existence only appear as *representations* of the phenomena at hand; these modes are *reactions* to an ontologically prior, and thereby more immediate, experience of our being. Thus, we do not experience our own death on its own terms, but rather such involvement is *secondary* to our initial being in the world. That is, we initially suffer and feel pain before we are faced by the possibility of dying. Contrary to Heidegger, Dasein

²⁰ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*, 74-77. In this section, Levinas describes the alterity of death, and how it alienates the subject; death is not something that we can ever *possess*. The experience of death is not one where we die, but rather the Other. This sets up the other as the site where we encounter death, and thereby, "we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us." (75)

²¹ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, ¶ 40.

²² Cohen, Richard A. "Levinas: Thinking Least about Death: Contra Heidegger," 27.

²³ Cohen, Richard A. "Levinas: Thinking Least about Death: Contra Heidegger," 28.

does not primordially exist according to its own death, but rather it is the experience of its vulnerability that provides the basis for the arrival of existential anxiety [*Angst*]. As we will see later on in this chapter, the appearance of vulnerability is not located exclusively within the self, but will also require an interlocutor. For the moment, it will be elaborated further that the *alterity* of death entails that it is beyond the sphere of knowledge.

If death is to be then taken as an utmost mystery of one's existence, which was discussed above as necessary for Heidegger's treatment of authentically dying, then it must be presented as an event that *flees* all possibilities of appropriation. This poses a problem for Heidegger's project because the outcome suggests that Dasein cannot by any means *relate* to its own death at all. The terms of one's own death are necessarily intangible, and must thereby remain transcendent to our understanding. Richard Cohen frames Levinas as describing death as a phenomenon that is prior to the issue of knowledge:

It is not enough to say that death is unknowable. Its inscrutability goes beyond the known and unknown. It is not known, to be sure, but it is also not simply unknown, as if it were somehow within the realm of knowledge but not yet known or even unknowable in principle. [...] More fundamentally death is recalcitrant to knowledge regarding its nature [...] the mystery of death – that which is ungraspable – is not an object of knowledge., of any knowledge. It is, to say the obvious, outside of all grasp.²⁴

To lay claim to something in the world from *our* standpoint requires that we accept what is in question according to the binary structure of known/unknown. That is, in order for us to be able to deal with an issue, it has to (potentially) appear from within the horizon of understanding because it otherwise could not illuminate as *an issue at all*; we have to be able to assimilate an issue at hand into a set of intelligible terms for the possibility of

²⁴ Cohen, Richard A. "Levinas: Thinking Least about Death: Contra Heidegger," 29.

forming a relationship with it. It is then necessary that if Dasein exists as Being-towards-death, it must have already encountered its death in some way. That is, Dasein has some *grasp* of its own death, namely through dealing with it *as* an impending possibility of existence, and is thereby able 'to be' accordingly. This negotiation between Dasein and its death suggests that they must both be *present* within a *shared situation*. In this case, death and Being are somehow placed on the *same ontological level* since they are *in sync with* and *coincidental to* each other. However, due to the elusive and impalpable nature of death, Levinas suggests that this phenomenon is in fact ontologically prior to such categorization. The binary of known/unknown is only available within the realm of being, and, since in dying *we have exhausted our possibility of further existence*, having any contact at all with death cannot come solely from within the terms of being. Rather, it seems that death as such must remain *other than Being itself*, since capturing death within these terms would be missing the point. In the language of Levinas, the connection between death and Being must then be one of *diachrony*.²⁵ Thus, any relationship to death must then not be derived from the Being of Dasein itself, which would then require assimilation into the realm of knowledge, but rather it is necessarily located in some other source.

1.2 – The Death of the Other

As we have seen thus far, due to the nature of one's own death, it cannot be taken as the basis on which one is able to generate existential possibilities. Cohen writes that,

²⁵ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*, see the essay titled, "Diachrony and Representation." In discussing the issue of temporality, which is tied to our obligations to the Other, Levinas argues that our ethical responsibilities for the Other never line up perfectly. The asymmetrical relationship with the Other suggests that we are wholly obligated, and furthermore that we cannot completely fulfill this obligation. This is because according to the process temporality, in approaching the Other, we *always* arrive too late. In the same way with death, Being can never catch up to it since once it does it is no longer.

“[d]eath is one of life’s inevitabilities, so it seems – but it is not now, this is Levinas’s point.”²⁶ Death as an *impending* event is characterized precisely by its *absence* from the present. For Heidegger to carry out his project of Being-towards-death, Dasein is demanded to appropriate its finality, and then exist accordingly. Dasein as Being-towards-death takes as an underlying *assumption* that death is in some way present and accessible to Dasein; this is how one in the first place forms a relationship with death in order for existential possibilities to come up. Levinas refutes this position required for the emergence of authentic Dasein because it commits an infidelity to death itself by taking away the futurity of it. For this reason, one’s own death cannot situate Dasein in its Being by any means.

Levinas maintains that death nonetheless continues to play a crucial role as the condition that sets up the possibility for the emergence of meaning and identity, but instead of one’s own death doing this work, it is by the death of the Other that we are situated into the world:

The death signified by the end could not measure the entire significance of death without becoming responsibility for another – by which one becomes oneself in reality [...] It is the death of the other that I am responsible to the point of including myself in his death [...] The death of the other: therein lies the first death.²⁷

Death on its own terms is rendered as meaningless because we cannot adequately attain a relationship with it in which allows for development of existential possibilities. *Being responsible* for one’s own existence, which in Heidegger’s case is a matter of *Dasein authentically existing*, does not therefore entail situating the self in accordance to its

²⁶ Cohen, Richard A. “Levinas: Thinking Least about Death: Contra Heidegger,” 33.

²⁷ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 42-3.

impending demise. That is, the function of death does not uncover the opportunity for Dasein to reflect on its existential possibilities in light of the entirety of its Being.

If we take seriously the claim that one's own death is beyond the realm of being, then the only way that we can have contact with death as the impetus for existence is through encountering the Other as *the one who dies*. The self anchors its own mortality and finitude by *projecting* the possibility of annihilation on itself *from the exposure to the Other*; it is the experience of the Other who is susceptible to dying that brings out the significance of the possibility of annihilation for the Ego. Although it is inevitable that I will eventually die, *being according to death* is not a relationship that I am able to have in isolation. At the same time, only in being exposed in some way to death can the solitude of the world be shattered in order to pave the way for the emergence of some finality that is constitutive for a meaningful situation. Death introduces a moment of *radical otherness* that calls us to take hold of existence, and informs the possibility of an identity. Here, there is agreement between Levinas and Heidegger. However, in Levinas's case, it is only through encountering the Other, from whom I receive an image of myself, that the issue of death can become pertinent to one's being in the world. Levinas writes that, "we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us,"²⁸ and that, "[t]he Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this [...] because of the Other's very alterity."²⁹ The Other, who is otherwise than myself, nonetheless provides a basis for self-reflection; it is only insofar as the Other mirrors our own being that 'mineness' as an issue can possibly emerge. In this case, it is the *alterity* of the Other that creates a separation from the Ego, rather than the mere physical contingency.

²⁸ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*, 75.

²⁹ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*, 83.

The issue of *my death* then becomes secondary to the appearance of the *Other's death*; the latter is constitutive for the relevance of the former. The death of the Other opens up a space where the mortality and finitude associated with existence, which is what provides the context for meaning and identity to arise, becomes an issue that we can actually encounter in the world. Here, of course, Levinas is not referring to the Other's *mere dead body*³⁰ as the condition for agency, but rather that the Other exposes us more generally to the *vulnerability of being*. Because the self cannot relate to its own death, it is the Other's death that *centers* and *singles out* the Ego as the one who is responsible for this possibility. This *alienation* from one's moment of dying demonstrates the *passivity* associated during the connection with the Other. With this, Levinas goes beyond Heidegger's description since death maintains its *impending* quality while at the same time exposing the pertinence of being through the Other's vulnerability.

It was suggested in the previous section that the encounter of death could be located in the experience of *suffering*. Although it could be empirically taken that one might be able to suffer in isolation, as discussed previously in Heidegger's existential mode of anxiety, this alone cannot establish a connection with one's own death. The trauma that is inflicted on me can at best only *represent a death* to me, but falls short in capturing *my death itself*. Since my death is always impending, and thereby remains inherently out of reach, the only demise that can situate the emergence of meaning and identity must be found in my relationship with the Other. Also, because we are not

³⁰ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 12. Levinas describes that, "[t]he death of someone is not – despite everything that seemed so at first glance – an empirical facticity (death as empirical facticity whose universality induction alone could suggest); it is not exhausted in this appearing." This re-emphasizes that death is not a mere happening, but rather is a phenomenon that always carries with it a further significance. In this case, the Other's death brings about the issue of vulnerability, and this locates the mortality of the self.

necessarily concerned with the dead body itself, the interest in death must then rest in its *expression* rather than as a mere *facticity*. The Other's death *speaks* by conveying to us the vulnerability of being, and this can be discovered through his/her suffering. As such, it is in the presence of the possibility of the Other's suffering that the issue of dying is made pertinent.

Levinas asserts that there is then a *primordially* associated with the death of the Other insofar as it exposes the vulnerability of existence. Cohen explains that:

[T]he ultimate sense of death, which lies not in my suffering or even in my dying, but rather derives from the primacy of the other person that we have already detected in the futurity of death [...] it is not my mortality and suffering that come first, but rather and precisely the mortality and suffering of the other.³¹

Levinas understands suffering as one of the most immediate conditions of humanity because it is prior to any choice or representation, and yet remains constitutive in singularizing the issue of being. The Other presented in its nakedness – that is, removed from any determinative preconceptions – calls forth the Ego according to otherness; the Other is *other than* the self. The Other's disparity from the Ego manifests as a frailness of being. Under these conditions, through being confronted by this fragility of the Other, the self is exposed to the *mortality* of existence.

The exposure to the Other's suffering gestures towards the mortality of life in general because it is here that the issue of vulnerability is able to arise in the first place. In fact, Levinas goes one step further in postulating the mode of *substitution*, and suggests that suffering is never confined to the self, but always a suffering that is derived from a relationship with the Other:

³¹ Cohen, Richard A. "Levinas: Thinking Least about Death: Contra Heidegger," 35.

[S]ubstitution signifies a suffering for another in the form of *expiation*, which alone can permit any compassion [...] To be me (and not I [*Moi*]) is not perseverance in one's being, but the substitution of the hostage expiating the limit for the persecution it suffered.³²

Suffering in isolation cannot direct me towards contacting my death. However, in the Other's suffering, his/her existence is called into question, and this signifies the potential of annihilation. Here, by the exposure of the vulnerability of the Other, the self is affected by the finitude of being. In this case, the Other *gives* us the context that situates death as a possibility. From this, I am then able to have contact with my suffering as anguish regarding death because it is the Other who *first* suffers. Suffering as being constitutive for relating to death, is thereby a *relational* phenomenon that is only possible insofar as the Other is capable of dying. What is furthermore true here is that in this suffering, the self is called upon in its *responsibility* for the Other. The vulnerability of the Other *calls me into question*, and this comes in the form of an obligation for the Other. Here, it turns out that the possibility of the Other's death, which emerges from being in contact with one's vulnerability, is what *singularizes* me as an Ego.

1.3 – Being as Ethics

It seems from the discussion thus far that if death is going to have any sort of a transcendental role in establishing self-identity and the context for meaning, we must concern ourselves with the Other's death. Contrary to Heidegger's viewpoint that endorses one's own death as the moment that singularizes the existential relevance of Dasein, Levinas asserts that it is only in the responsibility for the Other's death that the self arrives onto the scene as an issue. Because of this contingency on the Other, the issue

³² Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 180-1.

of being becomes *fundamentally ethical*. Being in the world, then, is not a matter of uncovering the ontological origins of one's own existence, but rather consists in holding obligations to the Other: "Suffering the weight of the other man, the 'me' [*moi*] is called to *uniqueness* by responsibility."³³ I am *identified* in the world according to my obligations to the Other. This fundamental duty is the product of the contact with death that the Other's vulnerability expresses.

The vulnerability that exposes the possibility of the Other's death situates the mortality of existence. Levinas suggests that this functions in communicating the command of 'thou shalt not kill.'³⁴ The necessity of this burden arises insofar as the (death of the) Other is the necessary condition for the emergence of a self at all. This appears to place an inherent obligation on the self to ensure that the Other remains within the relationship. Through the Other's vulnerability, which announces the relevance of existence, the self is held responsible in sustaining the Other's life at all costs. Levinas writes that within such a relationship, "[t]he Other is, for example, the weak, the poor, 'the widow and the orphan', whereas I am the rich or the powerful."³⁵ Because of the immanent fragility of the Other, the self always understands and identifies itself in the position of endowment. Therefore, within this situation, *no one else can protect the Other except myself*. This status is always beyond, and necessarily prior to any choice on the matter. As such, Levinas postulates that the self embodies the role of the *survivor* within this relationship:

³³ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 176.

³⁴ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 106.

³⁵ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Time and the Other*, 83.

This would be a responsibility for another in bearing his misfortune or his end *as if one were guilty of causing it*. This is the ultimate nearness. *To survive as a guilty one*. [...] In the guiltiness of the survivor, the death of the other is my affair.³⁶

Because the Other situates the self, the affinity with him/her is that of a *neighbour*; s/he is a friend, a beloved, or the one who stands there with me. The possibility of the Other's death then means that I take on the responsibility in *fending off* the actualization of his/her impending demise. The self is overcome by guilt because, despite the intimacy of the Other's proximity, s/he is nonetheless differed *as other*; the alterity of the Other suggests that s/he necessarily remains at the same time *distant*. The Other is then to a certain extent other *in relation to me*, and since the Other is the one who dies, this position places the blame for this annihilation on me. I thus take myself to be responsible *for the Other's death*. The obligation to defend the Other is only possible inasmuch as *I am the one capable* of inflicting death upon him/her.

The Ego is always in a position of *power* over the Other. The possibility of the Other dying suggests that the self is from the onset in the position to *take away the other's being*:

The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill [...] The infinite paralyzes power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes.³⁷

The death of the Other *empowers* the self inasmuch as the Ego appears as the one who is able to take the other's life away, and such a possibility demonstrates further the fundamental vulnerability associated with existence. In association with the self, the Other emerges in absolute nudity. This exposedness suggests that the Other lacks any sort

³⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 39.

³⁷ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*, 198-9.

of a protective barrier. As stated above, according to my guilt as the survivor, I enter into this relationship as the protector; I become somewhat like a shelter for the weak, or a helping hand who pulls the one drowning onto shore. However, this very status of my position as such also signifies the ability to destroy the Other. The Other's vulnerability then singles me out as a sort of 'grim reaper' in which at the same time places me as the 'sole savior.'

According to the vulnerability of the Other's face, there is a *plea* of 'do not kill me' that gets expressed. Levinas would liken such a request to that like the appeal of the beggar who seeks bread in order to survive. In its bareness, the Other's face calls for a response: "To give is to give the bread taken from one's mouth; giving has from the outset a corporeal meaning."³⁸ In this opportunity to give to the Other, the Ego emerges as the one *who is in the position to give*; the self is centered out by the Other pleading for mere *sustenance*. Here, the self is distinguished as a self, but only insofar as the Other's cry for help takes priority. Levinas shows that our obligations to the vulnerability expressed by the Other become the site where the self is called into question, and thus not found from within one's own death as Heidegger would desire. The possibility to give to the Other situates the *selfhood* of my existence. The inspiration to give is the result of being exposed to the vulnerability of existence. *The act of giving is then an attempt to preserve life*. Furthermore, what else is significant about this giving is that it appears from the *sacrifice of oneself*. This suggests the *asymmetrical* status of our obligations in light of the Other's death.

In a situation with the Other, since there is a contingency established from the onset of this relationship, the status of my being in the world is taken as being *only* for

³⁸ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 190.

the Other. The self, as the sole savior, discovers itself in a position to provide *unconditionally* to the Other beyond any restrictions: this context puts forth that *I have to give my all in sustaining the Other*. In this way, Levinas explains that we are indebted to the Other, and s/he holds us as a hostage:

[T]he other besieges me, to the point where he puts in question my for-me, my in-itself [*en soi*] – to the point where he makes me a *hostage* [...] a responsibility without measure, which does not resemble a debt that one could always discharge, for, with the other, one is never paid up.³⁹

In giving all of myself to the Other, there is no fulfillment that brings this unidirectional exchange to absolute completion. Even up to the point of *my death*, I have not sufficiently provided for the Other adequately. Being for the Other is then *inexhaustible*, which suggests that I am *infinitely* obligated. This futility of responsibility does not set up the context for inaction, but on the contrary, is in actuality the very basis on which the self gains momentum in existing. This ethical relationship is the site that allows for obligations to go beyond myself. It is here that the futurity of being, which is constitutive for generating meaning and identity, can be expressed, and result in taking hold on the issue of existence. What I do for the Other does not deplete my ethical responsibility, but rather serves as the impetus for continuation of existence.

It must be maintained that our infinite responsibility for the Other is according to the initial *face-to-face* encounter. Levinas writes that, “[i]n the situation of the face to face, there is no third party that thematizes what occurs between the one and the other.”⁴⁰ We contact the world through encountering the *singular* Other since this comes as the most immediate experience; it is the call of the Other that situates being. The status of my

³⁹ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 138.

⁴⁰ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 161.

ethical duty according to this immediacy remains uncalculated: the issue of being requires that I give my all to *one* Other. For Levinas, it is in this face-to-face relationship where the Other exposes the mortality of being, and becomes the initial site that delineates existential possibilities. The call of the Other is thus always a *singular* case of vulnerability. The face-to-face encounter is constitutive in revealing the finitude of existence which functions to open up a context where the self can identify itself as a relevant entity.

Within the confines of the face-to-face relationship, the devotion of my responsibility is obvious, and does not require reflection on my part. This is not a suggestion that Levinas is denying the presence of ethical responsibility after the arrival of some third party. In fact, Levinas acknowledges that this third sets up the possibility of a *social situation*:

Through the fact that the other is also a third party, in relation to an other who is also his [neighbour] (in society, one is never two but at least three), through the fact that I find myself before the [neighbour] *and* the third party, I must compare; I must weigh and evaluate.⁴¹

It is only when *another* Other, *to whom I am just as equally obligated*, appears before me that I am forced into making a decision that divides up my ethical responsibility. Having two (or more) Others within the same context requires that I evaluate my resources before following through my role as the savior. In this situation, *institutions* such as ‘politics,’ ‘economy,’ and ‘justice’ emerge in order to coherently govern our responsibilities. As such, codes and systems get devised as means to regulate our relationship with these others. However, Levinas argues that by engaging in this calculative process of

⁴¹ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 183.

determining how we ought to divide up our obligations, we *commit violence* against the Other; in choosing one, we *inevitably neglect the other*. With the arrival of the third, we hold *social responsibilities*. These merely *represent* the ethical sway of the face-to-face relationship, and are thereby considered as *secondary* in setting up the possibilities of being for the Other. This issue regarding the presence of the third will be brought up again in the subsequent chapter by way of a critical rejoinder to Levinas's position from Derrida's work. The important point to take from this is that the call to responsibility from the face-to-face encounter comes as the *necessary condition* that allows for problem of the third to be an issue in the first place. The ethics that arises from this exposure to face-to-face is therefore primary to being within the world.

Through the discussion of Levinas's emphasis on the death of the Other in locating the possibility of being, we have reached the claim that the issue of existence is made relevant only as ethics. There is no question of Being in the Heideggerian sense that is prior our responsibility for the Other. No issue of Being is available in isolation in the way that Heidegger would want to hold, but instead being is *always* responsibility for the Other. In the following chapter, I will investigate further how Levinas conceives of the violence that can be committed against the Other from the appearance of the third party, and explore the possible shortcomings that may arise. My hope is that at least with this chapter, I have demonstrated along with Levinas that *being is first and foremost ethical*.

Chapter II – Appearing Other: Derrida’s Questions to Levinas

In the previous chapter, I presented an overview of Levinas’s ethical position that overcomes some of the troubling issues that arise from Heidegger’s ontological inquiry. Namely that Levinas’s position on death, which is characterized as the *annihilation of Being*, and thereby ever only available as an *impending event*, suggests that it cannot be adequately located and taken from *one’s own standpoint*, but rather must be experienced through the exposure of the Other’s vulnerability. As already discussed, death is taken as the possibility that is constitutive in opening up the realm of meaning and identity. Levinas rightly points out that due to the *impossibility* of existence that death entails, it necessarily lies *beyond* any comprehensibility. If it then is only in the Other’s death that we are singularized as a relevant entity in the world, then we remain *wholly indebted* to this Other in question. This, of course, is not in any *reciprocal* sense, since such a debt cannot ever be *paid up* so that there is an *equivalency* that can be drawn, but rather that in *giving even up to the point of my own death*, my responsibility for the Other is not *exhausted*. Levinas shows us that our ethical relationship with the Other is fundamentally *asymmetrical*; there is a requirement to give *beyond* one’s possibilities. Contrary to Heidegger’s position, it is not the interrogation of Being that separates Dasein’s existence from that of mere objects, but instead we are distinguished by our *infinite ethical responsibility for the Other*.

Accepting Levinas’s argument, the first portion of this chapter will be devoted to uncovering how these obligations might unfold according to the principle of existing *absolutely for the Other*: it will be shown that our ethical being requires not assimilating

the *otherness* of the Other into the realm of what Levinas calls the Same.⁴² This task will involve drawing out and developing the implications of the Other in order to sort out what is at stake in the *alterity* of the face. The Other, dichotomously juxtaposed with the self, must be beyond any reductive categories that attempt to capture its essentiality. In so doing, Levinas's position advocates that a sense of *radical alterity* must be maintained in our approach towards the Other. We are told that any breach of maintaining this alterity commits *violence* to the Other. From this, I will suggest that Levinas privileges the primacy of the face-to-face relationship over the connections that form in relation to the arrival of the *third*. This priority is not to suggest that Levinas *denies* the reality of this third, and thereby renounces its relevance, or is motivated in demonstrating some sort of a *generative* account of reality (viz. to provide some story that states 'in the beginning, there was one, and then...'), but rather that the *singularity* of the face-to-face situates the basis for any such situation of *sociality* to hold any significance at all. Without the precedence of the face-to-face, the calculation and division that accompanies the appearance of the third does not pose as a relevant issue. As such, not only can alterity be exposed immediately in the face of the Other, and inherently remain beyond our categories of comprehensibility, but also it is the face of a *particular* or *singular* Other that calls us to responsibility. The face obligates as a *unique universality*.

In the second segment of this chapter, there will be an exploration of Derrida's rejoinder to the criterion of radical alterity that characterizes Levinas's Other. Posed as

⁴² Levinas uses this term throughout his earlier work (see, *Totality and Infinity*) to denote the cognitive space in which we can tangibly encounter the world. We can understand Levinas to be taking this term as denoting the realm of *facticity*. The Other is *exterior* to this metaphysical reality.

questions to Levinas,⁴³ Derrida offers a critical reading of the Levinasian framework in which he argues that perhaps radical alterity *cannot in any way* be sought after according to the terms of this regime, and in fact proves to be more detrimental than beneficial to the very possibility of a fundamental ethics. Put quite simply, Derrida argues that for the Other to impact the self in the way that Levinas desires, this Other must at least *appear as being other*. Without minimally committing this type of what Derrida calls *ontological or transcendental violence* against the Other, Levinas does not give himself a *language* where an ethics is even from the outset possible.⁴⁴ As such, alterity cannot be as radical or immediate as Levinas would want to hold. Derrida suggests that the issue of the Other is *always already a multiplicity*. Only in this way can the alterity of the Other be characterized by *infinity*, which allows for the possibility of the primordially of the ethical. As an alternative that attempts to remain faithful to Levinas, Derrida understands the issue of the third as being *co-originary* with the moment of the face-to-face: that is, *the Other is already third*. In the closing portion of this chapter, it will be held that Derrida's reading of Levinas is necessary for the possibility of any maxim of *being-for-the-Other*. The Other *must manifest*, and to a certain extent venture into the realm of the Same, for Levinas's position to remain consistent. With this trajectory in mind, I will explore how Levinas's Other is said to be necessarily resistant to assimilation into the realm of the Same.

⁴³ Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics," 109. Derrida suggests that, "there is no element of Levinas's thought which is not, in and of itself, engaged by such questions." Derrida positions his response *according to* the very content in which he is responding to. This gesture is an attempt to comment on Levinas without providing an outright rejection of this position.

⁴⁴ Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics," 116.

2.1 – The Levinasian Other

The Other is taken to be the central focal point in Levinas's writings. Despite the dominance of this phenomenon throughout his work, understanding exactly how it is characterized is far from a simple task. This is also made more difficult considering the shift in Levinas's thought from his earlier *Totality and Infinity* to his later *Otherwise than Being*. In the former, the Other belongs to the realm of the infinite, and resides in some intangible exteriority.⁴⁵ The latter work elaborates further on this, while moving away from such *spatial* delineations, and suggests that the Other is necessarily transcendent, and, as the title suggests, more accurately understood as that which is otherwise than being.⁴⁶ Regardless of the differences between these two treatments, there seems to remain a common thread: in a way, the Other is the corollary of the self that is constitutive of being as an issue, while at the same time necessarily beyond any definitive understanding. This guiding premise will direct the ensuing exposition on the issue of otherness in Levinas. It should be noted that part of the difficulty in discussing the Other in general is precisely because it is necessarily something beyond our capacities to do so.

2.1.1 – Alterity and the Face

The term *alterity* comes up, among other places, in *Totality and Infinity* in order to capture the radical transcendent exteriority where the otherness of the Other resides. For Levinas, that which is conceived within the realm of being, in the Heideggerian sense, is always prone to a reduction into a totalized and closed conception of reality. That is to say, the *facticity* of the world, or to use Levinas's terminology of the Same, takes over as the completed truth of the matter, without any need to pursue further such

⁴⁵ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*, see, 194-7.

⁴⁶ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being*, see, 3-4.

an issue as potentiality. The reduction to the Same suggests that the appearances from within the horizon of understanding is *completely accounted for*. If being signifies mere presence, to understand *being other* properly then precisely demands that we break through and overcome the realm of appearance. The Other must therefore necessarily be assigned to a level of transcendence beyond any totalized structures.⁴⁷ In another way, the Other does not appear within the realm of the Same. However, the sort of *radical transcendence* that is demanded for the conditions of the Other must even transcend transcendence, since even present within such categorization, there is an implication of a relationship drawn with the realm of our *knowledge* (namely, as a possibility that is *beyond it*). In such a reduction within the category of knowledge, and thus a confinement to the Same, we fail to adequately encounter the otherness that Levinas describes. As such, the phenomenology of ‘alterity’ signals the transcendent realm that can be taken as being *prior* (an appeal *before ontology*) to even such a categorization itself. In the same way as discussed in the previous chapter in regard to the Other’s death, the alterity of Other does not suggest a mere lack of knowledge, but rather is beyond *the issue of knowing* altogether. The condition of alterity suggests that the Other is inaccessible and unclassifiable according to terms available to our existence.

One theme in Levinas’s writings that attempts to allude what can be meant by alterity of the Other is found in the phenomenon of the *face*:

The other person [*Autru*] is not beyond-measure but incommensurable; that is, he does not hold within a theme and cannot appear to a consciousness. He is a face, and there is a sort of invisibility [...] signifying that is wholly other than manifestation.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*; see, 35-40.

⁴⁸ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 173.

It appears evident that in using the anthropomorphic image of a face to characterize the Other, Levinas is mostly concerned here with a *human* other. Furthermore, since it is *a* face, and not *many faces* that characterize the Other, there is a sense that the call to responsibility is always *singular*. The *universality* of the Other does not point to some *multiple generality*, however, this will be elaborated in the discussion of the third's appearance. For the moment, it must be maintained that this face remains irresolvable, and signifies that the Other is not given all at once by some conceptual image that we can conjure up. Instead of appearing as presence, the face of the Other comes to us as a sort of *absence*. Levinas writes further that, "[t]he face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me [...] *It expresses itself*."⁴⁹ The phenomenon of the face escapes every attempt we take at encapsulating it into a rigid image. As an evanescent self-expression that flees any fixedness, Levinas conceives of our contact with the face as that which is only left by a *trace*.⁵⁰ We never encounter the entirety of the Other, rather we only ever get a *sense* of its presence. What we deem as Other always vanishes at the instant of this very effort. In order to maintain the alterity of the Other, we can never reveal its otherness as presence.

It can be stated that in the exposure of the face, we *contact* the Other. At the same time, Edith Wyschogrod reminds us that the face necessarily still remains as that which is beyond our abilities to assimilate into the realm of knowledge:

[F]or Levinas the face in its very upsurge breaks into a world that is seen and understood but manifests itself otherwise than as idea or image [...] The face is not an appearance

⁴⁹ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity*, 50-1.

⁵⁰ Putnam, Hilary. "Levinas and Judaism", 44-5.

but rather an epiphany that resists conceptual grasp, rending the sensible through which it appears.⁵¹

The alterity of the face suggests that it remains incoherent to our understanding.

Wyschogrod points out here that even in this incomprehensibility, such an epiphany situates us in a context by setting up a world in which the issue of being can emerge. In the plea that is expressed in the face of the Other, we are *singled out* and *put into question*. As such, the revelation of the face becomes the condition that delineates a context that allows for existential possibilities. Yet, because our exposure of the face comes as an epiphany, this points to a fundamental *passivity* in our approach towards the Other. Unlike Heidegger who arguably upholds authenticity as the active process of interrogating the question of Being, Levinas shows us that the manifestation of one's existential possibility inherently relies on an inconsumable facet of experience. In this way, we are always *waiting* for the Other to appear, and each time we seek and announce the presence of the Other, we *find ourselves too late*.⁵²

The Other exceeds every attempt of appropriation, but nonetheless sets up the possibility of the self. Because of my inability to perfectly coincide with the Other, the issue of my existence becomes contingent on an aspect of reality that I cannot directly deal with. Here, Levinas uses the language of *insomnia* to describe the Other's embrace over my being: in the same way as sleep, "communicates with wakefulness, all the while attempting to escape it [...and] remains attentive to the wakefulness that threatens it and calls to it by its exigency,"⁵³ the Other affects the being of the self according to an absolute passivity. During sleep, we are never awake, but are always nearing a wakeful

⁵¹ Wyschogrod, Edith. "Language and Alterity in the Thought of Levinas," 195.

⁵² See, *God, Death and Time*, 187. These expressions are used by Levinas in exploring the temporal aspect in approaching the Other.

⁵³ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 209.

state, and the latter depends on the possibility of the former. There is no applicable force that can awaken sleep while simultaneously *maintaining it as sleep*. Levinas shows here that passivity (i.e., sleep, the face of the Other) can in fact be productive (i.e., wakefulness, the self). This suggests that the relationship developed with the Other is then one that comes from a degree of passivity, and it is here where any issue of possibility first comes to light. Being-in-the-world is always an *awaiting for the Other before me*, and thus attributes an ethical imperative at the origin of one's existential potentiality.

2.1.2 – Violence Against the Other

From the previous discussion, Levinas takes the position that the alterity of the Other must not fall victim to the conceptual assimilation into the Same. It can be said that the Other is characterized by *infinity* whereas the self identifies itself from within the *finite*. Our concepts about the world appear to *close off* or *totalize* the possibilities of that which is investigated, which misses the mark on the issue of the Other's alterity. The claim generated from what I will call the 'dogma of sameness' that is presented by Levinas's exclusive dichotomy between the Other and the Same holds that this realm of Sameness *actually appears as an unquestioned and completed totality*. It is precisely because of this characterization that there is a necessary *resistance* posed against reducing the Other into the Same. The reason that this becomes an ethical plea is because Levinas tells us that due to the Ego's contingency on the Other in realizing itself *as Ego*, such assimilation is easily practicable within such a relationship. Since according to Levinas, the self's capacity to access and relate to issues always requires a reduction into the Same, the alterity of the Other ends up being compromised. In the relationship with

the Other, which is constitutive for the possibility of the issue of existence, the Ego expresses a tendency in *consuming* the Other as *something for the Ego*. That is, in the face-to-face, where the vulnerability of the Other is exposed to us, the Ego is always in a position of power over the Other. This gives reason for why the Other's death, as a *disruption* that calls us to responsibility, always appears as *murder*.⁵⁴

In this act of *consumption*, it can be said that we commit a level of *violence* against the Other:

The ethical relationship is not a disclosure of something given but the exposure of the 'me' [*moi*] to another, prior to any decision (every decision is a decision about something to be decided, about a conclusion). Here, a sort of violence is undergone [...] a claiming of this Same by the Other.⁵⁵

The call of the Other suggests that we do not engage in some process of deliberation during this exposure, nor are we brought closer in *achieving* some enlightened view of the world. Rather, it is the Other's gaze *itself*, prior to any decision on the matter, which calls us to responsibility. In the words of Levinas, it comes as an *epiphany*. The Other *commands* us to respond to his/her call according to such an exposure of vulnerability. Such a summon by the Other demands a response which can be likened to the Hebrew word *hineni* where we are to make ourselves available to the Other unconditionally.⁵⁶

Ethical responsibility is thus prior to any decision on the matter, and rather appears as the *fundamental principle of life*. If, for instance, we can imagine walking down the street, and we encounter someone tripping and dropping her books, Levinas might suggest that an urge for us to stop and help pick her things up will overwhelm our sense of being; we

⁵⁴ Cohen, Richard A. "Levinas: Thinking Least about Death: Contra Heidegger," 33-4.

⁵⁵ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 187.

⁵⁶ Putnam, Hilary. "Levinas and Judaism," 37-8.

are *interrupted* by the Other. Even if we decide to turn a blind eye to this happenstance and continue walking, there is no denial that we would nonetheless remain in a position where we are still exposed to the vulnerability of this individual (albeit however mundane this example may be), and it is *solely our decision* to overlook her plea. Here, the suggestion is that *even prior* to the books hitting the ground, there is already a sort of *pre-ontologically categorized call to responsibility* that invokes us to help the Other. This moment, antecedent to any reduction into the Same, but yet constitutive as singularizing the relevance of the Ego, remains unnamable. It would appear that according to this example, Levinas might respond that the *appearance of this particular vulnerability* (i.e., dropping the books) alone does not generate our action ethically, but rather it is the *inherently intangible* demand posed from the exposure of the Other's face that provides a context for this situation to become meaningful, which thereby prompts us into some action. Strictly speaking, we are not responding to pick up her books *because* her books fell, but instead only insofar as it is *her that calls us*. The latter describes the openness of our ethical possibilities by not pigeonholing the Other in being *identical* with her need, whereas contrarily in the former explanation, by giving an *exact explanation* for one's action, there is a reduction of the situation into the realm of the Same, which is inevitably referred to as violence.

Levinas invokes the language of violence because in reducing the alterity of the Other into the Same, we end up *conquering* the Other. That is, we are no longer held as hostage by the Other because, in a sense, we exercise the *mastery of being*, and overcome any ambiguity that is put forth. The self *takes the place of* and *makes the decision for* the Other, and the vulnerability of the face is thus *victimized*. Levinas writes that in retaining

the *distance* demanded of alterity in our relationship with the Other (or what is called *ethics*) can be akin to holding open a door in order for one to pass first.⁵⁷ Not only does this image illustrate the Other's precedence over the self, but also the *asymmetrical* status of our ethical obligation becomes apparent. Ethics, as an instance of 'letting the Other pass through before me,' points to my subordinate status in this relationship. In fulfilling my obligation to the Other, I am required to give myself over to him/her even to the point of *my own death*; I am *subservient* to the Other. To backtrack to the case where we might pick up the books *because they fell*, we have already conceptualize a situation, and acted *according to* what has appeared and become evident as the matter of fact. This 'according to' structure suggests that the self has put itself first by adding its *interpretation* of *why* the Other is in need. This might be analogous to oneself going through the door before the Other. Levinas deems such positioning as violence because through this act of placing the priority on the Ego, which acts to assimilate the alterity of the Other, we no longer are being-for-the-Other. On the contrary, there is a reversion back to the ontological structure of Dasein, where the main concern lies in sorting out the issue of Being, and this allows for us to turn our back to the vulnerability of the Other. The Other becomes an *obstacle* instead of the very site that generates the possibility of existence. In order to then hold fidelity to our ethical being, the self would be required to *respect* the alterity of the Other in question. That is, we are to ensure that the Other does not *sync up* with the Same. This will anticipate Derrida's formulation of *hospitality* within Levinas's work in latter part of this chapter. However, before going further with such an issue, it will be necessary to elaborate more on Levinas's description of the third. As we will see, the priority must

⁵⁷ See, *God, Death and Time*, 138, and *Otherwise than Being*, 117.

necessarily be given to the face-to-face, and the appearance of the third party disrupts the distribution of ethical responsibility.

2.1.3 – Levinas and the Emergence of the Third Party

In the previous chapter, there was a brief mention of the third party's entrance onto the scene. It was stated that with the appearance of the third, we are forced into a situation where we have to calculate and make decisions on how we are to divide our ethical undertakings. When we engage in this evaluative process, we inevitably commit violence against *at least one* of these others present, because within a situation where we are faced by two others (say *x* and *y*), by deciding to help *x*, my obligation to *y* is compromised. Since we need to be selective with our responsibilities, we must inescapably *deny* helping one of those present. It could be said that the third exposes the *finitude* of my ethical potentiality because I cannot *infinitely give to all*. In fact, this seems to be the thrust from which Derrida develops his reading of Levinas. Putting this aside for the moment, I want to examine further this issue of the third, and show how Levinas privileges the face-to-face encounter as being *primordial* according to the singularity criterion of the Other since this task will become significant in setting up Derrida's position.

In presenting Hegel's perspective of the family, Levinas notices that, "[i]t is necessary that there be a relationship with a singularity, and in order for this to be ethical, the content of this relationship must be universality."⁵⁸ The singular relationship with a family member signals the *universality* of that individual. Within the family, Levinas points out that each family member calls us to responsibility insofar as they relate to me in their *uniqueness*. This unique character of the Other in question demonstrates his/her

⁵⁸ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 83.

irreplaceable status, which indicates his/her relevancy as Other. For instance, if it is my son that dies, I cannot just merely exchange him for another child; if this were possible, there would be an inherent violence or injustice committed against my son since it undermines what is at stake within such a relationship. This *impossibility for exchangeability* is what holds us accountable to the Other.

It was noted previously in this chapter that the universality of the Other lies in the plea that exposes the vulnerability of existence. For this to actually generate ethical responsibility, it must then necessarily be *a face*, and not the *collective* that obligates. For as suggested in the ethical obligations that appear when dealing with family members, the exposure to vulnerability only arises from being exposed by the *uniqueness* of the Other. As such, the Other *loses its face* when it is considered as some *multiplicity* of others. In this plurality, the affectivity of the Other's call diminishes because there is no *particular* entity that singles out the self, which leads to a failure in generating ethical responsibility; appearing as a collective, the Ego's burden as the survivor (from death) can be displaced, and it can be said that we are no longer held hostage by the Other. By taking the Other to be some generalized multitude of others, there is a reduction into the Same; a category such as 'humanity' *at the same time* points to everyone *and* no one. This *totalizing* of the Other betrays the alterity that calls us to responsibility since within such a 'concept', we have already made some determination of the Other's relation to us. The result is that we are no longer directly exposed to the vulnerability, but instead, it is *mediated* through our own perspective. The Other no longer emerges in passivity, and according to Levinas, violence is thus committed. Because the obligating force of the face is characterized by its uniqueness, it appears that the *personal Other* is the figure that hails us to

responsibility. In fact, it seems that Levinas's uses the image of a 'face' in gesturing to the Other precisely in order to capture such a quality of indispensability.

The personal Other that emerges in Levinas's writings suggests that that which is constitutive for the possibility of our ethical existence is based first and foremost on the encounter of the face-to-face. Although there are passages where Levinas remains ambiguous on this primordially,⁵⁹ it appears that insofar as the Other must necessarily be unique in order to express the vulnerability that calls for an ethical response, our main concern is the Other in *its singularity*. This must be the case for Levinas in order to remain consistent with the issue of our *infinite obligation*. If, as Levinas holds, that I am infinitely obligated to the Other, why must I 'compare, weigh and evaluate'⁶⁰ when a third party enters onto the scene? That is to ask, does not ethical responsibility entail that I am infinitely obligated to *both others equally*? If I must give all of myself to *x*, then *y*, according to its alterity *as Other*, ought to receive just as much from me since I would *also* be infinitely obligated to *y* as in the case with *x*. This division that comes up appears to be only from *my own finitude* in which prevents the possibility infinitely giving to *both*. This situation brings up two issues that favour the interpretation that Levinas likely holds the primordial status of face-to-face.

The first is what I will call the *Infinity constraint*: when there is a situation where *x* and *y* are present, to be infinitely obligated to *both at the same time* does not change the

⁵⁹ See *Otherwise than Being*, 158. Levinas writes that, "[i]t is not that the entry of the third party would be an empirical fact, and that my responsibility for the other finds itself constrained to a calculus by the 'force of things.' In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already this obsession cries out for justice, demands measure and knowing, is consciousness [...] but also, more ancient than itself and than the equality implied by it, justice passes by justice in my responsibility for the other." Within this passage, it is apparent that the issue of which takes precedence (the face-to-face or the third) remains unsettled. In the first part, it might be suggested that the third is *already there from the onset*, but by the end of this quote, it is clearly the case that the obligation in the face-to-face surpasses categorization as the site of ethics. Derrida will take the side of the former, and suggest a *co-originary* status of the third.

⁶⁰ Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death and Time*, 183.

degree in which I carry out my responsibilities. In a sense, adding *two infinite obligations* together still nonetheless remains as *infinity*. By separating *two* responsibilities, we have already denied the infinite character of ethics according to Levinas. Thus, unless the *first Other* is somehow privileged *before the second Other*, there is no necessity to engage in any calculative processes in my approach to them. Quite simply, infinite obligation construed in this way involves that we are obligated to both *in an equivalent manner*. However, since ethics is always *asymmetrical*, Levinas would deny this. The second dilemma posed as a question is the *Multiplicity constraint*: in a similar vein as the first issue, are we not required to simply *combine* both *x* and *y* to form another entity that we could deem as the Other who generates ethics? It would seem as claimed by the criterion of *infinite* responsibility, rather than dividing our ethical conduct, which appears incoherent insofar as we are not dealing with some totalized sense of duty, we would need to *group all the others in question* in order to permit us to give accordingly. Obligation that is characterized by infinity cannot provide a mechanism that governs *neglecting* one over the other. If we hold steadfast to this level of responsibility, then not even the arrival of the third can act to separate our obligations. Instead, the third must be then included *within* this Other, and we are obligated *unconditionally to all others*. However, since the Other must necessarily be *singular* in order to generate ethical obligation, this plurality is resisted by Levinas's project. Both of these cases demonstrate that the face-to-face is necessarily primordial to the appearance of the third despite Levinas's obscurity on this issue. Without this precedence, the third is unable to force us into decision on dividing our responsibility. As such, the face-to-face must inevitably come *first* for violence to incur from the entrance of the third.

2.2 – Derrida’s Response to Levinas

From the numerous references made throughout his career, Derrida openly expresses his utmost influence by Levinas’s thought. Derrida often responds directly to the central themes within Levinas’s work while avoiding knockdown refutations. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore three instances where Derrida’s suggestions to Levinas overcome the difficulties that one may encounter in accepting such an ‘ethics of alterity.’ Without delaying further, let us investigate the first of these comments that involves the use of language.

2.2.1 – Transcendental Violence: Radical Alterity and the Use of Language

Like Levinas, Derrida acknowledges that the sense of alterity that generates meaning and identity, and thereby ethical responsibility, must necessarily come from beyond the realm of the Ego, and thus is only received through the encounter with the Other.⁶¹ As discussed previously, what is at stake in Levinas’s criterion of alterity is an otherness that is beyond all our attempts of reduction into the perspective of the Same. However, in being committed to this strict sense of *radical* alterity, Levinas prevents himself from engaging in any kind of discourse altogether:

[In] this combat [against the traditional task of philosophy], he already has given up the best weapon: disdain of discourse. In effect, when confronted by the classical difficulties of language we are referring to, Levinas cannot provide himself with the classical resources against them [...] he does not give himself the right to speak, as they did, in a language resigned to its own failure.⁶²

For the most part, Levinas conceives of philosophy as attempting to reduce the alterity of the world into the Same. In providing an *explanation* of reality, we inevitably betray the

⁶¹ Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics,” 94.

⁶² Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics,” 116.

topic under scrutiny by using oversimplified generalities to capture some essential quality of that in question. Under the terms laid out according to radical alterity, there is then *immunity* from any attempt of capturing such an image within the realm of the Same. The Other is *always clandestine from the terms of our understanding*. Because Levinas is first and foremost concerned with retaining the alterity of the Other as the fundamental principle associated with our ethical existence, we *lose* the resources available to even *minimally* conceive of the Other as such. If we hold steadfast to such a description, we are left *without any language* that enables us to communicate otherness *as an issue*. The *failure of language* is in fact what sets up the basis for *going beyond* the issue at hand. That is to say, because our concepts are always in some way insufficient, there is a possibility of further inquiry, which is not possible according to the terms of radical alterity.

Despite agreeing with Levinas's claim to the importance of the Other, Derrida maintains elements from Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenological ontology. Namely, that some form of *expression* is necessary in order to have a relevant issue arise:

There is no speech without the thought and statement of Being. But as Being is nothing outside the determined existent, it would not appear as such without the possibility of speech. Being *itself* can only be thought and stated.⁶³

The point that Derrida makes here about the issue of Being is that, in the same way as with the Other, it is not some *thing* that appears all at once; this is in reference to the ontological difference that was mentioned in the first chapter. However, where Heidegger's observations make a contribution that cannot be overlooked by Levinas is that in order to *investigate* Being at all, it is required that we are able *to at least think*

⁶³ Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics," 143.

Being. That is to say, Being makes its appearance not in any overbearing *ontic* sense, but rather emerges as *manifestation itself*. In order to take issue with Being at all, we must be able to notice it as something that can be discussed in the first place. Derrida's claim to Levinas is that this issue of *emergence* must also be true in the case of the Other. The Other must *appear*, albeit in some *fleeting* fashion, in order for a fundamental ethics to be at all possible.

Derrida writes that, "[t]he other cannot be what it is, infinitely other, except in finitude,"⁶⁴ which suggests that an ontological level of violence (inasmuch as there is a *breaking through and betraying* of this absolute alterity) must be committed against the Other in order to vouch for the primacy of ethics. The Other must be at least be found *within a delineated context*, and the claim to radical alterity would resist this insofar as the Other would then necessarily fall victim to the horizon of the Same. Derrida suggests to Levinas that we must narrow down this infinite otherness of the Other in order to pursue any project of ethical obligations; responsibility is always *for* the Other. Furthermore, Derrida explains that an utter commitment to the claim of nonviolence, which is apparent from our ethical commitments in what I have deemed as Levinas's 'dogma of sameness', in fact leads to even more grave consequences:

[The] thought of Being is thus as close as possible to nonviolence [...] Pure violence, a relationship between beings without face, is not yet violence, is pure nonviolence. And inversely pure nonviolence, the nonrelation of the same to the other (in the sense understood by Levinas) is pure violence. Only a face can arrest violence, but can do so, in the first place only because a face can provoke it [...] Being is history, that Being dissimulates itself in its occurrence, and originally does violence to itself in order to be stated and in order to appear. A Being without violence would be a Being which would

⁶⁴ Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics," 114.

occur outside the existent nothing, nonhistory, nonoccurrence, nonphenomenality [...]
Levinas's thought would not only propose an ethics without law, as we said above, but
also a language without phrase. Which would be entirely coherent if the face was only
glance, but it is also speech.⁶⁵

Without allowing the Other to appear, that is to accept the necessity of ontological
violence, there is perhaps the greatest violence committed against the Other because the
result would be *total annihilation*. The Other as being absolutely disjointed from our
comprehension negates any possibilities for us to meaningfully engage with him/her in
any way. In this situation, there is no exposure of the Other's face that generates the sense
of vulnerability. Levinas would want to hold that the epiphany of the face is pure
passivity (as 'glance'), without any conceptualization; remember that the violence of the
totalized concept *violates* the passivity of the Other by actively reducing it to a
manageable set of terms. Derrida, on the other hand, suggests that the former (passivity)
is not possible without the latter (violence/activity). The presentation of this ontological
violence is received as a sort of *transcendental condition for the possibility of the Other
as an issue to be reckoned with*. The passivity of the Other must be *dealt with actively* in
order to engage with a possibility of an ethical situation. The 'epiphany' has to be
revealed minimally to an onlooker for it to *call* one to respond. As such, Levinas cannot
maintain the *pure passivity of the face* without acknowledging the *active reception of the
Ego* for his fundamental ethics.

2.2.2 – 'Aporias': Insufficiency and Multiplicity of Language

Throughout his writings, Derrida always maintains that all facets of
communication appear as a *multitude* of possibilities. The issues of meaning and identity

⁶⁵ Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics," 146-7.

are then never *fixed* in any absolute sense. In a discussion on the ambiguous interpretations available for the French phrase '*il y va d'un certain pas*' ['it involves a certain step/pas'; 'he goes along a certain pace'], Derrida points out the *fleeting* nature of the issue of totality:

As soon as these totalities are overdetermined or rather contaminated, but the events of language (let us say instead, but the events of the mark), which they all just as necessarily imply, they, in turn, are no longer thoroughly what they are or what one thinks are, that is, *they are no longer identical to themselves* [my emphasis, C.N.], hence no longer simply identifiable and to that extent no longer determinable. Such totalities therefore no longer authorize simple inclusions of a part in the whole.⁶⁶

What we attempt to convey with our concepts inevitably misses what we desire to take hold of *itself*. For instance, when we use a word like 'apple' to communicate the 'sweet and scrumptious red coloured fruit,' there is an element of this sort of description that is excluded from the *actual* thing at hand. One obvious limitation is that the word cannot *be* the *material* object itself; language is always a *reference to* something else. In this case, 'apple' is not *identical* to the apple in question. Along with this example, Derrida would perhaps suggest further that 'the apple itself' is *also* not equivalent with itself, but rather is always engaged within a *process of reasserting* its 'appleness.' Although this might be a bit complicated for the consideration of a mere apple, the point remains that language, as well as for meaning and identity, is *always disjointed* from what it attempts to capture. The issue of an all-encompassing sense of totality is nothing more than a myth since it presupposes that *totality in general is already in some way complete and sufficient*. Instead, reminding the reader of the *temporal structure* that presents the

⁶⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*, 7.

impossibility of death, Derrida holds that there is *always* a failure in attempting to gather the entirety of what is at stake.

Because of this sense of futility with language, Levinas can be accused of *oversimplifying* the exclusive dichotomy between the Other and the Same. As Richard Beardsworth puts it:

Levinas goes too far in the other direction, losing the aporia of the law by surrendering a differentiated articulation *between* the other and the same [...] The effect of this loss is the loss in turn of the *incalculable* nature of the relation between the other and its others (the community at large).⁶⁷

For Levinas, according to his ‘dogma of sameness,’ the issue of the Other can *never meet up with* the realm of the Same. Because the condition of radical alterity maintains an *irreconcilable distance* from our comprehension, there cannot be any negotiation between these terms of understanding. On the contrary, Derrida argues for the possibility of a degree of otherness *within* the realm of the Same. By pointing out the *aporetic* quality within the instance of our language, we find that there are gaps in all projects of conceptualization:

It appears to be paradoxical enough so that the partitioning [*partage*] among multiple figures of aporia does not oppose figures to each other, but instead installs the haunting of the one in the other [...] the limit is too porous, permeable, and indeterminate.⁶⁸

Within every determination we make in our use of language, *other concepts* tacitly support the claims in question. In using a word, there is always a *missing* counterpart that provides a context for signification. A concept *on its own terms* cannot communicate these relational support structures. As such, language *speaks* according to the inevitable

⁶⁷ Beardsworth, Richard. *Derrida and the Political*, 125.

⁶⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*, 20.

insufficiencies that arise *from the act of speaking*. In this case, the Same *is never the same as such* since Derrida seems to be suggesting that with any sort of an *appearance*, there is at the same time necessarily a *disappearance*. Taking seriously the claim to the temporal aspect of meaning and identity through the function served by death (whether of one's own or the Other's), such issues always appear as *impending* possibilities, and here Levinas would not object. However, in allowing for the structure of the Same to *actually be a determinable totality*, Levinas seems to neglect the point that sameness itself is *also* open to question, and perhaps not quite yet adequately completed in the way that he conceives. Derrida seems to be pointing out that in fact there remains an otherness *within* the categories of the Same, and that Levinas's radical alterity ignores this possibility.

For Derrida then, the issue of alterity is always presented as an *ongoing* process:

[T]hat the other is only 'other' in the constant re-making of the alterity of the other.

Thus, the alterity of the other is not *the other*, but its alterity, its 'self-alteration. This alterity [...] *also* exceeds the other.⁶⁹

Whereas for Levinas that which calls us to responsibility is a *personal Other* who is beyond our comprehension, for Derrida, it is *the otherness* that functions to situate our ethical possibilities. There appears to be an accusation posed to Levinas's Other, insofar as such an 'entity' is characterized by *radical* alterity, that it is to a certain extent also *totalized* according to its incomprehensibility. Because the Other cannot appear within the Same, and the Same cannot have room for appearance of alterity, Levinas's categories are too strict. In fact, Derrida shows us that *precisely because* alterity makes its appearance within the Same, as a failure to the system of language, a meaningful situation is possible in the first place. In making a reference to the issue of a 'border,' Derrida writes that:

⁶⁹ Beardsworth, Richard. *Derrida and the Political*, 132.

Everything thus lies in this enigma of the 'as such' [...] To mark and at the same time erase these lines, which only happen by erasing themselves, which only succeed in erasing themselves, is to trace them as still possible while also introducing the very principle of their impossibility.⁷⁰

This poetic image of 'erasing the lines as soon as they are marked' suggests that the borders that we draw are always incomplete, and thus remain unsettled. To mark some facet of experience within the realm of the Same, *already* implies a level of alterity insofar as the delineated concept falls short *as a totality*; any articulation of sameness always comes with otherness. As soon as we decide to set limits we paradoxically end up exposing the fragility of such frontiers, which in effect remove its function as a limitation: *the act of marking opens up the question of what is marked*. Thus, in using a concept we simultaneously acknowledge its insufficiency in capturing what it desires. However, this is the basis on how a concept holds any meaning, and becomes relevant in the first place; its impossibility as a concept allows for it to appear *as an issue*. In the context of political borders, which supposedly act to *definitively separate* different nations around world, they never appear as being completely settled once and for all, but necessarily *develop* over time according to the unfolding of history. What is then considered as the Same, is only as such because it is not so in any *absolute* sense; in stating the possible, we also recall its impossibility. Thus language, as well as meaning and identity, is always from its inception aporetic, which suggests that otherness is *parasitic* on sameness, and vice versa. Derrida shows us that the realm of the Same that Levinas's resists can only *appear as such* insofar as an otherness is always already there from the onset. Alterity must then emerge from *within* the Same if it is to generate any sense of ethical responsibility.

⁷⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Aporias*, 73.

2.2.3 – Hospitality and Welcoming the Third

As discussed previously, it appears for Levinas that the face-to-face encounter is the primordial relationship that generates a meaningful situation. Only in this way is the Ego forced into a bind that results in committing violence against the Other through dividing up ethical responsibilities upon the entrance of the third party. However, as discussed with the issue of language enabling a sense of *otherness within the Same*, Derrida suggests that there are certain dispositions that are always already in place in order for ethical-type relationships to be possible in the first place. In other words, in attempting to keep faithful to Levinas, Derrida offers a reading where the third is *co-originary* with the inception of the face-to-face. That is to say, that even within the relationship with the Other, there is *already a multiplicity*.

The thrust of Derrida's interpretation of a co-original status of the third is in much of the same vein as the discussion in the previous sections. The issues of the Same and the Other remain radically exclusive in Levinas's work; we are provided with a *totalizing* set of categories in which encountering the Other remains utterly impossible. This restriction prevents the possibility of ethics altogether. Derrida presents a position that, insofar as the self *responds* to the Other at all (which is Levinas's criterion for the emergence of ethical possibilities), there is necessarily some otherness associated within this encounter. In the acknowledgement of the Other, as Derrida suggests in saying 'yes' to him/her,⁷¹ there is a commandment that forces a response. We are not *indifferent* and *neutral* when the face of

⁷¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 24. Derrida writes that, "the welcome is always the welcome of the other [...] there is no *first yes*, the *yes* is already a response. But since everything must begin with some *yes*, the response begins, the response commands." There is already a multiplicity built into the response to the Other. In responding 'yes' to the Other there is an implication that not only was there an issue there *before* it that this is a reply to, but also that in such an agreement, it opens up the possibility of an impending future. The response exposes how we are thrown into a situation, and thus shows that there cannot ever be a *first yes*.

the Other calls us into question. From the previous example of where our character drops her books, by acknowledging such a situation, we have already in some ways said 'yes' to her. Through being *engaged* with her at that very moment, the course of action that follows is taken as our response; regardless whether we choose to help, or walk away, there is already a commandment present that situates the emergence of such options. In being faced by the possibility of the Other's death, we are urged to protect the Other. As mentioned previously, the Other's death is *always too early*, and thus every death *always* comes as a *murder*. Because in this epiphany of the face, the Other exposes the vulnerability of being, and we are *invested* and *interested* in approaching him/her. Levinas would suggest that this is where ethics is first generated. It could be said here that such devotedness to the Other brings him/her into question *as a relevant issue*.

Due to the fact that the Other comes to us as being relevant, Derrida suggests that the third party is *always already* there:

For the third does not wait; it is there from the 'first' epiphany of the face in the face to face. The question, then, is third. The 'birth of the question' is third. Yes, the *birth*, for the third does not wait; it comes at the origin of the face-to-face.⁷²

Derrida suggests that there is a third party as soon as there is a possibility of a relationship with the Other. In light of my exposition of Derrida's response to Levinas, it seems that there can be at least two reasons for this kind of a claim. The first is because *the Other is already third*. Since it has already been pointed out that Levinas's categories are too strict, the Other is not as such without being intertwined within the realm of the Same. However, in holding true to the aporetic quality of experience, the Other is then *always other from itself*. That is, the Other according to its alterity appears from within the Same

⁷² Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 30-1.

inherently as a *multiplicity*. This is how an accessible sense of alterity can be generated: the Other is *always a process of othering from itself*. In this sense, the singular Other becomes a myth, and thus we are never confronted by *only* a face-to-face relationship. The second reason comes from the otherness that is constitutive of delineating relationships in general. Because temporality is an underlying condition, a relationship between two is never *only the case*. By engaging in a relationship with another, there is always more to come than what is currently at hand. In other words, *the relationship itself is a process*. What is at stake here is the claim that there is already an element of *alterity* present at the inception of the face-to-face encounter. This otherness, beyond the presence of the two involved, can be understood as the third. Insofar as relationships are in no way *settled* aspects of life, the third is there from the onset promoting a sense of more to come. By keeping open the possibilities available from the face-to-face, the possibility of a primordial ethics emerges.

These two possible reasons also suggest another point: there is also a third *member* who is always already there in the face-to-face encounter. If it were the case that there were only *two* involved, then there would be *no issue* of ethics that could arise in the first place; we would be *missing the question* of our responsibility in this context. As Levinas argues, when there is only *one* Other, ethical responsibility is simple: give my all to the Other. It is only at the inception of the third party that a division of obligation is required. However, it appears that Derrida's point here is that in *giving* to another at all *already* means that there is *another Other* present to distinguish this as a possible scenario. The third party puts me into a relation with the Other by exposing the stakes of such a connection; I can only give my all to the Other by *neglecting* to divide my

resources to the third member. The evaluation and comparison that Levinas suggests comes along with the third party's appearance on the scene is *constitutive in distinguishing a situation as being ethical*. Only by delineating a situation where *I must choose how to divide my responsibilities for the Other* can I then be *demand ed ethically*. Providing for the Other is ethical only because there is a third that functions to *situate* the *conflict* my generosity. The third party's presence then is what delineates a context in order to open up ethics as an issue that needs to be addressed. Ethics is only possible insofar as we are *involved* in a *social setting* where there are *at least three involved*, and thus the third member *must* be present during the face-to-face encounter: *even between two, there is already three*.

On one final note, Derrida suggests that within Levinas's description of the relationship established with the Other, there is already an undertone of *hospitality* presupposed in the assertion that the call of the face forces the Ego into ethical responsibility. Hospitality, in its colloquial sense, signifies a degree of *care* in the presence of the Other. The maxim of 'the Other before me' exemplifies Derrida's reading most explicitly. This condition of hospitality also enters onto the scene in an aporetic fashion:

Hospitality assumes 'radical separation' as experience of the alterity of the other, as relation to the other, in the sense that Levinas emphasizes and works with in the word 'relation', that is, in its ferential, referential or, as he sometimes notes, deferential *bearing*. The relation to the other is deference.⁷³

The primacy of ethics that Levinas defends requires a relationship where we *await* for the Other indefinitely. Such *passivity* is the result of a *deferral* of the Other's presence. That

⁷³ Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, 46.

is to say that when the Other appears, this appearance is not a finished image of the Other: *appearance is repetitive*. In order for the Ego to *remain patient* in waiting for the Other, there is already the presumption of 'being hospitable' that is requisite for this relationship. Such hospitality suggests that we *welcome* the Other when s/he comes onto the scene, only to chase him/her away.⁷⁴ The alterity that is constitutive of ethics demands this from us. We must acknowledge the Other in his/her alterity, but in so doing, we fall short reaching such task. Since the Other's presence is always fleeting, and at most we only receive its trace, the condition of hospitality can never be conclusively fulfilled. Not only is hospitality then infinite, but also it is the disposition that puts us in touch with the alterity of the Other. Only by being hospitable *from the start* does the Other emerge as a meaningful entity that I can be obligated to. Hospitality is always implied in an ethical situation, and thus the relationship with the Other is always *mediated*. Here, it could be said that hospitality is a *third term* that lies *between* the Ego and Other in which sets up the provisions of their relationship.

Through the exposition given in this chapter, it has been illuminated that Derrida's position provides Levinas with the means of constructing the primacy of ethics. By exploring the issue of the third, we have discovered that the Other is only singular insofar as *it is necessarily multiple*. There is never a face-to-face encounter with the Other since the condition of *encountering* requires *another otherness*. Because the Other must be torn from its abysmal alterity, that is, break through, and appear within the horizon of the Same, a level of ontological violence is imperative for the possibility of ethics at all. Only

⁷⁴ Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*, 141. In reading role of *ghosts* in Marx, Derrida writes that, "he welcomes them only in order to chase them. As soon as there is some specter, hospitality and exclusion go together." For the appearance of alterity, we must welcome the possibility of this manifestation. However, insofar as we allow for this, in order to take seriously the *claim* of this sense of otherness, we must *deny* that such an appearance is *adequate*.

in this way can alterity be made into an issue in order to generate ethical responsibility. It is the case that we must make a decision for any responsibility before the Other. *Ethics then*, according to Derrida's reading of Levinas, is *(ontological) violence*. In the final chapter, as a continuation of this necessity of appearance, I will suggest that such a primordial ethics can be generated by the exposure of the *particular differences* of the Other.

Chapter III – The Importance of Particularity in Ethics

In the previous chapters, I have given an overview of Levinas's ethical critique of Heidegger's ontology, as well as delineated Derrida's response to such a project.

Following Heidegger, Levinas holds that death marks a level of transcendence that is generative of the related issues of meaning and identity. As discussed previously, Levinas provides a convincing account of how this phenomenon can only be encountered from the exposure of the Other's face. The Other's death reveals the vulnerability and mortality of existence, and it can be said that this is where the issue of alterity arises. I have emphasized how Levinas's position holds that the alterity of the Other resists assimilation into the realm of the Same. At the same time, it must be also maintained that this criterion of alterity is the site that informs our relationship with this Other which functions to generate ethical responsibility. This aspect of the Other, which is expressed through his/her death, exposes the possibilities of a world beyond myself. As the survivor within this relationship, we are then *singled out* and *called forth* to take on responsibility for the Other's fragility because we are positioned in a way where there is *no one else who can respond*. Levinas's main contribution in his critique of Heidegger is that the alterity that delineates the possibility for the development of meaning, indeed coming *prior to the issue of Being*, in fact *obligates* the self and *forces* it into an ethical situation. Such precedence for ethics comes *earlier* than any decisions on the matter, and arrives as the condition for the possibility of existence. Where a problem arises from this inquiry is in the development of this otherness as a form of *radical* alterity.

Derrida's response to Levinas is that for alterity to in fact *do the work in forming an ethics*, the Other must necessarily appear from within our horizon of understanding in

some way: the main question that gets posed is that if we can never have any tangible contact with the Other, how is such an entity supposed to influence any facet of our reality? Under the terms of *radical alterity*, we are prevented from any discussion about the Other since this is taken as a form of violence. According to Levinas, violence is the Egoism of the 'I' during the reduction of its situation into the realm of the Same: it is a *violence of the concept*. As such, within the confines of Levinas's own position, the Other is forbidden from becoming manifest. Here, Levinas fails in obtaining a *language* that enables developing a fundamental ethics. In response, Derrida suggests to Levinas that there must *minimally* be a level of *ontological* violence taken so that the Other can *stand out* as the basis in forming any sort of an ethical situation at all. The criterion of alterity that is constitutive for Levinas's ethics must then necessarily emerge, and which is thereby made into a *relevant issue*, if the Other's face is to actually affect us into obligation. Derrida shows us that the terms created in the exclusive binary distinction employed by Levinas's position are too strict, and that not only is there an otherness that is found from within the Same, but this *must* be the case for the possibility of otherness in general. Maintaining the temporal structure of experience, the Same is never settled *as being the same, or identical to itself*. Whereas Levinas attempts to develop his ethical position through a *positive* account of alterity, insofar as there is an immediate revelation of the vulnerability of existence through the epiphany of the face, Derrida puts forth that such an issue can only be defined *negatively*.⁷⁵ That is to say, we are only able to

⁷⁵ Derrida, Jacques. "Violence and Metaphysics," 138. Derrida writes that, "it is impossible to avoid the ontic metaphor in order to articulate Being in language, in order to let Being circulate in language [...] At one and the same time language illuminates and hides Being itself." The issue of Being is not some object in the world that can be captured conceptually; rather it is the *inadequate relationship* that such metaphor has in the world that brings up the issue of Being. Through negative definition, that is, in ultimately pointing to what alterity *is not*, we can have contact with phenomena that is beyond the realm of our understanding. This is only possible insofar as there is at least an attempt made to articulate such a

distinguish alterity by pointing to what it is not, and maintaining that *any terms* we use in order to capture such aspect of otherness inevitably will be insufficient. Of course, paradoxically, this negative character is only the result of a positive denotation of the Other. Derrida tells us that the Other must appear for alterity to illuminate as an issue for ethics, but not in any overbearing and settled state, rather it is an appearance that remains *open to question*; the *insufficiency itself* is the basis where alterity emerges within a situation. Derrida proposes that Levinas needs to hold this *mediated* sense of alterity, that which has succumbed to the ‘aftermath’ of ontological violence, in order to achieve his ethical endeavours.

At this point, it appears that the development of these various positions has the outcome of opening up a mass of unsettled questions. Among the plentitude of possible inquiries that could arise, there seems to be one issue that stands out as being the most relevant for the ensuing task of this final chapter: *how* does the Other appear? It should be noted that this same question could of course be put differently by using other interrogative connections (*viz.*, *why*, *what of*, *who*, etc). These changes modify the nature of what is investigated while nonetheless remaining linked to the topic at hand. In striving for the goals of this current chapter, these other types of questions will be indirectly addressed in one way or another, but for the moment, let us stay with this issue of ‘how’ in order to develop the matter under scrutiny. Because Derrida explains that the Other must appear within the realm of understanding if we are to be thrown into any sort of an ethical situation, it entails that there must be some *characteristic* of this Other that allows for us to be affected in such an ethical manner. This seems to imply that the

relationship. The issue of alterity (and likewise for Being, and Infinity) lies in the part we *miss* with our conceptual assimilation.

particularities that expose the Other *as an Other* become the constitutive counterparts that illuminate the possibility of the emergence of alterity. The goal of this chapter then is to investigate what is at stake in understanding the grounding of our ethical possibilities in this way, and unfold some of the potential consequences of such aforementioned observations. In order to bring us closer to this endeavour, it will first be necessary to develop a convincing account of why these particularities are central in our exposure to the Other in light of the previous encounters with the projects of Levinas and Derrida. From this, there will be an exploration of how Derrida's *différance* can inform the role of these particular qualities of the Other, and how they are to be approached and dealt with appropriately. In so doing, the final portion of this chapter will be devoted to providing an overview of the repercussions of reading these particularities according to *différance*. Through this process, the claim will be reached that the possibility of generating any type of an 'ethics of alterity' means that we must necessarily take seriously the particularities of the Other. Ethics understood in this way poses the potential ramification that we must investigate certain *social* understandings of the Other's particularities – namely, multicultural and gendered considerations – within such discourse. Because of this, as Derrida will suggest of Levinas's project, ethics is *always already a politics*.

3.1 – Why Particularities of the Other?

As we already know, Levinas's Other must necessarily resist any reduction into the realm of the Same. This inability to appropriate such alterity is the basis where a world beyond the Ego is revealed, and we are thus put into a position of being-for-the-Other. Such a possibility suggests that there is some *relation* between the terms of the Ego and the Other, and thereby demonstrates a contingency on some negotiation between

these apparently disparate distinctions. The ‘appearance’ within the categories of the Same that Derrida suggests of the Other comes as the *trace* left by his/her fleeting presence, and here Levinas would not object inasmuch as he favours an ‘epiphany’ involved with the revelation of the face of the Other. This means, however, that this Other at some moment *manifested* from the horizon of the Same, since the suggestion of a ‘trace’ left over implies that there is a *reminder* of the Other’s presence, and Levinas cannot sidestep this fact. This can be developed with an example where we imagine that a colleague (let us name him Bill) enters a small office wearing a strongly scented perfume, and subsequently remains in there for a couple of hours in order to read a book. Let us say that during Bill’s stay, he receives an urgent phone call, and leaves rather abruptly. In so doing, he subsequently forgets to turn off the lights,⁷⁶ and fails to organize his things as he typically does when he finishes with his dealings. By some chance, we enter the room just minutes after his departure, but miss crossing paths with him during this process. At this moment upon entering the office, we get the *sense* that there was someone that had just been there; the noticeable cues such as the illuminated light, which for most of the time is switched off, and the personal belongings scattered on the desk allow for us to draw such conclusions. Furthermore, say we have previously worked with Bill within these close quarters, and had noticed that his perfume was quite a wonderful and distinct scent. Given this prior experience, we might even project to ourselves a thought of ‘hmmm, I guess Bill was just here, I wonder where he went?’ This example illustrates some of the key points we get from Derrida’s rejoinder to Levinas. To entertain this fabricated example to its fullest, it is necessary to understand that the light, personal

⁷⁶ See, “Violence and Metaphysics.” It should be noted that Derrida provides a historical account of the use of this image of ‘light.’ Utilizing this theme within this example of Bill is meant to reference this discussion.

belongings, and smell of cologne are considered as the tangible elements of our reality (viz. the items found within the realm of the Same), and the character of Bill plays the role of the Other.

The first immediate observation that we can draw from this example is that there are some *particular traits* of Bill that exposes us to his presence within our understanding. The *traces* left by him, namely the illuminated light, the belongings on the table, and even his lingering scent, all act to direct us to the claim that *someone* was just in the room *before me*. Through these cues, it can be said that we are in a way affected by the Other's presence without his/her full disclosure within our experiential field of perception. That is to say, despite the fact that Bill is no longer in the room, his presence is traced back to the disruption of the environment caused by his rushed departure. The fact that the light is usually turned off means that nearly every time I see it shining through the cracks of the door when approaching the office, I already hold a belief that there is either someone currently in the room, or that someone left the light on while in there previously. In any case, the light projects an image of the Other beyond his/her actual presence. Not only do the things left on the table further justify my feeling of the Other's presence, it can also provide a level of assurance that the person who was in this office is in fact not an intruder in any evasive sense, but perhaps a colleague who has some permission to be there. Suddenly, there is an *identity* that can be attributed to this Other whom we have yet to meet. These two observations of this particular context (i.e., the light, and the belongings) *already* signal the possibility of the Other without having our situations coinciding synchronously (insofar as Bill does not have to *physically* be in the room for his presence to be revealed to us). Through encountering elements of the

Same according to our experiential understanding, we are exposed to the alterity of the situation; these items point to a possibility of a world that lies beyond my current assimilated facts.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of this example can be found in the discussion that arises from the image that is left by Bill's scent,⁷⁷ and the processes that unfold from such a phenomenon. It seems that two main points can be brought up with this situation I have conjured up which helps provide a better indication of how Derrida might understand the emergence of alterity through always iterating the particularities of the Other in order to re-identify them. In the first place, the perfume that we smell is connected with *what we experience* from encountering *Bill*. As such, this fragrance is *associated* with Bill himself, and when we are overtaken by it, such a smell *signals his* presence. There is again a connection made with an element found within our horizon of understanding that gestures to something otherwise than what is present. This is true insofar as the question that we can ask from such an exposure (viz. 'I guess Bill was just here, I wonder where he went?') is not only an actual possibility that is not too far-fetched from reality, but is also exemplary of how something within our perceptual field can guide us towards a *different* matter that is indeed *absent* from the present; in this case, the odor is never *just an odor*. This point is not so different from the one previously made about the illuminated light and Bill's belongings that we had encountered upon entering the office initially. However, without this olfactory experience, we could not as readily arrive at the strict claim of *Bill's* former presence; our familiarity with his scent allows for us to take him as the relevant issue to be under interrogation.

⁷⁷ See, *Specters of Marx*. Derrida provides an extensive discussion on the issue of a 'ghost.' Such an entity is meant to gesture towards the presence of something *already* in repetition. Bill's scent is a reference to this Derridian image.

The second point that emerges from here is that in order to make this sort of a connection at all, there is a contingency on the *previous* experiences of it. If Bill did not wear a certain type of cologne when we had encountered him in the past, we could not legitimately draw up such an association. This demonstrates that in order for alterity to show up from the contents present from within our perceptual field, there is necessarily a *historical* constraint that informs such a possibility. Interestingly enough, such a history can also serve the function in misdirecting our conclusions if we hold too rigidly to such previous experiences. If, for instance, another fellow colleague had received a bottle of the same fragrance as a gift, and he had entered the room rather than Bill, our experiential history acts to conceal the ‘truth’ of the matter. This poses the imperative that such quality *ought not, and cannot, conclusively* determine the understanding of our world. The word *truth* was placed in quotation marks here because such verification is *always* contingent on being backed up by the context, and thus necessarily remains open to question since the setting changes and evolves over time. Despite this, what the scent of Bill does in terms of our relation to him is that such a determinable quality points out his presence to us, as well as the historical necessity that is required in the possibility of this ‘tracing.’ Furthermore, in our abovementioned question addressing the whereabouts of Bill, there is a *temporal* process that is built into the onset of this interrogation. By being exposed to an element of our tangible experience, we acknowledge that Bill is a person who is *also* capable of engaging in his own projects within the world. In other words, by the *presentation* of his *absence* from the current situation, it becomes revealed to us that there are possibilities that *exceed* our state of affairs. The issue of Bill’s scent signals the evanescent character of the Other’s appearance *as nonpresence*. This passivity illustrated

by Bill's absence in this situation is gathered and taken up actively by our engagement with these tangible and consumable aspects found within our context. In fact, the reception of the scent, along with the historical connection of reality, seems to offer the possibility for Bill to become a pertinent issue in this situation: if the perfume did not signal for us Bill (viz. that there was no formed history for this connection), or if such a scent had already dissipated before we entered the room, then the curiosity about *his* presence may not have come to fruition. The smell that lingers *indicates* precisely that *Bill* has just eluded us.

It seems that this elaborate example of Bill in the office could be taken to illustrate, and unfold further, the crux of what was discussed in Chapter II. The Other must appear, and this thought experiment was meant to demonstrate that this sort of manifestation is *contingent on*, but not necessarily *reducible to*, our reception of the specific qualities that we can associate with Bill. Although it could be deemed as (ontologically) *violent* that we encounter Bill as being smelly, following along with Derrida's observations, such a reduction is *minimally* necessary to illuminate his presence according to the (constructed) context. To answer the question posed in the title of this section then, *the particularities of the Other are what provide the basis for the expression of alterity that is constitutive for the determination of the Other as 'Other.'* We can only understand the issue of alterity inasmuch as there is an insufficiency with the terms uncovered within the Same, and this allows for the possibility of otherness to emerge. It is only in the *failure* of these particularities in attaining the essentiality of the matter at hand (namely by asserting that they *actually capture an undifferentiated sameness*) that the presentation of alterity is possible, which as both Levinas and Derrida suggest sets up

the framework for generating our ethical obligation to the Other in question. Alterity *cannot* be found independent from the particular characteristics of the Other that we notice in the world. As such, how we *contact* the Other provides a context for alterity to emerge. As the example of Bill illustrates, this proximity with him is encountered in the particularities we receive from the remains of his former presence. With this, let us move onto the next section where the principle of *différance* found in Derrida's writings will be developed in greater detail in order to show how this can help us better understand the reception of these particularities, and why they are inescapable.

3.2 – Différance

One of Derrida's most prominent themes throughout his work is the notion of *différance*, which comes as an overarching relation that guides deconstruction. Like the issue of the Other in Levinas, the difficulty of providing an accurate definition for *différance* lies in the fact that it is actually a 'concept' that *necessarily* escapes any attempt of positive denotation. The result is that words like 'concept,' 'theme,' 'motif,' etc., inevitably miss the point in capturing what is at stake with *différance*. Derrida writes that it is located (but not in any absolute sense), "as the strange space that will keep us together here for an hour, *between* speech and writing, and beyond the tranquil familiarity which links us one another, occasionally reassuring us in our illusion that they are two."⁷⁸ Rather than appearing as some *thing* in the world, Derrida argues that it is more precise to understand it as the *process* that is constitutive in putting forth the possibilities of meaning, identity, and ethics. *Différance* marks the *incoherent* moment where we are able to distinguish and set up a coherent situation. If we can recall the discussion in the

⁷⁸ Derrida, Jacques. "Différance," 5.

second chapter of linguistic meaning as *aporetic*, *différance* would be the *cause* of this *aporia itself*; it comes as an impossibility that sets up the possibilities of the world.

Derrida tells us that *différance* gestures to two available significations that function simultaneously: the first is to *differ*, and the second is to *defer*. The word 'différance' captures both of the active senses of these corresponding verbs. To explain the first, this neologism has its root in the French word *différer*, which in English basically means to differentiate, and is the common consensus on how this verb is used. In order to illustrate how this is significant in the generation of a meaningful situation, Derrida presents the contingency of language with its contrasts: "in language there are only differences [...] language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system."⁷⁹ To differ is to draw a relation between the separate entities at hand in order to discern a meaningful description of them. This can be done with objects (i.e., an apple is *not* a banana), as well as with concepts (i.e., the 'good' is in the *absence* of 'bad' or 'evil'). In this sense of the word, we *compare* and *contrast* between *two or more* terms within a given situation. However, the presence of these terms *as being separate and comparable* is *contingent* on the process of differentiation posed by *différance*. In distinguishing the partition between 'apples' and 'bananas,' *différance* suggests that the possibility of these categories arises through their divergence as 'fruit.' Such concepts maintain their *identity* and appear as *independent* terms precisely because of the demand for differentiation. This also shows that the signification of a concept is only possible when it *corresponds* to the other elements within a context; meaning is thereby *relational*. In fact, without such an interrelation between terms, the possibility of any meaningful situation would be annihilated. Language thus is presented as a system that

⁷⁹ Derrida, Jacques. "Différance," 11.

depends on such differentiation in order to convey meaning, and as a further claim, Derrida asserts that there would be *nothing* without this process. These differences found in our use of language then appear *prior* to even the comparisons that *we* might draw. That is to say, the differentiation does not require us to be conscious of *every distinction* that sets up the concepts in question. Rather, this first part of *différance* shows us that an issue *as an issue* has to emerge from *within* its background, and this must necessarily be the case. This must be the case because we would otherwise be lacking a *context* that functions to *situate* the term as being meaningful. Any issue cannot appear as relevant in isolation, and meaning can only be generated in this act of differentiation. Thus, an apple is as such insofar as the claim of ‘not-banana’ is always already implicitly there to support it.

The second side of *différance* that Derrida puts forward is derived from the etymological roots of *différer*:

The Latin *differre*, to wit, the action of putting off until later, or taking into account, of taking account of time and of the forces of an operation that implies an economical calculation, a detour, a delay [...] *temporization*. *Différer* in this sense is to temporize, to take recourse consciously or unconsciously.⁸⁰

This facet of *différer* that is captured by *différance* suggests that not only does the generation of meaning require situating the term through a comparison of the other terms that support it, but also that this happens over time without a final product in sight. Derrida points out that the meaning from this differentiation is then always *deferred*, which suggests that its occurrence always appears as an *ongoing process*. Meaning in the world is not something that is rigidly fixed and standing *outside* of time, but instead, as

⁸⁰ Derrida, Jacques. “Différance,” 8.

with the possibility of death, it is always *forthcoming*, and *yet to be determined*. This condition of temporality suggests that the signification that arises relative to a particular instance in time is open to being otherwise. The resulting claim entails that there can be no prediction mechanism that stands outside of our experience, and allows for us to conclusively define this relational aspect of our situation. As such, it is not enough to simply *state* the comparison and contrast between terms in order for them to be understood as meaningful, but rather, since any current definition does not hold consistent *through all of time*, this *temporal constraint* implies that there is an onus on the part of the perceiver to constantly *re-state* such distinctions each time they are encountered. At any given moment, our acceptance of a certain distinction that constitutes our situation is always open to question, and this entails that differentiation is always a constant *reaffirmation*.

This latter characteristic of *différance* might bring us to some discomfort in regard to the issue of maintaining any form of a *static* sense of identity or meaning. Because differentiation is always *according to* the unfolding of time, and if we assume that time is *infinitely* instantiated, then this never-ending process does not allow for the attribution of any *enduring* qualities; meaning appears to always be *fleeting* from any attempt of comprehension. For instance, if ‘apples’ must not only be contrasted with ‘bananas,’ but also that this comparison itself is never fixed in any absolutely unquestionable sense, how can we then even hold that *there is such a thing as an apple* at any point? It would seem that *différance* forces us to be committed to the claim that, inasmuch as there is a temporal structure that dictates our interaction with issues in the world, meaning as finally fixed is an *impossibility*. That is to say, we are at each moment prevented from

identifying anything within the world because such recognition is always found in flux; we are left unable to legitimately hold any word or concept in any meaningful sense.

The issue of reaffirmation according to temporality, however, does not entail that the resulting change from the unfolding of time is necessarily *radically different* from one moment to the next; the apple *does not* miraculously turn into a banana. In fact, to suggest such a disparate transformation is undertaken in this process misunderstands the *repetitive* structure that is required of *différance* as a *deferral* of meaning; repetition implies a *return* to something that *already was*. Because meaning is forthcoming, each mark created by *différance* can be imagined as a *projection* towards the (unreachable) goal of *the thing in-itself*. Here, the criterion of ‘unreachable’ directs us to the position that there are no overarching Platonic-type categories that inform our conceptual understanding of the world, but instead meaning is the continual process of reinstating the issue at hand, and thereby dealing with it according to our present context. This in no way suggests that by moving forward, we *forget* the past, but rather it is quite the contrary: *the past informs how we are to engage in this reaffirmation*. Instead of disjointed and fragmented change throughout time, what is suggested by this temporal constraint of *différance* is that meaning is always a *development*. The deferral aspect of *différance* informs us that *history* is a key component in the emergence of meaning, which signals the possibility of the identity. Therefore, the apple maintains its identity because the established contrast with bananas that differentiates it as such is *already built* into such a concept historically. What *différance* as deferral suggests then is that this given differentiation need not hold absolute throughout all eternity. For if we encountered an apple that say *tasted* like a banana, such a categorical comparison that we had previously

held might become questionable. Différance shows us that such conceptual development is not only possible, but is also constitutive of the emergence of meaning in the first place. Without the possibility of this progress, any concept inevitably becomes a non-issue in the world because there is nothing that *supports* it as such. The *controversy of the differentiation* is what illuminates it as a relevant issue that can be dealt with. Différance suggests a *postponing* of meaning because, as a temporal process, there is an element of the unknown that is forthcoming which contributes to how it gathers significance within the world.

It was noted earlier in this section that différance is not some thing that we can discover in the world. Derrida writes that, “[i]t erases itself in presenting itself, muffles itself in resonating, like the *a* writing itself, inscribing its pyramid in *différance*.”⁸¹ Because any difference that it captures is always deferred, as soon as we believe that we have apprehended exactly what it is, it already escapes our conceptual grasp. The appearance of différance is only through its *effects*, and thus can be understood as *provisionally* marked insofar as its reference point in the world *accommodates* and *shifts* to what is taken at hand. This quality of différance keeps it hidden from a *total* appearance in the foreground; it is the *relation* that supports the issue in question as significant. Thus we cannot obtain *knowledge* of différance because *it is always otherness*.

One question that might be raised from this conclusion is if it remains inaccessible, then why is it necessary for Derrida to even put forward the issue of différance in the first place? It would seem that the futility of this concept precludes it

⁸¹ Derrida, Jacques. “Différance,” 23.

from having any relevance as an issue at all. However, it should be noted that

Beardsworth reminds us that:

Just as one will lose the aporia if one recognizes it, so will one lose it if one does not recognize it. One's relation to aporia must consequently be *itself* aporetic, if the experience of aporia is to remain an impossible one.⁸²

There is a necessity to *indicate* the presence of an aporia. Because such a relation appears as being *impossible*, that is, one that eludes any attempt of conceptualization, we are faced with a paradoxical bind: the aporia must be noticed, but in such recognition, the aporetic quality of it prevents such a possibility. Différance, insofar as we take it as being aporetic, maintains itself inasmuch as we are *unable* to coherently capture its essential structure. At the same time, in order for it to do the work of generating meaningful possibilities, it must necessarily be distinguished as such. Here, there is not a mere suggestion that the *name* of 'différance' must be delineated, but rather that we must acknowledge its *relational processes* for any appearance of meaning. The issue of différance must therefore *at least attempt to manifest itself* in order for it to function as a sort of *transcendental* condition for the possibility of meaning. Despite that fact that différance eludes our direct understanding, it is necessarily *always already* there in order to set up a meaningful situation; it is then understood as the *incoherency* that is constitutive for any sense of *coherency*. As a result, in even pointing out any issue as pertinent, différance emerges *indirectly* as the background that makes such relevancy possible.

Différance could be interpreted as an otherness within a situation that is always already there from the onset. To remember a discussion had in the previous chapter,

⁸² Beardsworth, Richard. *Derrida and the Political*, 104.

insofar as it 'reassures our illusion that there is only two,' it can be instantiated as the *third* which acknowledges the elements indicative of this context. Différance allows us to *distinguish* the different elements of our situation because it exposes that there is something yet to be determined within this situation. Différance expresses itself as the *separation itself* that lies *between* the 'two.' Because it is always there setting up the situation, this implies that there is *always more than just two* (hence, the reason for why Derrida considers this situation an 'illusion'), and comes as the necessary otherness that *sets up* the presented elements and makes them relevant. Since we are able to identify *different* elements within the world, différance then appears as that third item within a situation that sets out the possibility of such *division*: it can then be taken as *the unfolding of the ontological violence itself*. At the same time, in creating this separation of terms, there is also a call to *negotiate* what is expressed. Due to the duality associated with différance (the verbal senses of to *differ* and to *defer*), any terms given in a *present context* are never conclusively settled. So by delineating a set of 'two' (in Levinas's case between the self and Other), différance disallows the *borders of these two* to be completely determined. In fact, différance shows us that *as borders* they are necessarily *indeterminate*. Suddenly, what is captured by these categories remains an open question, and this has the function of showing an inherent *ambiguity* with the terms formed within our context. As the third, différance illuminates the elements within a situation while exposing the insufficiencies of the delineated items. This deconstructive quality of différance, as we will see in the next section, can provide insight and inform us on how we can approach and deal with our exposure to the Other.

3.3 – Particularities after Différance: an Ethics via Particularity

As the condition that opens up a possibility beyond the existence of the self, and thereby articulates an ethical obligation for the Other, alterity can only function in this way insofar as it comes up as an issue within the comprehensible realm of the Same. Alterity must be an issue *as otherness* in that it appears as such *in relation to* the given term; it is never captured and delineated in any positive sense, but rather it can be traced as the insufficiency displayed by the myth of a completed totality. Différance suggests of alterity that it can only ever manifest *through its effects*. Derrida's contribution to Levinas here is that the issue of alterity must *always be situated*, and depends on the given comparable counterparts that set up the emergence of otherness; alterity *must be otherness from something*. Any claim that is then found in the realm of Levinas's Same has *already within it* a sense of alterity that makes it *stand as sameness*. What we are then exposed to is not alterity *itself*, since we would receive an otherness that is void of any context which prevents it from arising as an issue, but rather it is the *appearances* from the horizon of our understanding that provide the basis for such a revelation. As such, alterity is *mediated* through the tangible qualities of our experience.

The proximity to the Other that allows for contact with alterity is the result of some *particularity* that *emerges* and functions to *articulate* his/her existence to us. Alterity is generated through the fact that the terms that we *equate* with the Other's existence always fall short (this is what Levinas deems as 'violence'). At the same time, the Other must *express* him/herself to us since otherwise there is *no relationship in any sense* that is possible. This expression can only come as a determinable quality of the Other that appears from within the horizon of our understanding. These particularities

that distinguish the Other allow us to *notice and gain access to* such an entity so that there can be a possibility of ethical existence. Back in the example where Bill had just left the office, we were exposed to his presence through the environmental cues left by his hasty departure. Without these reminders of Bill, the issue of his presence becomes non-existent.

What *différance* informs us on the issue of these particularities is that although they might allow for us to encounter *an* alterity that generates ethical responsibility, they are not presented as absolute categories that definitively anchor the essential character of the Other in question. The deferral of *différance* postulates that Bill is *irreducible* to the belongings he left on the desk, or to the light he forgot to turn off, or even to his distinctive scent that we have associated with him. Coincidentally, *différance* as differentiation *also* suggests that if these qualities actually do illuminate Bill's presence, then they have to be tethered to his being in some way. This puts us into to a paradoxical situation: we have to acknowledge the particularities of the Other in order to have the possibility of forming a relationship, but in so doing, those very characteristics that we have pointed out have necessarily become obsolete and insufficient. As discussed previously, this puts forth the proposition that we need to re-affirm such particularities that allow for comparison as time passes. However, temporality entails that we must do this *in light* of the shift to a context that has *evolved* from the present. If Bill unexpectedly comes into the room one day, and we notice that he is wearing different cologne, such an experience requires that we *adjust* our understanding of Bill accordingly. There is then a negotiation of the current situation contrasted to our developed history with Bill. *Différance* shows us that in recognizing the Other according to his/her particular

qualities, there is a necessity to maintain the *open-ended unsettledness* that such differentiations as *impending* necessarily imply.

Although one's scent might in some sense provide a path to the alterity that situates our ethical responsibility, this particular quality seems to not hold as the best example in suggesting such possibilities. For one reason, considering it is merely cologne that is in question, such an item is *interchangeable* between Others. This was illustrated when there was a suggestion that *another* colleague could receive a bottle of the same stuff that Bill wears. If we can recall from the previous chapters, there was some discussion on the *uniqueness* of the Other as determining the primordially of the face-to-face encounter over the appearance of the third. Despite the conclusions drawn from Derrida's suggestions that this third is perhaps co-originary in the encounter with the Other, the criterion of uniqueness is nonetheless underlying his reading of Levinas: the particularities of the Other *identify and singles out that Other as an individual*. The reason that alterity can come up as an issue is precisely because the Other has *stood out* as a vulnerable entity that expresses a world beyond my own possibilities (although it seems that Derrida's contribution to Levinas here is that *my decisions* according to this experience might *also* play a role in such a process). We can then pose the following question: can some quality such as an odor generate ethical responsibility? The quick answer is, of course it can! This exclamation is not intended to be cheeky in any sense for if we can imagine entering a place like a hospital, where we become overwhelmed by the sterile smell of the medication in the air that could be associated to the Other's fragility given our previous experiences, it seems that a sense of vulnerability can be signaled from this particularity of the situation, and therefore could call for the generation of

ethical obligation; we can be exposed to the issue of *death*, and thus encounter the mortality of existence. However, why Bill's scent seems to not be the best example (if there can even be one) lies insofar as such a trait is not *appropriable* as part of his existence in the world. That is, in that he is able to make a decision on wearing some other scent (or even none at all), it demonstrates the *contingency* of this quality. As such, the perfume that he chooses to wear seems as if it is *accidentally* associated with his possibilities, and need not necessarily guide the way he exists in the world. Because of this interchangeable and provisional quality of his scent, Bill is not identified *uniquely* by it; Bill is not *thrown* into his existence according to such an aroma. Insofar as these particularities of the Other are supposed to gather some image of him/her that provides an indication of alterity, it seems that we need to encounter traits that are more closely connected, and thus pertinent to the Other's being in order to reach such an endeavour. To investigate the traits that perhaps might be more informative of one's being, that is to say, demonstrate a more intimate connection with the Other's being, requires that we move away from our friend Bill, and ask ourselves which particularities can function in exposing this closer proximity to the Other. In other words, what particularities carry an affinity to the image of the Other that projects the sense of alterity required as the condition of ethics?

When we consider the number of characteristics that could be noticed of the Other, it appears that there are an *infinite* amount of different possibilities that are available to allow for such a manifestation. It would seem that in order for a particular characteristic of the Other to provide an image that could gesture towards the presence of alterity which obliges us ethically, it must be some quality that is informative of his/her

being in the world. In this respect, although it could be argued that *all* particularities are in one way or another important to this process, there appears to be some traits that are posed as more pertinent according to the context where we discover the Other. As we may recall, ontological violence suggests that some identifiable particularity of the Other will inevitably stand out insofar as s/he appears within the tangible field of comprehension, which allows for the development of a relationship. Since implications of the third suggest a *fundamental sociality*, one could argue that the particularities that have *social significance* might be fitting on gaining insight into the image of the Other that provides the glimpse of alterity that generates ethical possibilities. Since we are always in a *social* situation with the Other, the particularities that emerge as constitutive of his/her being from this exposure might be fruitful to explore. At this moment, it might prove useful in bringing up Derrida's reading of the German word *Geschlecht* as characterizing existence as an issue.

We are told by Derrida that 'Geschlecht' holds many ambiguous meanings: "according to the contexts that come to determine this word, it can be translated by sex, race, species, genus, gender, stock, family, generation or genealogy, community."⁸³ Derrida explicates that in Heidegger's formulation of Dasein, there appears to be an active avoidance in attributing any 'humanistic' and 'worldly' qualities to such an ontological formulation of existence; the argument is that Dasein is *prior* to such categorizations. This line of reasoning also resonates with nudity of the face of Levinas's Other,⁸⁴ which resists the assimilation into the Same. Because of this removal from any

⁸³ Derrida, Jacques. "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand," 162.

⁸⁴ Derrida, Jacques. "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," 180. Derrida writes that, "the work of [Levinas] seems to me have always made alterity as sexual difference secondary or derivative." Because the precedence of Levinas's project works on the primordially of alterity, sexual difference, and likewise

conceptual baggage, when it comes to the question of the *sex* of Dasein (and similarly for the Other), it must be understood as being *sexually neutral*. However, Derrida writes that this is in fact a misunderstanding of how Dasein (and the Other) appear in the world:

If Dasein as such belongs to neither of the two sexes, that doesn't mean that its being is deprived of sex. On the contrary, here one must think of a pre-differential, rather a pre-dual, sexuality – which doesn't necessarily mean unitary, homogeneous, or undifferentiated [...] it is sexual division itself which leads to negativity, so neutralization is *at once* the effect of this negativity and the effacement to which thought must subject it to allow an original positivity to become manifest. [...] In other words, despite appearances, the asexuality and neutrality that should first of all be subtracted from the sexual binary mark, in the analytic of *Dasein*, are in truth on the same side, on the side of sexual difference – the binary – to which one might have thought them simply opposed.⁸⁵

In framing Dasein as foremost an *asexual* entity, Derrida proposes that there is *already* the issue of sexual difference required in generating such an understanding. Maintaining that Dasein is sexually neutral requires that the *conflict of sexuality* be tacitly lurking in the background; the denial of such an attribution is precisely to *affirm* it as an issue that needs to be addressed. Derrida's point here is that regardless of whether such a category is in fact *named* (that is, determined as being 'male', 'female', etc.), Being-in-the-world has *included* with its existential possibilities an *identity* that is *sexed*. Through holding the sexual neutrality of Dasein, sexual difference necessarily emerges as a relevant issue that is constitutive of this distinction. Just as sexual difference must characterize Dasein in its neutrality, the same can be said of the nakedness of face of the Other. If the Other is truly

with the third (see the discussion from chapter II), is only an issue *after* ethics. On the contrary, Derrida puts forth that alterity is only an issue *insofar as* sexual difference is already implied.

⁸⁵ Derrida, Jacques. "Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Violence," 73.

supposed to be prior to the such categorization, then this issue must always already be there in order to support this negative attribution. However, as previously discussed, the naked face is nothing more than a myth; alterity can *only* come 'dressed up' and characterized by its particularities. As such, the Other found *in the world* is *also* always already *Geschlecht*, or within this discussion, *sexed*.

Différance informs this issue of sexual difference. Since sexuality is characteristic of the Other's appearance, there is a necessity of noticing his/her sexual identity in order for us to be placed in a position where we get in contact with the alterity of his/her being. Sexual difference is the site that opens up a world beyond my own possibilities. The Other then comes to us as already sexed. However, if we can recall from earlier in this chapter the aporetic structure of différance, this condition requires us to necessarily make certain determinations in order for them to be available the deconstructive process that is constitutive for the appearance of meaning. Because sexual difference as an issue is implied in the neutrality of the Other (and Dasein), it must then be noticed as a relevant particularity that can expose the realm of alterity. The Other is then called out as 'male,' 'female,' etc., but not necessarily conclusively. Instead, as différance suggests, in pointing out this particularity, it becomes opened up as an unsettled aspect of the Other which involves a constant re-affirmation of such terms. It is not enough to simply identify the Other as 'female' for instance, but this acknowledgement must be maintained throughout time; what the identification of female signifies always changes and develops over time.

Also, différance suggests that the designation of sexual difference carries with it a history that informs such an instantiation. Because we are engaged with the Other

socially, the main concern is the *history informed by society*. As such, the issue of *gender* emerges from our encounter of the Other as sexually differentiated. To be classified specifically as a 'Man' or 'Woman' in this *social context* has implications and determinations that consequently come with being addressed accordingly. What it meant to be a 'Woman' in the 1960s for instance is different than the meaning of such an attribution in the present day, and this becomes even more complicated when we consider those who identify themselves as *trans-gendered*. Each *period* that we understand the term 'Woman' then is inevitably contrasted from each other; such a category remains *non-identical* with itself at any given point in history. The stakes of gender issues change as history unfolds and develops. Derrida responds to Levinas by suggesting that because this historical baggage cannot be avoided, there is a prevention of the sexual neutrality of alterity: "once sexual difference is subordinated, it always so happens that the wholly other who is *not yet marked* happens to be *already* marked by masculinity."⁸⁶ To assert that the nudity of the Other is in some way *prior* to sexual difference, we ignore the historical significance that is already implied in this particularity which shapes the formation of our relationships. This project of *nonviolence* (of the concept) conceals the fact that our approach to the Other is marked by a tradition that has been characterized by the *concealment* of the relevance of femininity. When we posit that the Other is sexually neutral, Derrida informs us that we are *already* foremost concerned with a *male* entity. Insofar as such 'neutrality' is from the onset historically loaded, *différance* commits us to holding that sexual difference as a relevant particularity of the Other that cannot be overlooked.

⁸⁶ Derrida, Jacques. "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," 180.

What *différance* contributes further to this issue is that these past experiences of the Other's sex or gender remains relevant and informs the projection of these categories into the future; the categories themselves are *also* open to question, and how they provide an image of the Other is always yet to be determined. According to the unfolding of temporality, such particularities are inevitably insufficient in adequately gathering the Other's being. The process of reconciling these terms as being constitutive of the Other is thus realized as a *negotiation* between the history of such terms, and its enactment in the world. Not only does the Other appear to us within this social context as sexed and/or gendered, but also according to such a realization, the alterity that emerges from this process forces us to interrogate how these images of the Other are enacted and taken up *as a distinctive characteristic of the Other*. What this suggests is that there is always a call for *discourse* to take place in approaching such a particularity of the Other.

In pointing out the ambiguity of *Geschlecht*, one of the other possible significations is the issue of the Other's race. In a similar vein as to say that the Other is always already sexed and/or gendered corresponding to the transcendental attribution of *Geschlecht*, we could say that as another historically relevant characteristic, s/he also appears according to *race*. Along with this racial attribution, if it is to gesture towards the Other's alterity, then there is inevitably a history tied into such a categorization. Because being 'Black,' 'White,' 'Asian,' etc., is not *simply* reducible to one's skin tone, there comes with these appearances a *cultural lineage*. We could then say that the issue of *ethnicity* also appears as a pertinent matter that requires a negotiation in its enactment with the current social situation. The claim that we can draw from reading this observation of race and ethnicity according to *différance* is that these particularities that

contribute to identifying the Other are not settled in any absolute sense. It would appear that any previous racial subordination throughout history was the result of closing off and erasing the alterity that race and ethnicity can generate (this is likewise true of the patriarchy that ensued from the casting off of the relevance of sexuality and gender). As such, the issue of the Other's race or ethnicity must not be marginalized.

It might be taken that the proposal of differentiating race and ethnicity could be understood as a discriminatory practice. After all, the history of the U.S. tells us a tale of the acceptance of slavery in the South, and the subsequent segregation that ensued post-civil war. In Canada, there was also a similar treatment of people of different 'races' considering those who were sacrificed during the construction of the trans-Canadian railway, as well as the implementation of a 'head-tax' for such workers. These acts of *racism* appear to be precisely because such a particularity of the Other was distinguished as being informative in the treatment of the individual in question. However, Robert Bernasconi reminds us that:

Perhaps any effective intervention against racism is liable to repeat to some extent the very gestures it seeks to oppose and so itself might be labeled as racist. But within deconstructive politics, opposition is never *simply* opposition.⁸⁷

To point out one's race and ethnicity as a significant marker can only ever be the *preliminary* point of departure in dealing with the Other. The briefly abovementioned cases of discrimination found within North American history took the opposition between particular groups of people, and asserted an antagonism without the possibility negotiation. Différance tells us that this history informs, and comes with such particularities. In this way, only by noticing them are they able to gesture towards

⁸⁷ Bernasconi, Robert. "Politics Beyond Humanism." 118.

alterity. Just as the aporetic relation of *différance*, there must be an attempt in making such impossibility an issue. Despite the infidelity committed against what is at stake in such a particularization, the question of the Other's race (as well as gender and sex) must also be negotiated, and put forth as a significant particularity that can generate a sense of alterity that holds us ethically liable. Ethics requires us to not to mask over these particularities of the Other.

The fact that we find ourselves in a social situation where we are surrounded by Others who are gendered, sexed, raced and/or ethnic, ethics calls for us to deal with the understanding of these differences according to the historical baggage that comes along with them. *Différance* proposes that this past informs how such particularities are to be enacted in the future. As such, there must be a constant reconciliation of the *multiplicity* constitutive of these particularities of the Other. Because of this continual discursive process involved in dealing with these ways that alterity can appear, understood through the social context and *différance*, ethics always involves an investigation of the *borders* that constitute the particularities of the Other. The unsettled aspects of the Other's particularities force us into an understanding of these terms that respects their development, and this requires a constant negotiation between the present with its history. Only in maintaining this process can we project into a future, which puts forth the possibility of alterity.

If we do not think the inevitable particularization of alterity through the historically significant traits of race/ethnicity and sex/gender, then we risk having an uncontrolled differentiation that forbids us to contact the Other. Ethics always involves *compromising* the *radical* alterity of the Other in order to narrow down a coherent

situation in which a relationship can be developed. The affirmation of racial/sexual difference through *différance* provides a basis for the emergence of alterity that accounts for the historical relevance of the Other. In doing this, *différance* also brings the finitude of each ethical situation. Alterity, which generates ethical responsibility by illuminating a world beyond the present, obligates according to the *particular* situation where we encounter the Other *as an individual*. An 'ethics of alterity' must then hold that the particularities of the Other remain at issue. Ethical responsibility is then a matter of negotiating the terms in which we contact the Other since such particularities are always yet to be determined. There is always a calculative process that is necessary for making a decision on dealing with these elusive particularities of the Other. For this reason, ethics in the way that Derrida develops from Levinas's project is to a certain extent always already a *politics*.

Bibliography:

- Beardsworth, Richard. *Derrida and the Political*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Bernasconi, Robert. "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics." In *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, edited by John Sallis, 122-42. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- . "Politics Beyond Humanism: Mandela and the Struggle against Apartheid." In *Working Through Derrida*, edited by Gary B Madison, 94-119. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993.
- . "What is the Question to which 'Substitution' is the Answer?" In *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 234-51. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Ciaramelli, Fabio. "Levinas's Ethical Discourse between Individuation and Universality," translated by Fabio Ciaramelli and David Webb. In *Re-Reading Levinas*, edited by Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, 83-108. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.
- Cohen, Richard A. "Thinking Least about Death: Contra Heidegger." In *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Vol. 60, No 1/3, Self and Other*. Springer Online Publication: November 10, 2006.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. California: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- . "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," translated by Ruben Berezdivin and Peggy Kamuf. In *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, edited by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, 143-90. California: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- . *Aporias*. Translated by Thomas Dutoit. California: Stanford University Press, 1993.
- . "But as for me, who am I (following)?" In *The Animal That Therefore I am*, translated by David Wills, 52-119. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- . "Différance." In *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass, 1-28. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- . "Geschlecht: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference," translated by Ruben Berezdivin. In *Research in Phenomenology XIII*, 65-83. Boston: Brill, 1983.

- . "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand," translated by John P Leavey Jr. In *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, edited by John Sallis, 161-96. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- . "Psyche: Invention of the Other," translated by Catherine Porter. In *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, edited by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, 1-47. California: Stanford University Press, 2007.
- . *Specters of Marx*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)." In *The Animal That Therefore I am*, translated by David Wills, 1-51. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- . "Violence and Metaphysics." In *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, 78-153. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Heidegger, Martin. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- . *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row Publishers Incorporated, 1962.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations*. Translated by Dorian Cairns. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999.
- Kearney, Richard. "Derrida's Ethical Re-Turn." In *Working Through Derrida*, edited by Gary B Madison, 28-50. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by Richard A Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.
- . *God, Death and Time*. Translated by Bettina Bergo. California: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- . *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998.
- . *Time and the Other*. Translated by Richard A Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987.
- . *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.
- Llewelyn, John. "Levinas and Language." In *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 119-38. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Putnam, Hilary. "Levinas and Judaism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 33-62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Waldenfels, Bernhard. "Levinas and the Face of the Other." In *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 63-81. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Wyschogrod, Edith. "Language and Alterity in the Thought of Levinas." In *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, 188-205. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.