

# The other as unknown and the feminine as utter alterity. About the returning of face to face communication in Emmanuel Lévinas

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## ABSTRACT

Lévinas presents in contemporary criticism the returning of the ethic issue in social sciences. In this way, he criticizes the structuralist approach whose origins are provided by Hegelian philosophy, which conveys all phenomena in unconscious and impersonal structures. Lévinas brings back the dialogue where the other we talk to is an utter alterity. That is, an otherness that can never be overcome and that places in me what yet was not in me.

**Key words:** dialogue, face-to-face communication, feminine as an utter alterity

## RESUMO

Lévinas representa, no pensamento contemporâneo, o reaparecimento da questão ética nas ciências sociais, e, desta forma, a crítica ao estruturalismo - cuja origem ele vê em Hegel - que transfere tudo para uma estrutura impessoal e inconsciente. Lévinas propõe a redescoberta do diálogo onde o outro com quem dialogamos é totalmente alteridade, alteridade que jamais dominarei e que introduz em mim o que não estava em mim.

**Palavras-chave:** diálogo, comunicação face a face, feminino, alteridade.

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### FROM EXISTENCE TO EXISTENTS

**E**MMANUEL LÉVINAS WAS BORN in Lithuania at the beginning of the XX century. Later on, by the time Heidegger was mesmerizing all students in Germany, Lévinas began his philosophical studies at Strasbourg University (1924), working together with Franz Rosenzweig. He came to know in this city several people who would be important in his life afterwards: Charles Blondel, Maurice Halbwachs, Maurice Pradines and Henri Carteron. Also in Strasbourg Lévinas met Martin Heidegger in 1928 and 1929 and came to read the other most important philosopher of the XX century, Edmund Husserl.

After 1930 Lévinas became a naturalized French citizen and taught at the École Normale Israélite Orientale, eventually becoming its director. He was also professor of philosophy at the University of Poitiers (1964), later at the Nanterre campus of the University of Paris (1967) and lastly at the Sorbonne (1973). Lévinas introduced the phenomenology in France.

Lévinas philosophical tendencies drifted between Husserl and Heidegger, together with a slight inclination for Soren Kierkegaard in 1937, but finally adopting Henri Bergson's philosophy. Husserlian at first, Lévinas wrote against the master with Heideggerian ideas as well as against Heidegger making use of Husserlian arguments. Yet Lévinas kept for the rest of his life central concepts from Heidegger, especially those from the first period such as finitude, being-there (*Dasein*<sup>1</sup>) and being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*).

The philosopher from Messkirch was important to Lévinas since it was Heidegger who introduced the idea that access to knowledge is not feasible via theoretical steps but only through anxiety (*Angst*), therefore a straight and irreducible access. By influence of Heidegger, Lévinas took off the main concept of Husserlian philosophy (consciousness): the subject ceases to have a transcendental and merely contemplative consciousness (as in Kant and Husserl) to become actual existence facing death. According to Lévinas, the excitement on Heidegger's philosophy was due to the separation between being and entity and due to the fact that the being carries the relation, the movement and the effectiveness.

Lévinas kept during his educational development some Cartesian concepts, especially the idea of infinite, which would be a matchless concept to comprehend the possibility of an utter alterity, something that, according to him, would not break in the interiority. Infinite, for Descartes, is an attempt to overcome that idea offered to understanding. Lévinas takes this thought and says it is the exterior bright of the other, a moment when transcendence (or exteriority) breaks off totality. And it is in this very alterity, in the "experience of the other", that Lévinas tries to move away from Descartes, the same way Husserl had done before. From Bergson he took the concept of duration and his personal metaphysics, certain spirituality and the possibility of put himself away from the phenomenon.

1. In German, *Dasein* stands for existence. It is a word made from *Da* (here/there) and *Sein* (being). Heidegger created this word to refer to the being that is there in its world, that is, the being for whom being matters. The same word is also found in hyphenated form on later publications as *Da-sein*, thus emphasizing the difference from the word's standard use. (TN)

Lévinas openly supported the introduction of transcendence in philosophy the same way he was a tough opponent of Structuralism, Marxism, 60's and 70's Psychoanalysis and a permanent antagonist of Scientificism. His originality relies on considering the other as unknown, as a mystery, and the visage as nudity. This other comprises an exterior independence from mine, is the one who is out of my system and with whom no melting is possible. Besides, as pointed out by Calin and Sebbah, this other is a humiliation of all egoistic forces of my ego, revealing itself as a pure ethic relation for it is an experience with the other in which I have to present myself entirely "to the other" (2002, p. 8).

Thence his radicalism in facing femininity as *tout court* alterity. Feminine is alterity itself. It is both a "hospitable hosting" and an erotic relation in which "its secret duplicates, with the materiality of an insolent nudity, inscribing it in the oversight profanity taken as 'simultaneous to the undercover and the uncovered', betrayal to the secret that is not, nonetheless, its negation" (idem, p. 31).

The other is also visage, living presence, expression, something that prevents me from killing it. In this way the dialogue gets a crucial importance for it is not the dialogue between men and a third (I-it dialogue) but a Buberian dialogue I-thou<sup>2</sup>, in which this thou (*you*) is the feminine for Lévinas. Both in dialogue and alterity I do not get this other, I do not overcome the other but get myself overcome by them. I am its "deacon" and I can only communicate if sending myself away, when clearing myself out.

One may suggest that Lévinas's main thesis is the changing of the existence to the existent, which is summarized on the following lines for a brief introduction on this theme.

Suffering and death make up the loneliness of the being. On the beginning the being is subordinated to an anonymous "there is" (*il y a*), which is a silence that whispers on the bedroom, an emptiness that fills the sound of a shell; emptiness prior to all creation. In this point the being is looking for individuality, a selfness to fill this "there is". That is why it cannot be something empty; it is stuffed with loneliness. However, this loneliness is now on other than the Heideggerian one, which describes it as collective "side by side" solitude, the *Miteinandersein*. It is then necessary a face to face loneliness, since this other kind of loneliness would take it to the hypostasis of the being.

Hypostasis is the turning of the being (as a verb) into something (into a noun). The being becomes a noun, a name, an existent emerging from the existence. It is the existence that makes the existent to pursue freedom so it can overlap the existence of individual human beings, emancipating the self for oneself. But this is just not enough. Loneliness

2. Distinction first delineated by Ludwig Feuerbach as I-thou relationship (*Ich und Du Beziehung*), comprising the consciousness human beings have that animals do not, and whereof Buber (Buber, Martin. *Ich und Du*. Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1974) and Lévinas evolve to a broader conceptualization. Feuerbach discusses this subject in *Das Wesen des Christentums* (translated into English as *The Essence of Christianity*) especially in the §1 of the introduction, *The Being of Man in General*. This relationship is what grounds religion and it constitutes a decisive element for all personalities. Last but not least, it is also on the basis of all moral construction (for it is related to the other). Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1989 and Feuerbach, Ludwig. *Das Wesen des Christentums*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994 (p. 47, 158, 201, 313 and 550). (TN)

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put the existent away from the other but the thing is this loneliness is closed in its identity prison. Loneliness is a self that happens to be locked in itself; it is “matter” and body. Herein I do not exist as spirit, smile or wind; I do not exist out of obligation and my *being* is paired with a *containing*: I am stuffed and crammed of myself as material existence. It is only breaking the hypostasis that the being can place itself in the time.

There are two radical ways to reach the subject and both of them leads to “lose of control”: the death and the alterity of Eros. Death is an event where the subject is all passivity; it is no longer “able to be able”<sup>3</sup> and faces something totally different. In this case it is not a becoming (*devenir*) in time. It is only by Eros that the subject can reach this becoming; by the relation with the other that has no communion – since Eros has no melting attributes –; by putting oneself in the place of this other.

In this case, the other is not an Alter Ego. It is what I am not. Moreover, it is only in the feminine that the other’s alterity remains pure. This sexual duality has nothing to do with blending or merging features since it is an endless dodging from the other. The other will not be mine in any case for it backs off in its mystery. The other is not freedom since freedom refers to submission and obsequiousness, in which one freedom cancels the other. If one is free, then communication fails. But if Eros is not possession then communication is feasible once again.

To sum up, Lévinas writes in his book *From the existence to the existent* (*De l’existence à l’existant*) about a way out from that “there is” described above. Yet on *The time and the other* (*Le Temps et l’Autre*) he seeks a chance for getting away from the loneliness of the existence. Firstly, it is shown as a way out of the world through the knowledge. In this case, it is knowledge as immanence and without rupture on being’s solitude. Secondly, we are facing the communication of this knowledge, side by side with this some other but without confronting it, although in direct relation, still not subjecting it, not seeing it as a familiar object, not communicating *stricto sensu* any knowledge, given that existence cannot be communicated. Existence is not something common.

### HEIDEGGER AND HEGEL

The fundamental objection Lévinas put to Heidegger relies on the notion of *being* as something utterly anonymous. Martin Heidegger has said that to understand the entity it is necessary to have previously understood the being of the entity. Being-there is as such a prior stage in the relation to the entity. Anybody, any entity, is then subordinated to the being of the entity, which is something impersonal. Instead of my relation with you as an entity (a natural ethical relation) there is the relation with the being as an abstract event.

3. In the original it is written *poder poder*, which is a complicated expression to translate. In Portuguese “poder” is both the verb form of *can* (technical possibility) and *may* (social permission) plus it stands for the noun “power” or “force”. It is then an intentional pun that would mean “able to be able” or any combination of these possible meanings. It would be more easily translated into German as *Macht Macht*, since *macht* is both a verb conjugation of *machen* (to make) and the noun for power. Only that in this case the phrase would have to capitalize the word supposed to be a noun, leaving them in lower case if it is a verb. (TN)

Lévinas not only suggests a turn over on the Heideggerian model by granting privilege to entities against the being but also aspires for an ethics that signify the significations beyond the being-entity issue, that is, to signify in the Infinite. And what is this “infinite”, whose origin he brought from Descartes? Firstly, infinite is a replacement for the idea of totality that was used in philosophy for a long period and about what Lévinas disagrees (especially in Hegelian philosophy, as mere speculative theoretical assumption). But Infinite is also something produced when the Same and the Other get into a relation; it is to receive from Other person something beyond the capability of the I; it is, above all, an ethical relation. This is what Lévinas calls metaphysical atheism: the dawn of a humanity without myths, a faith refined from the myths, a monotheistic faith, as he says. The Infinite is performed through signification, education and justice.

Take the example of the problem of education. Lévinas says there is no domination but the presence of the infinite, “which overlaps the closed circle of totality” (Lévinas, 1961, p. 153). The connection with somebody else, Lévinas affirms, introduces in me what was not in me. The passage of contents from spirit to spirit goes without violence if the truth taught by the master is now and ever inside the pupil. (idem, p. 162). It is not the reason that creates relations between Me and the Other, Lévinas summarizes, it is the teaching process between Me and the Other that creates the reason (idem, p. 230). Now, this is not far from the emergence of the exceptional in the communication with the other, as stated in the New Theory of Communication: “reason appears in the during”<sup>4</sup>.

This way, Lévinas suggests to think the being-for-the-other instead of the being-toward-death. At first, it is a being conceived as a verb, which refuses at the same time both the idea of entity as a thing, as animated body or individual, and the idea of nature that embraces all in its totality. It is a being as a process, an event of the being, an adventure of the being.

Another way to express this idea is through the contraposition Lévinas does between the said and the saying. In saying, I expose myself to the other, the same way my skin exposes itself to something that hurts, an imminent slap on the face, says Lévinas. The saying is therefore previous and earlier to any differentiation; it is the One, neither verb nor noun for it is prior to verbal signs. To the saying, the one who speaks is not “an object unveiled to the theory”, it is someone that “finds itself overlooking the self-defense, leaving its shelter and thus exposing itself to the outrage” [Lévinas, 1971c, p. 188]. Therefore the saying is for Lévinas the contact, the caress, the wound but never a knowledge about these things. That is why communication demands some kind of “unfasteningness”. It does not refer to the contents of the saying, that logical-syntax established structure used to transmission and decoding decoding with the other, which is less important than the saying itself. It is otherwise a “oneself’s exposing discovery with honesty, a rupture of the interiority and a leaving of any shelter; an exposition to trauma and vulnerability” (idem).

4. *A razão aparece no durante* is how it is stated in the original and it means *the logos appearing in the process*. According to the author, “the during reason (*logos*) is the creative moment that emanates from a common process of scientific discussion in a group. It is a spontaneous and unexpected creation, like the Leibnizian totality (which is bigger and different from the sum of the individualities), coming from the circulation of ideas, suppositions, arguments and all kind of concepts that cannot be conceived from the researcher’s isolated point of view in their office.” Original quotation in Portuguese accessed on Sep. 24, 2007, in <http://www.eca.usp.br/nucleos/filocom/razao.html> (TN)

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Hegel is for Lévinas the one who refers to the nostalgia of the totality. In Hegel, the spiritual and the meaningful are always in knowledge. It is knowledge as an overview of the real that satisfies the spirit. It is supposed that the totality has disappeared and that this loss is an offense of the spirit. Totality is as such a work of synthesis and it is exactly this idea that Lévinas stands up against: the thing is not some kind of synthesis but a human face to face and its moral significance. In a Husserlian way, Lévinas says that Hegelianism achieved *avant la lettre* some kind of suspicion towards the immediate facts of the consciousness (*données immédiate de la conscience*). In a certain way, says Lévinas, Hegelianism gave an opportunity to introduce the Structuralism in human sciences, for the truth was not anymore in the evidence acquired by myself, but in the extensive contents of the thought, that is, the living man fades away while mathematical structures think this man more than the man thinks them. (cf. Lévinas, 1971a, p. 96-97).

### SUBJECT, ALTERITY AND LOVE

Lévinas rediscovers the subject not in the sense of the imperialism of the I (*Moi*), but as an image of the Self (*le Soi*), as the one that opposes the 'There is'. The 'there is' is the silence in the bedroom that carries out a hollow threat, the emptiness of the sound inside a seashell which cannot be closed; this 'there is' is verb in its impersonal form, conjugated in the neutral third person singular. It is an action without subject like when one says "It rains!" or "It is warm!". It is a general being invading the subject and this being is just a "field of force", a heavy environment that belongs to nobody.

This being as abstraction brings a fear to the being, a unique horror other than the Heideggerian notion of anxiety towards death (*Angst*). In the Heideggerian anxiety there is something like a "pure nothingness", a fear of the nothingness. This anxiety brings about the being-toward-death though death is by all means clearly understood and perceived without it. Yet this 'there is' has no way out and comes in the horror of the night presenting an existence that cannot be interrupted: "tomorrow, unfortunately, I still have to live", says Lévinas. Tomorrow is thus a horror of the immortality as in the eternal conflict of existence. The point is not the loss of the being but its resolution.

As stated before, the being rediscovers the subject in the image of the Self, which is opposed to the 'there is' and requires an event: the hypostasis, the appearance of the existents (as a noun) in the core of existence (as in the verb 'to exist'). There has to be something that ceases the anonymous 'there is' and provides the outbreak of a noun, that is, the emergence of the entity. The hypostasis constitutes consciousness: there is now a position, a gift, an I. It is subjectivity that is now created. The identity generated at this point is a very specific one, different from what is provided by the Idealism. It is the identity of an entity in the heart of an anonymous and invading being. (Lévinas, 1947b, p. 148).



Then again there is sociability been generated all this time. This is also a theme from Heidegger although he referred it as the *Miteinandersein*, the being-together-with-the-other or the collectivity of getting with. This sociability is only in the subject as a being-there which appears in the solitude. Lévinas yet refers to this collectivity in a distinctive manner: it is the mine-yours prior to the Heideggerian notion. There is no third participant (person, idea or dogma). It is not a matter of communion, but pure face-to-face. The other, here, is my alter ego but also – and necessarily – what I am not, thus generating asymmetry. It is a proximity that persists in the distance.

Lévinas sympathizes with the example quoted by Merleau-Ponty regarding the touch of the hand (cf. *Phenomenology of Perception*): “the other and myself ‘are elements of the same intercorporeality’ (Merleau-Ponty): the co-presence of both hands, due to the fact that they belong to the same body, spreads it out to the other” (Lévinas, 1984, p. 137). The sensory communion, which Lévinas calls “esthesiologic” establishes intersubjectivity and shall support the intropathy of intellectual communication. The other is reached in a different way, independent from any previous value and only available by the “gnosis of touching or seeing”, whether it is a glance or a skin contact, says Lévinas.

This sensory approximation via skin or glance cannot be assumed as a concept. The context of somebody else’s experience, says Lévinas, cannot be traced from an abstract piece of work and this, in a certain way, had already been suggested by the *Einfühlung* theoreticians: the other cannot be known as a variation of each of us or by a projection of these variations as external parts of us: there is an irreducible access that leads to the thou, where “each encounter creates a new history”(Lévinas, 1954, p. 50).

The other, thus, as the one that has freedom away from my own, lets me speechless, says Lévinas. This other is uncatchable by psychoanalysis: “it is not in the system”; it is a transcendent being (idem, p. 61) at the same time free and uncanny; even though poor, stranger, miserable, it is my equal and beyond that, it organizes me as a Master, thus standing above and below myself. It is poor, deprived, orphan and my lord all together: “called to prevent and justify my freedom” (Lévinas, 1961, p. 229). Thus, the other guarantees my alterity, my difference, which has nothing to do with fusion and lays on the opposite extreme of the idea of love.

Schopenhauer identifies love with compassion for this was the only possible kind of love (the other forms were nothing but self-love). Lévinas agrees to this position to some extent though for him feeling hurt because of the other’s pain is only one moment in a broader and more complex relation regarding the responsibility towards the other. Lévinas says the intersubjective relation of love is the denial of society: it implies in the I satisfied by the thou, “getting in somebody else the justification for my being” (Lévinas, 1954, p. 43). Love and its affectionate warmth are enough

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for this achievement, this satisfaction or fullness, for the society of love is a society of two, “a society of solitude against universality” (idem).

In sexuality the subject goes through a relation with something totally other, the alterity itself, says Lévinas, an other not given in formal logic. The other remains other and never turns into something that is mine. What ordinary language calls “ownership of the other” in erotic relationship – “She is mine”, “I have had her”, “He was mine” etc – turn out to be invalid. The other, who is giving itself to me here and now, who is offering its sex, can never be actually mine. Ownership is no more than contingency, a casual and transitory fact that does not guarantee any future “property”. That is why there is always an imminent passion, jealousy and anxiety for the loss.

Lévinas says that the other’s submission is beyond relations of gender and species, part and whole, action and passion, truth and mistake. The feminine offers a visage that goes beyond its appearance. The lover’s face “does not express the mystery profaned by Eros. [The visage] abandons such an expression or, if at all possible, it expresses nothing but a refusal to this expression, the end of speech and manner, this rough interruption of what was supposed to be there” (Lévinas, 1961, p. 239).

That is because the visage goes along without concepts; it does not have “contents”. I have no powers over this thing called visage, this untranslatable and never comprised thing; something that cannot be overtaken or understood. For Lévinas, the other’s visage challenges my strength and power (*poder poder*) for it is less than a phenomenon. The visage reveals a severe nudity, more naked than the very nakedness of the body. The vestiges of the self are in the wrinkles of the skin, mirroring the traces of the mask and showing the emptiness and an inconvenient misery. “It looks at me”, says Lévinas, “everything in the visage looks at me” (Lévinas, 1976d, p. 212). In a formulation that resembles the ‘there is’, Lévinas says nothing is more imperative than this abandon emptiness of space, a trace of the infinity where the visage’s absence is deep as a wrinkled skin (idem).

The other’s visage is closeness without signs. It does not allude to any theme; it only presents itself as a trace, as something that annoys me even though I cannot match. The visage is a kind of approaching, says Lévinas, which cannot be defeated by speculation. It is the infinitude or the glory of the Infinite. It is a “being in front of” (as in the French expression *en face*) whose face-to-face flashes the first rationality and the impersonal structures of reason. It is the infinite that speaks through me over visage. Hence, the face is closeness because it comes from the Infinite and that cannot be confined in something desirable or intentioned: the infinite exists through visage. (cf. Lévinas, 1968, pp. 89-90).



However, one could kill or murder a person thus destroying this face. Lévinas disagrees, explaining that when I kill the other, the other escapes me. Murders expect to act on someone immediately, over a sense-based object though they soon realize this something cannot be eliminated by appropriation, it is something that cannot be neutralized. The infinite holds an endless opposition to murder and this resistance “shines on the visage of the other, in their eyes’ nudity, in the defenseless nudity of the utter opening to the Transcendent” (Lévinas, 1961, p. 178). The infinite is an ethical defense that paralyzes my powers. Addressing the “thou shalt not kill”, Lévinas locates the visage’s signification as an opposition to the mystery profaned by Eros, which is femininity.

Lust as the very form of the desire is profanation. Lust is the discovery of what is out of sight. Nevertheless a *sui generis* discovery, for what is found does not lose its mystery just because it was discovered. What is out of sight, what is really hidden, cannot be resolved (as in the sexual act when the person gives their body but not their visage). Yet the point is to violate a secret.

What lust unveils – the other’s body or nudity – is not exactly offered as signification. The thing does not shed light anywhere given that only the visage can play this role. Moreover, the feminine offers a visage that goes beyond the face. The lover’s visage does not express the secrecy that Eros (the Lust) profanes. On the contrary, the lover’s visage is the very refusal on expressing whatsoever. The erotic nudity is thus un-significance while the visage is significance. Its chaste nudity – says Lévinas – does not disappear in the erotic exhibitionism. Only those who have the weakness of the visage can “un-veil” the lascivious un-significance. According to Lévinas, the I-thou heterogeneity is constituted in Eros, where the transcendence can be thought in its radical form: “for this I bound to the being one shall bring something that is not a returning, disentangling the I from its shadow so it can return to itself?” (Lévinas, 1947b, p. 163-4).

This is because visage’s signification, as stated in *Totality and Infinity (Totalidade e Infinito)*, is prior to all sorts of significations. It comes before the *Sinngebung* and is quite different from a sign. It is an act of expression, an act of personal exhibition. In other words, the visage is entity’s exhibition *par excellence*. The original significance of the entity – its exhibition as a person – comes as an “attempting to a radical denial” and endless resistance to the murder of the other as other. Thus, the expression “Thou shalt kill” is placed as an opposition to the mystery that Eros (Lust) profanes and comes out in the femininity of the expression.

This way, the face-to-face and the encounter set an expression not necessarily articulated with understanding, since understanding is related to giving names and descriptions; it is an act of violence and a denial of the autonomy of the entity. The face-to-face is mainly a sociability organizer by means of a relation not reducible to simple understanding and apart from

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any content. It gives evidence of the non-fusional and asymmetrical aspects of sociability, as stated by Colin and Sebbah (2002, p. 28). On the contrary to what is frequently supposed, it is no “eye in the eye” that would move from me toward thou and vice-versa, but an asymmetric relation in which I am the mandatory starting point: a movement that goes from me to the other without returning (*idem, ibidem*). It is a relation that cannot be reduced to the representation of the other (which is not ontological, says Lévinas) given that it evokes the other, but an evocation not proceeded by any understanding, it is therefore “religion”. Also, the visage is not only what is seen naked but also the one that sees, the one that looks you back: I see both the eyes of the other and the fact that it looks me back. (cf. Derrida paraphrasing Scheler, in Derrida, 1967, p. 146).

### DIALOGUE AND COMMUNICATION

Lévinas clearly embraces a philosophy of the dialogue, that according to him, would be opposed to the philosophical tradition of the unit of the I as sufficient in itself (both as unit and system, that is, as immanence). Pioneers in this approach were Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in Germany, and Gabriel Marcel in France.

But the dialogue according to Lévinas is not quite the same as presented by these predecessors. Martin Buber is important in Lévinas’ work since he removes any gnoseologic basis from the encounter. According do Lévinas, I do not get to the other to know about whatsoever, to get in touch with nonentity. On the contrary, I accomplish a pure dialogue, a pure union. I get back to the other not because there was some previous closeness or because we are already connected but because the thou (*you*) is something entirely other. The relation I-thou is irreducible in a way that this encounter cannot be reduced to anything determinable. According to Bubber, the encounter is pure act; it is transcendence without content. It is mere sparkle just like the instant in Bergsonian intuition. According to Lévinas, it is like the Jankélévitch’s concept of almost-nothing (*presque-rien*). In this place consciousness has no content anymore; it is just a needlepoint sticking the being. (Lévinas, 1984, p. 29).

Buber is also important for having excluded the We from the relation I-thou: The I (*Je*) from this relation interpellates the thou without taking it as an object of my sight, an object about which I could judge. Yet, it is not an enemy for it does not uphold a juridical erasing of me (*Moi*) under an anonymous law of the State. And to interpellate the thou in such a way that no concept would apprehend them is for Lévinas what establishes a legitimated society and a fair world, stopping violence.

Still Lévinas thinks that the Buberian relation I-thou can get limited to a strict optical relation, a harmonious eye-to-eye, a looking glass relation grounded in the face to face of the encounter, emptying thus its heteronomy, its transcendence or its involvement. It takes more than this, says Lévinas, it takes some kind of commitment, which stands for his concept of diacony. According to him, the bond on somebody else only gets tied with responsibility, whether we can or cannot do something in favor of the other. It is the “I am here” that makes something to the other, that gives oneself to the other in a subservient way prior to any dialogue. When the other is at hand, their visage or the expressing of their visage (and their body) calls me to serve them. That keeps the autonomy or the alterity of this other in safe, which is precisely what sets me free.

Thus dialogue is not communication, or at least it is not as in the usual meaning of the word. “I only communicate if I send myself away”, says Lévinas (1954, p. 50), by the time I disappear and an event (*Geschehen*) is settled down. My interlocutor is somebody away from any subjective movement; a person I am strange to but that stands up in front of me. In this way, communication turns out to be substitution for Lévinas: the substitution as a relation from one to Other and from Other to one, in a way these two relations do not get the same meaning. Lévinas emphasizes that it is about my own substitution and inasmuch it is mine that this substitution goes to the other. That is why it is in me and not in the other; in me and not in the individuation of a concept that communication unfolds itself. (Lévinas, 1967, p. 200).

Therefore it is clear that communication is something else other than social exchange of information. It is a two-way reversibility on the meaning path, opened to circulation of information, in which, as he says, the meaning is irrelevant (1967, p. 188). In this case there is a third that introduces the theme in this very place, the appearing and the justice, all in regard to the needing of the justice. The “meaning” shall come only from oneself (*du Soi*).

In the dialogue, says Lévinas, the other is for me an absolute strange and only this strange can instruct me. It is clear then that for Lévinas communication is close to instruction, the same way he inferred when talking about the Infinite, that is, something that happens when we receive from somebody else something beyond the capacity of the Self. The Infinite actualizes itself in the signification of tuition and justice.

The I-thou relation is entirely different from the I-it, which is also necessary as an early interior act. The thought makes a request for words in order to think and therefore realizing an “interior speech”: it interrogates, it answers and ponders about itself, says Lévinas, but still this is not dialogue. When going around people there is an attempt to recover the lost unity of the thought addressing the language that bends itself to knowledge (I-it relation). The One is on the “other’s thought”, that is, their reasons match

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and achieve agreement in “only one soul”. “The Reason is the actual interior life, a brightness coming together with subjects when they speak and encounter themselves”. (Lévinas, 1980, p. 191).

Yet things are not like this, says Lévinas. The neutralization brought by truth is also a domination force related to astuteness. The more I get in touch with someone – who is for me an object, not quite sociability –, the more power I have over this person, no matter if this person agrees to be conducted by the dialogue thus inhibiting violence. In fact, things are quite different from that:

The philosophy of a new dialogue explains that invoking or interpellating a person as *thou* and speaking to this other shall not rely in a previous experience with the other. At any rate, the significance of this *thou* is not a result of this experience. Dialogue’s sociability is not knowledge of sociability given that dialogue is under no circumstances an experience between men in conversation. Dialogue is an event of the spirit, as much irreducible and ancient as it is the very cogito. (...) There would be in the I-thou dialogue some kind of openness to transcendence, beyond all mundane spirituality, beyond all knowledge acquired by and in this world. (Lévinas, 1980, p. 194).

In *From God comes the Idea (De Deus vem a Idéia)*, Lévinas says that the dialogue digs an utter gap between the I and the thou, which is different from usual considerations. They are totally set apart by means of the “unspeakable confidence of the intimacy”, that is, an unmatchable domain whereof no coincidence is available. Hence the dialogue is for Lévinas something that transcends although it neither dissolves the distance nor makes use of a gaze that understands, comprises and reclaims this distance. That means there is no *and* between I *and* thou; they make no assemblage and thus there is no way to objectively get hold of them.

This very act of putting together isolated elements that will not blend is previously found in Rosenzweig, who calls it “Revelation”. It is a totalizing overview that takes out of single elements their very basic features. Hegel used to refer to the unity of consciousness in itself, which becomes equal to itself as soon as it matches the world (in the multiplicity of beings, each one having a particular knowledge and being conscious of something). For Hegel, it is by getting conscious of others consciousness via *Einfühlung* (that is, to be in other’s shoes) that communication would happen. On the other hand, Lévinas holds that the encounter in the dialogue is something totally different from this. It is a thought that thinks “beyond the world”. The dialogue is thus not only speaking but also transcendence, and not only a given variety of transcendence but its “original form”. (1980, p. 198).

When practicing the dialogue the “familiar thou” gets hidden. This is what Lévinas recognizes as language without teaching, a silent understanding without words, “secrecy appearance”. (1961, p. 138). For Lévinas, what Buber has once found in the concept of inter-human relation is not the interlocutor but the feminine alterity, which lays on the origin of the concept of alterity. The feminine is this other that hosts me in its home. However, to be hosted may turn out to be ruled and that prevents me from seeing things as they are. I shall not dominate or possess. All I have to know is to give what I have. (1961, p. 152).

It is important to say that for Lévinas the feminine is not the material woman. It is an action of acceptance and hospitality that accomplishes a radical and profound essence in a “meta-empiricism that takes into account the sexual difference under an emancipated ethics of the ontology” (Lévinas, 1997, p. 60). What provides me this acceptance is not the actual empirical women but the female being (*idem*). Also, language for Lévinas comprehends a lot more than the restricted linguistic idea. According to the author, it cannot be reduced to the maieutical awakening of the thoughts. Language does not speed the interior transformation of the reason common to us all. On the contrary, it brings something new to the thought, the idea of Infinite. (1961, p. 196).

Lastly, Emmanuel Lévinas suggests that it is only possible to analyze things by living them, going further to the event, the dialogue made of total strangeness, the face-to-face and the idea of a communication that turns back to the present subjects, which is a statement in perfect accordance with the New Theory of Communication.

Such a discourse (the impersonal reason discourse), expressing the coherence of the concepts, assumes that the interlocutors’ existences are summarized in concepts. It is only by this price that man ends up as the ‘moment’ of its discourse. This is indeed the man diminished to his realizations, mirrored in his acts, a dead elderly man entirely mirrored there. This impersonal discourse is by all means a necrologic discourse. Man is driven to the heritage of mankind, absorbed by the totality of the common heritage. The power that relies in all living being (over its acts and not only between its actions) ceased to exist in the cynical man. Man ends up not as a thing but as a dead soul. This is not the reification idea but the history itself; history to be judged by those who are to come, the absent ones. It is a judgment that will not change a thing; judgment of those who were not born regarding those who died. To seek this I as singularity, as a totality made of relations that cannot be subsumed as a concept, is to ask if a living man has the power to judge the history in which he is engaged, that is, it is asking whether the I as a thinker, apart from all he owns, does, creates or leaves behind, has anything of cynical in himself (Lévinas, 1954, p. 49).

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