



## Research Article

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# Is Finitude Original? A Rereading of “Violence and Metaphysics”

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to challenge what may seem to be an obvious assertion: that finitude is original in the sense that it must be presupposed that any possible meaning can only be thought beginning from this finitude. I do this through a rereading of Derrida’s epochal essay “Violence and Metaphysics,” which perhaps is the most decisive interpretation of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. In the essay, Derrida demonstrates how Levinas is forced to betray his own intentions in his attempt to describe the Other as transcendent. By making use of a newly published lecture series, Derrida held at the same time as writing the essay, I show how Derrida’s reading of Levinas is intimately tied to his interpretation of Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysics of presence, and how both Levinas and Derrida end up in the paradox I call “original finitude.” I then show how new commentary literature on Levinas’ analysis of enjoyment gives us an alternative to Derrida’s notion of original finitude. I do not propose that this alternative overcomes Derrida’s problematic, but rather that it gives another option of how to relate to that which escapes the grasp of philosophy. The key difference will be whether transcendence is conceived as a failure of philosophy or its excess.

**Keywords:** Derrida, Levinas, Heidegger, finitude, metaphysics of presence, the Other, enjoyment, philosophy of religion, transcendence

## 1 The question of finitude

As Emmanuel Falque notes, it is becoming increasingly difficult in both philosophy and theology to circumvent the necessity of “an order of discovery beginning with the human – from below.”<sup>1</sup> Any responsible and reasonable discourse about, e.g., the meaning of “God” in the twenty-first century must begin by recognizing that any such discourse is only possible in virtue of the human condition and the limits this entails. Any inquiry into the possible meaning of whatever the object of that inquiry is must begin by submitting itself to the finitude of the human condition.

This condition would also count if the object of inquiry was finitude itself. The question of what finitude is, what it means, and what it follows from are all questions that can only be answered from within the insuperable confines of our finitude. But, is finitude original? Does the fact that every inquiry must begin by submitting itself to the finitude of the human condition imply that the human condition is originally finite? This seems to be the case. If every inquiry must begin by admitting its finitude, then it follows that every

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<sup>1</sup> Falque, *Crossing the Rubicon*, 126.

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inquiry begins in finitude. On the other hand, this would seemingly exclude *a priori* the possibility that our finitude is not original, but rather follows from a relation with the Infinite.

I will attempt to ask this question through a rereading of Jacques Derrida's essay "Violence and Metaphysics." I believe this essay from 1964 is still highly relevant for us today, especially in view of the topic of the theological turn in French phenomenology. The essay is one if not the most decisive interpretation of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who is considered by Dominique Janicaud himself as the "first mover" in the theological turn.<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire is furthermore quite similar: the question is if Levinas' thought of the absolutely Other can be justified within the confines of phenomenology. Whereas Janicaud is more explicitly skeptical of this being justified, it has long been recognized that Derrida's essay cannot be read as a refutation of Levinas' project.<sup>3</sup> Rather, the essay ends by leaving the door open for the possibility of the thought of the Other.

The reason why I believe Derrida's essay requires a rereading today, however, is because of the way in which Derrida leaves this door open. I believe Derrida sees a potential in Levinas' thought by situating it in what I will call *original finitude*. What this means is that Derrida sees Levinas' thought of the absolutely Other as impossible, but simultaneously sees the positive potential of this thought in this impossibility. This seemingly contradictory idea of possibility and impossibility being interlinked – or original finitude – will become clarified by a detour through Derrida's recently published lecture series *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, which Derrida held at the same time as he was writing "Violence and Metaphysics."<sup>4</sup> In this lecture series, Derrida discusses Heidegger's thought in view of the same problematic that he will situate Levinas in, that is, original finitude. What will be shown is that for Derrida, both Heidegger and Levinas seek to formulate the thought of that which escapes philosophical comprehension. Because of a certain metaphysical necessity, however, it will only be possible to contest philosophy by showing how philosophy has something which is impossible for it, therefore revealing it to be finite.

After this, I seek to challenge Derrida's notion of original finitude. I believe that although Derrida's interpretation of Levinas leaves a door open to the thought of the Other, it nevertheless makes the Other a limit-phenomenon, something Levinas explicitly tried to avoid. This becomes clear when we turn to Levinas' analysis of enjoyment, which Raoul Moati argues in his work *Levinas and the Night of Being* is an underappreciated aspect of Levinas' philosophy. The analysis of enjoyment concretizes Levinas' notion of the Same, an understanding of our embodied worldliness that, importantly, understands it as self-sufficient and complacent rather than finite. This alternative conception of subjectivity is crucial for Levinas in his attempt to think the transcendence of the Other as something else than a limit-phenomenon. The Other is not what limits philosophy, but what exceeds it, a difference we catch sight of by giving the analysis of enjoyment its due.

What does the question of whether or not the Other is a limit-phenomenon have to do with the question of finitude? It follows from the fact that Levinas understands my relation to the Other in terms of the Cartesian idea of Infinity, which means above all to emphasize that this finitude is not original; "we retain its *positivity*, its *anteriority* to every finite thought and every thought of the finite."<sup>5</sup> The Other cannot be determined in virtue of the meaning she gains through being thought beginning with finitude, for she is anterior to the finite thought that thinks her. This means that the relation with Infinity that makes me finite is anterior to my finitude, rather than this finitude being original. The enjoyment of the Same is crucial for this conception of finitude, for it allows Levinas to pose the question of our finitude in a fundamentally

<sup>2</sup> Janicaud, "The Theological Turn," 25.

<sup>3</sup> Bernasconi and Critchley, "Introduction," xii.

<sup>4</sup> This lecture-series became available in 2013 in French and 2016 and in English, but the lecture itself took place in nine sessions from 16 November 1964 to 29 March 1965. It thus hails from the very same time as "Violence and Metaphysics," which was first published in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* in 1964 (in two parts), the first in the third issue (July–September) and the second in the fourth issue (October–December) before being republished in the essay-collection *L'écriture et la différence* in 1967.

<sup>5</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197, my emphasis.

different way: how did it ever come to be that the self-sufficient human condition started regarding itself as finite?

The article concludes with admitting that Derrida's problematic is in a sense inescapable, but that there is an alternative to how this inescapability can be interpreted. That is, finitude is perhaps inescapable, but that does not necessarily make it original. However, it might be that this alternative interpretation of our finitude is already present in "Violence and metaphysics," an alternative that this article hopes to bring to light.

## 2 Original finitude and the metaphysics of presence

"Violence and Metaphysics" begins with a broad questionnaire regarding the finitude or mortality of philosophy. Derrida asks if philosophy died yesterday, with the advent of this and that philosopher, whose thought could have signaled the end of philosophy. Can it, for example, be said that the thought of Nietzsche entails the end of philosophy, insofar as he reduces philosophy to a particular moment in a larger history ("will to truth" being only one expression of the will to power among others)? Or perhaps, as some say, Hegel has thought to the very end of philosophy, so that philosophy finishes with him.

Moreover, would it be the case that philosophy "died *one day, within history*"? That is, was philosophy at some point in time immortal, and then *became* mortal? Or perhaps philosophy always has been finite and mortal, even when it has been unable to admit this to itself. Perhaps, more strangely still, philosophy *depends* on its mortality, depends on a having-been-wounded which would also be a having-been-opened, thus feeding off its own suffering. Having posed all these questions, however, Derrida encloses them within the finitude of philosophy itself;

all these are unanswerable questions. By right of birth, and for one time at least, these are problems put to philosophy as problems philosophy cannot resolve.

It may even be that these are not *philosophical*, are not *philosophy's* questions.<sup>6</sup>

All these questions that concern the end, the limit, or otherwise the finitude of philosophy are questions philosophy for essential reasons cannot answer. Furthermore, this questionnaire might not be philosophical, may not belong to philosophy. It is thus approaching philosophy's ultimate limit that it becomes, perhaps, possible to catch a glimpse of what lies beyond it.

Unanswerable as they are, however, these questions would also be all that is keeping philosophy alive. Why is this the case? Why is the possibility of philosophy connected to that which it is impossible for it to comprehend? Why is the life of philosophy conditioned on its mortality?

Simply because the unanswerability of these questions means that philosophy still has questions to ask, which sustains the life of philosophy in a double sense. First, it means that philosophy very concretely speaking has questions left to occupy itself with, that its project is not finished but still open to new possibilities. Second, this state of having-questions belongs to our concrete facticity; we are for whatever reason able to ask questions, and we can ask questions about how this is possible. Philosophy is "A community of the question about the possibility of the question," a questionable question.<sup>7</sup>

This means that philosophy is essentially kept alive by having something that limits it. In the awareness of the very facticity of the question – the fact that the question is possible – there is also the awareness of something implied that philosophy cannot integrate into itself:

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<sup>6</sup> Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 98.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

The question has already begun – we know it has – and this strange certainty about an *other* absolute origin, an other absolute decision that has secured the past of the question, liberates an incomparable instruction: the discipline of the question.<sup>8</sup>

The awareness of the facticity of the question is the awareness of our finitude, of the continuous unanswerability of some questions. This awareness is something we find ourselves thrown into. Philosophy begins *in medias res*, always already there; it is a *thrown* question. Moreover, it is precisely the fact that it is a *thrown question* that distinguishes it from historical determinism. What is so enigmatic about our “being-there” – *Da-Sein* – is that this question is an opening, an opening unto phenomena, being and history, an opening that therefore can, in a peculiar way, ask questions about the question as such. On the other hand, these questions cannot be answered. Finally, it is precisely by being unanswerable and thus limiting philosophy that these questions sustain the life of philosophy.

Original finitude, I will argue, means precisely this. It means that the necessary condition of the possibility of the question is simultaneously its impossibility, that it is both the “death and wellspring” of philosophy.<sup>9</sup> The depths of our finitude are so original that not only do we begin always already within it, and not only is it impossible to recuperate the conditions of it, but the very possibility of asking questions regarding it – and for asking questions in general – has its positive condition in this selfsame finitude. *Finitude and possibility are essentially linked*. This is the decisive feature of original finitude we must keep our eyes on.

After posing several questions regarding the finitude of philosophy, Derrida weaves together the philosophies of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger, who all in their respective ways call for a rigorous repetition of the history of philosophy. This is not because of some shallow conservatism, but because if anything “still is to transpire” within philosophy today, then it would have to come out of a serious engagement with the conditions of possibility – the history of philosophy – that allow us to ask the question in the present.<sup>10</sup> It is precisely here, however, that Derrida believes that “that the thought of Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast to these thinkers of original finitude, Levinas posits a thought that is not given on the basis of its historical possibility, that is in fact not given on the basis of anything but itself, but rather ruptures the historical horizon by calling it forth to justify itself. This is the thought of the Other.

Before turning to that question, however, I want to do a detour through Derrida’s lecture series *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*. By reading this lecture series alongside “Violence and Metaphysics,” one thing becomes clear that is only hinted at in the essay: Derrida places Heidegger in closer proximity to Levinas than the abovementioned juxtaposition would suggest. For, while it might seem that Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger represent one alternative and Levinas another, Heidegger and Levinas in fact both share the same problematic: that of contesting the limits of philosophy in order to grapple with the nonphilosophical alterity that philosophy can never recuperate.<sup>12</sup> We could also call this problematic original finitude.

In *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History*, therefore, we find another juxtaposition: that of Hegel and Husserl on the one side, and Heidegger on the other. In question here is Heidegger’s destruction of metaphysics, with Hegel and Husserl serving as representatives of this metaphysics, and the question is if Heidegger can contest this metaphysics without finding himself enveloped by it. This question is posed first and foremost in relation to the metaphysics of presence, and thus to the possibility of Heidegger formulating a notion of “past” and “future” not reducible to the metaphysics of presence. It is, however, also possible to discuss the same problematic in terms of the question of language. Does the fact that Heidegger depends on the language of metaphysics mean that any attempt to challenge this metaphysics will fail due to Heidegger’s reliance on its language?<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Heidegger*, 23.

I draw attention to this in order to point out that although I in the following will be focusing on the destruction of the metaphysics of presence, it is not my primary interest. What interests me is Derrida's discussion of the possibility and limitations of this destruction, which relates to the notion of original finitude. If Heidegger seeks to challenge the tradition of metaphysics on which he depends, he will, argues Derrida, only be able to challenge it by showing that it depends on something that is impossible for it. In other words, the possibility that there might be something that escapes philosophy's grasp – e.g., a notion of the past irreducible to the present – can only be indicated by demonstrating that philosophy is in fact not absolute, but finite, and thus that it has something that is "other" to it.

This follows first from the unassailable security of the present, which, according to Derrida, comes to light in both Hegel and Husserl's philosophies. For both of them, the human subject is the ultimate ground of philosophy. Any and every phenomenon must submit itself to how it is presented to a subject, for it is only as present to a consciousness that a phenomenon can be visible and open to inquiry. The meaning of a phenomenon is only available to a subject to whom it is given in its intelligibility. This fact is not temporally neutral, but obviously favors the temporality of the present. This means that any meaning of "past" and "future" depends on being given in the present, which is indeed what Hegel and Husserl argue. Not only must past moments be understood as a "past present," and the future as "an anticipated present," but "past/future presents" are only available in their meaning *in* the present.<sup>14</sup> It is in the present that I have access to something like "a past memory," which means that the past is only intelligible as a modification of the present. In general, experience itself has the form of the present, and there is no available meaning that is not found in experience.

To challenge the invulnerability of the present seems therefore as naïve as to try to separate philosophy from experience. At the same time, however, this invulnerability of the present presents us with a peculiar problem. The present obviously depends on the past and the future, for any present moment depends on "coming out" of the past and "heading toward" the future. Husserl was of course aware of this in his temporal analyses. Nevertheless, it remains the case for Husserl that the past and future are only possible as modifications of the present, and the question thus remains if this modification does not also entail a reduction. For example, it is necessary that I am born and that I am going to die for my present, here and now, to be possible. At the same time, the very form of the present also excludes an authentic relation to my birth and death:

The certainty of the living Present as absolute form of experience and absolute source of meaning, presupposes as such the neutralization of *my* birth and *my* death. What I grasp when I think the *a priori* necessity of the living Present is the possibility of a temporalization without me[...]<sup>15</sup>

The philosophical subject, Husserl's transcendental ego, is the I that accompanies every experience and comprehends the phenomena that become visible in them. The birth I came out of and the death I am heading to, however, are both temporalizations without me, where I am impossible. The life of the present, therefore, depends on that which is impossible for it.

The success of Heidegger's destruction of the metaphysics of presence depends then on the possibility of demonstrating a notion of "past" and "future" not reducible to the present. This, however, is impossible due to the invulnerability of the present, for insofar as Heidegger must make this irreducible notion intelligible, he would also have to make it present:

At the very moment when Heidegger destroys metaphysics, he must confirm it, destroy it in its language since he is speaking and is making appear in the Present the very thing he is saying cannot be gathered up in presence.<sup>16</sup>

A notion of the past or future irreducible to the present is a notion of that which does not appear, of something whose intelligibility is not constituted through its accessibility to a subject. Heidegger's project

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 151.

is impossible, for there is no outside or alternative to the present in which the destruction of metaphysics could appear; by appearing, it has already covered over itself, become other than itself, and lost its meaning. Heidegger's project fails the very moment it ventures on an attempt.

It is therefore impossible to overcome the metaphysics of presence, for this metaphysics is the possibility of meaning itself. However, Heidegger's destruction still has potential, argues Derrida, precisely in virtue of this impossibility. While it is impossible to step outside of this metaphysics, it is still possible, perhaps, to show from within that this metaphysics has something that is impossible for it. This is not a rejection or refutation of philosophy, for Heidegger affirms that the metaphysics of presence is able to disclose meanings in the way they become present to a subject. The point is that when this grasp reaches its apex in thinkers such as Husserl and Hegel, there still remains an insufficiency in this grasp that in an enigmatic way signals what lies beyond it. It is in reference to this *failure* and *inadequacy* of the metaphysics of presence – in terms of how it is *not* able to gather itself up – that what lies beyond it in a certain way comes into view.

This is why the analysis of anxiety is so important for Heidegger. Anxiety indicates the breakdown of my world, the disappearance of its familiarity. The phenomenality of anxiety does not give me access to the world, does not present it in its intelligibility, but rather disturbs the meaningfulness of the world; “The world has the character of complete insignificance.”<sup>17</sup> The experience of anxiety is a very strange experience that does not conform to the general form of experience, for here, things are not presented to me in their meaning. The subject itself, furthermore, is not securely grounded in anxiety. Rather than a secure presence of self to self, anxiety fosters in me an uncomfortable feeling of not-belonging. It is uncanniness, *Unheimlichkeit*, our “not-being-at-home.”<sup>18</sup> The everyday familiarity in which Dasein ordinarily is steeped usually covers over this unfamiliarity and non-belonging, but this state of not-belonging becomes uncovered in anxiety.

Heidegger therefore, argues Derrida, contests the invulnerability of the metaphysics of presence by demonstrating when it breaks down. It is in reference to the failure of the present to gather itself up that it becomes possible to challenge the invulnerability of the present. In other words, one must show that this metaphysics *has something that is impossible for it*. By doing this, it becomes clear that the philosophy of the subject is not absolute and immortal, but precisely *finite*. It is of course difficult to say that it “becomes clear,” for this would again submit Heidegger to the metaphysics he attempts to contest. All he can do is to challenge philosophy from the inside by demonstrating its finitude: its fundamental incapacity to account for the past and future without reducing them to the present. Heidegger rejects the fantasy of an “outside” to philosophy, rather submitting himself – and rigorously so – to the confines of philosophy in such a way that these confines appear *as* confines:

No doubt the thinking of being announces the horizon of non-metaphor on the basis of which metaphoricity is thought. But it does not announce itself prophetically like a new day (prophets only ever announce other metaphors), as something that will be; it announces itself *as the impossible on the basis of which the possible is thought* as such.<sup>19</sup>

“Does not announce itself prophetically,” that is, does not announce itself as if it already held the non-metaphor in its hand, as if one were speaking on behalf of the non-metaphor, as if one's speech was a privileged kind of speech beyond metaphysics (and this is what Derrida will claim Levinas is doing). Rather, it announces itself “as the impossible on the basis of which the possible is thought as such”; that is, it demonstrates that which is both necessary and impossible for something like “presence” to be meaningful by thinking alongside the limits of thought.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 180.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Heidegger*, 223, my emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Derrida's talk of “metaphoricity” and “the non-metaphor” should be understood in terms of the general topic of the article. The present is the precondition for any possible meaning of “past” and “future”, and, in the same way, language and its metaphors are the precondition for any comprehension of the non-metaphorical. In other words, just like we cannot step outside of philosophy, we cannot step outside of language.

If the present is in fact the absolute foundation of philosophy, one could, *perhaps*, argue that philosophy comes to its end with Hegel and Husserl. This would not mean that history stops in its tracks after them, but that they have thought the absolute horizon for all possible philosophical meanings.<sup>21</sup> Relating this back to the opening of “Violence and Metaphysics,” this would mean that philosophy is only one moment within history: “The history spoken of by philosophy, in the final analysis and even when it speaks best about it, is *the limited history of one epoch of being*.”<sup>22</sup> Having determined the present as the ultimate foundation of meaning, philosophy is quite literally finished. On the other hand, however, philosophy is precisely as such still alive. The fact that the metaphysics of presence is *not* invulnerable but rather mortal means that philosophy continues on, that it is not finished but rather that there are more questions to ask. Philosophy is therefore kept alive by that which limits it, the non-integratable other which philosophy is unable to reduce. This is original finitude, “in an original sense of the word *finite* that is difficult to think,” for finitude is both the possibility and impossibility of thought.<sup>23</sup>

Returning to the question asked at the outset of this article, what would Derrida’s response be, considering the above? The question was, if we accept that any inquiry must submit itself to the finitude of the human condition, and that finitude itself was the object of our inquiry, does this imply that the human condition is originally finite? Derrida’s answer would be that our finitude is original in a sense difficult to think, for one can only attempt to think about finitude because we are always already finite; the impossibility of answering this question is therefore already indicated by the possibility of asking it, and vice versa. Our finitude is therefore original in a very profound sense, for the possibility of asking questions regarding finitude has both its death and wellspring in that finitude.

### 3 The original finitude of thinking the Other

In “Violence and Metaphysics,” it is Levinas who is trying to contest the tradition of philosophy by positing the thought of the absolutely Other as that which philosophy can never reduce. Levinas sees in my relation to the other human being an extraordinary relationship, for the Other is not given on the basis of any presupposition. In contrast, the face of the Other is present in its refusal to be contained. There is no category that can contain the Other, for they express themselves only as themselves. The Other is therefore that which philosophy cannot comprehend.

Derrida questions this possibility in the essay in very similar terms to the ones he used to question Heidegger in the lecture series. What interests Derrida is why it seems impossible to formulate the idea of the absolutely Other in language. At the precise moment when Levinas tries to break with the *logos* of philosophy, he seems to be roped back in again by “Some unlimited power of envelopment, by which he who attempts to repel it would always be *overtaken*.”<sup>24</sup> It is, however, precisely in the impossibility of Levinas’ thought that Derrida simultaneously sees its potential.

Derrida demonstrates the impossibility of the thought of the Other in several ways, one being through a discussion of the absolute but nevertheless nonspatial exteriority Levinas claims the Other enjoys. For Levinas, the Other enjoys an infinite distance *vis-à-vis* myself, which must be understood not as a distance in space, where the Other would occupy a point only determinable with reference to another point, thus making the distance relative. In contrast, the absolute distance of the Other is an ethical exteriority, the fact that the Other expresses themselves as themselves only, and in no way reducible to my world. The Other’s exteriority is their independence *vis-à-vis* me in the face-to-face relation.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 139.

Why then, asks Derrida, is it necessary for Levinas to use precisely a *spatial* metaphor – exteriority – in designating that which is nonspatial? Why must the absolute exteriority of the Other be understood in terms of what it is not? Levinas can only designate the radical exteriority of the Other by making use of a spatial metaphor in a certain way, that is, making use of it while destroying it, using it against itself to signify something other than itself. Derrida thus asks if “there is no philosophical logos which must not first let itself be expatriated into the structure Inside-Outside” precisely when one seeks to challenge this structure (e.g., when attempting to say that true exteriority is nonspatial).<sup>25</sup> This does not simply mean that language has a finitude of available metaphors, but rather that the possibility of thinking emerges alongside language and some essential metaphors without which thought would not have an opening at all:

philosophy can only *speak* it, state the metaphor itself, which amounts to *thinking* the metaphor within the silent horizon of the nonmetaphor: Being. Space being the wound and finitude of birth (of *the* birth) without which one could not even open language, one would not even have a true or false exteriority to speak of.<sup>26</sup>

Levinas wants to state that the Other is exterior in a sense irreducible to the presuppositions of philosophy and language, but precisely by *stating* this, he must refer to the language he seeks to escape. Thus, similar to how Heidegger depended on the metaphysics of presence in order to formulate a notion of the past irreducible to the present, Levinas depends on the metaphor of spatiality in order to designate the exteriority of the Other as nonspatial.

This is the problem of original finitude. As we attempted to show above, what is peculiar to the problematic of original finitude is that impossibility and necessity appear simultaneously; one both depends on and is limited by the original thrownness of language. Levinas both needs language and is incapacitated by it. Furthermore, however, *and crucially so*, it would only be possible to demonstrate that this language in fact *is finite*, that is, is not absolute but rather hides something while showing something else, by pointing toward its limits, to what is impossible to state for it:

To say that the infinite exteriority of the other is *not* spatial, is *non*-exteriority and *non*-interiority, to be unable to designate it otherwise than negatively – is this not to acknowledge that the infinite (also designated negatively in its current positivity: in-finite) cannot be stated? Does this not amount to acknowledging that the structure ‘inside-out,’ which is language itself, marks the original finitude of speech and of whatever befalls it? <sup>27</sup>

Original finitude – the opening and closure of meaning – appears as such when its limits are staked out against what it would be impossible for it to let appear. The question thus remains if the impossibility of Levinas’ project does not by itself stake out the limitedness of language *vis-à-vis* the thought of an absolute Other, and furthermore if this staking-out does not by itself testify to its enigmatic possibility.

This problematic appears, perhaps, with modernity and the Copernican revolution, which reorients the possibility of philosophy to the finite and mortal human condition.<sup>28</sup> After this, experience itself cannot escape its reliance on being structured by meaning. The idea of a pure empiricism has already been left behind by thinkers like Kant and Husserl who “always criticized or limited with one and the same gesture metaphysics and empiricism.”<sup>29</sup> Both reject a naïve empiricism that separates experience from its transcendental horizon while simultaneously rejecting metaphysical speculation about concepts outside of their legitimate frame of reference – experience. The slogans “Thoughts without content are empty and intuitions without concepts blind” and “Back to the things themselves” spell out the same message; experience is the legitimate field of philosophy, but the way in which this experience is given is more than this immediate

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>28</sup> Only “perhaps,” because we cannot know whether philosophy died “one day within history,” if it has “always known itself to be dying,” etc.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *Heidegger*, 54.



experience itself. In experience, appearances appear *as* what they are, endowed with meanings that allow them to appear as such.

This problematic becomes further exasperated when the distinction between language and thought breaks down. If thought cannot distinguish itself from language, then it finds itself both opened by/in a language it can only question by putting language to use against itself. Language becomes both the death and wellspring of meaning and experience:

This is why the modern philosophies which no longer seek to distinguish between thought and language, nor to place them in a hierarchy, are essentially philosophies of original finitude.<sup>30</sup>

Levinas accepts this modern framework: he affirms the “underlying solidarity of thought with speech.”<sup>31</sup> Meaning can only appear in and with language, and thought thus finds itself surprised by the meaning it has been able to articulate; insofar as a thought has successfully been able to capture some phenomenon, it will to its own surprise discover that it was able to do so only because of an indebtedness to language and its significations.<sup>32</sup> Signification precedes thought by providing the opening through which thought is possible, surprising thought as it comes to itself.

Levinas furthermore submits himself to this modern framework by placing my relation to the Infinite *within* the world, *within* language, and *within* experience. He therefore closes himself off from the option pursued by negative theology and Bergson, who both in different ways posit the pure realm of metaphysics outside of language.<sup>33</sup> By asserting that philosophical discourse as essentially inferior and closed off from the realm of metaphysical truth, classical discourse on the infinite avoided having to justify how the meaning of Infinity could be indicated in this discourse itself. The idea of that which infinitely escapes comprehension is therefore more feasible for negative theology and Bergson, who in a very classical fashion can advance negatively in this pursuit.<sup>34</sup> Levinas, on the other hand, has not only placed the Infinite in the mortal body of the Other, but also as contemporary with the possibility of language itself. Levinas believes language originates with the ethical relation, a relation that itself escapes the categories of language, so that language is opened in and by the very relation it cannot consummate.

Levinas inscribes the incomprehensible moment of my relation to the Infinite into (finite) language and experience, so that the peaceful relation between me and the Other in the distance of language both be in language and irreducible to it. The Other is in language, but cannot be expressed by it, and works therefore as a certain silence at the heart of speech.<sup>35</sup> Precisely, a *certain* silence, however, because this silence would have to be delineated and thus formulated: “not *that* silence but *this* silence.” But if silence must be brought to language in order to gain its correct specification, it must become what it is not in order to be grasped for what it is.

This means that peace is violated once it becomes formulated, and that the absolutely Other is lost as absolutely other once we are forced to determine him as such; the Other can thus only be respected as a “certain silence.” The ineffability of the Other must be posited, but this necessity demonstrates already that there is no access to “the Other as Other,” a formulation already betrayed by the “as.” Thought must begin by admitting this original finitude of thought/language in order to think responsibly:

The philosopher (man) *must* speak and write within this war of light, a war in which he always already knows himself to be engaged; a war which he knows is inescapable, except by denying discourse, that is, by risking the worst violence.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>31</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 205.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 145.

<sup>34</sup> This option of course has problems of its own, namely a return “to an infinitist dogmatism pre-Kantian style, one which does not pose the question of responsibility for its own finite philosophical discourse” – Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 162.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 146.

It is only by admitting ourselves to the horizon of original finitude that we are able to recognize that meaning appears with difference – e.g., the difference between spatial and nonspatial exteriority. On this note, however, the Other cannot be said to express herself only by herself: her distance and exteriority could only signal itself in its difference from what it is not. Derrida shows how Levinas relies on the language of this comprehension in his attempt to indicate what is always other to philosophy, thus demonstrating the impossibility of describing the absolutely and totally other, which can only be posited as such in its difference with the sameness of the familiar and intelligible.

This impossibility of itself, however, testifies to an ambiguity, an enigma disturbing the rigidity of philosophy. It is for this reason that Derrida's essay is not simply a critique; the potential of Levinas' questionnaire is demonstrated precisely in the impossibilities it grinds against. The essay demonstrates not only the unavoidable necessity of Levinas finding himself enveloped by the language he seeks to escape, but also the incapacity of this language to think and state the idea of something wholly other to it:

this incapacitation, when resolutely assumed, contests the resolution and coherence of the logos (philosophy) at its root, instead of letting itself be questioned by the logos. Therefore, nothing can so profoundly *solicit* the Greek logos – philosophy – than this irruption of the totally-other; and nothing can to such an extent reawaken the logos to its origin as to its mortality, its other.<sup>37</sup>

The impossibility of a philosophy of the wholly Other signifies as the mortality of philosophy. It is simply impossible to *think* something absolutely other, and this impossibility therefore demonstrates the limit of philosophy's ability – the thought of the Other incapacitates philosophy. It is then, however, only possible to enigmatically announce the wholly Other through *incapacitation*, through the *failure* of philosophy and the metaphysics of language. The instant that the thought of wholly Other is brought to speech, it already “covers itself with its own noise,” for this thought can only be indicated in its impossibility.<sup>38</sup>

Derrida therefore leaves the question in the way he considers it: open. With regards to philosophy's finitude – its other – there can be no answer, at least not within philosophy itself. Is this original difference Heidegger's thought of being or Levinas' Other? The impossibility of answering this imposes itself as a metaphysical principle, for to attempt an answer would mean to be enveloped by the finitude one seeks to determine once again. Yet, this impossibility holds promise, precisely *as* impossibility.

## 4 Is finitude original?

Nevertheless, even if Derrida's essay is not simply a critique, it still remains the case that Levinas' project has potential for him only within the framework of original finitude. This framework, as we have seen, supposes that the opening of the question depends on what is impossible for it for its own possibility (the impossible on the basis of the possible), and thus that philosophy can only ask questions about what lies beyond it by demonstrating how philosophy fails and becomes incapacitated. This means that our finitude is presupposed at a profound level; our finitude is so original that the possibility of there being something philosophy cannot grasp can only be indicated by demonstrating this finitude.

Derrida therefore describes Levinas' philosophy as a “wounding of language,” an attempt to reveal “by philosophy's own light, that philosophy's surface is severely cracked,” so that transcendence might be glimpsed through these cracks.<sup>39</sup> However, it must be recognized that Levinas already in *Totality and Infinity* – thus before knowing about Derrida's critique – posits his understanding of transcendence *against* the idea that “there would have been a suffering that would be the mother of all wisdom.”<sup>40</sup> Levinas

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>40</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 83.

delineates transcendence as beyond the grasp, this is true; but he is adamant that it should *not* be understood as a failed grasp, as a limit-phenomenon. The reason for this is moreover crucial for his project; it follows from the Other having a positive meaning, ethics.

I am here converging with a point made by Raoul Moati in his *Levinas and the Night of Being*, albeit from a different direction. Whereas I have chosen *Heidegger: The Question of Being and History* as my point of departure for a rereading of “Violence and Metaphysics,” Moati argues that it is through *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction* that we gain a necessary foothold to understand the essay. Levinas argues that the wholly Other is impossible for Husserlian phenomenology, which through its understanding of intentionality as adequation reduces all otherness to the thought of the Same. Derrida’s deconstructed reading of Husserl’s later work, however, shows that “intentionality is inscribed within the horizon of a task of infinite constitution that the ‘metaphysics of presence’ covers up,” because the ethico-theoretical task of constitution is both necessary and irreducible to Husserl’s theory of intentionality.<sup>41</sup> It must therefore be understood that in the essay, “Derrida’s critique of Levinas is a defense of Husserl against a reduction of his work to a theory of ‘the same’ and ‘totalization’.”<sup>42</sup> Husserl’s phenomenology cannot be a totality, for it is conditioned on an element it cannot include.

As Moati explains, however, this is a misunderstanding of the notions of both totality and Infinity, such as Levinas understands them. The non-adequateness of the Other does not, for Levinas, refer to the question of whether or not intentionality depends on a moment it cannot recuperate. Independently of whether intentionality could or could not constitute itself without a certain fundamental errancy, it is simply not a question of understanding the Other: “For Levinas, the concept of the infinite is eschatological in that it entails a suspension of the teleology of constitution – however indefinite it may be.”<sup>43</sup> The indefiniteness of the understanding is not in question, but rather its telos, which is precisely that of adequation. Even if comprehension is forever marked by an irredeemable finitude it cannot rid itself of, it nevertheless seeks to grasp and present what it thinks as adequate to the thought that thinks it. It is therefore “not a question of merely confirming the insufficiency of intuition with regard to an infinite Other always in excess of the grasp of intentionality, but to denounce a categorical error,” that of thinking we relate to the Other as Other in terms of understanding him or her.<sup>44</sup>

This misunderstanding comes about, I would argue with Moati, from an underappreciation of both the importance and, more importantly, the *novelty* of the notion of the Same in *Totality and Infinity*. Rather than some stand-in for traditional ontology and its imperialism, the analysis of the Same must be understood as a critique of that tradition for “holding to a perfectly vague conception of subjectivity.”<sup>45</sup> Levinas is able to delineate transcendence correctly because he establishes the subject – the Same – in its concreteness, and in doing so as, crucially, *not finite*. It is through the analysis of enjoyment and dwelling that this is achieved.

Another relevant difference between Derrida’s and Moati’s reading of *Totality and Infinity* concerns its structure and method. Derrida famously asserts in a footnote that “*Totality and Infinity* is a work of art and not a treatise,” whose analysis repeats and expands its metaphorical language like waves on a beach.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, Moati argues for a strict structure in the work, one with very precise aims in mind. Section 1 introduces the Same and Other as purely formal notions, whereas Sections 2 and 3 deformalize and concretize these notions; Section 2 concretizes the notion of the Same through the analysis of enjoyment; and Section 3 concretizes the Other through the analysis of ethics.<sup>47</sup>

With this reading in mind, two observations about “Violence and Metaphysics” become very interesting: (1) Derrida discusses the *formal* structure of the Same, what he calls “the theme of the concrete (nonformal) tautology or of false (finite) heterology,” and in fact notes that “this very difficult theme is

<sup>41</sup> Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being*, 184.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 187–8.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>46</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 398.

<sup>47</sup> Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being*, 24.

proposed rather discreetly at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*,” and furthermore that “If one is not convinced by these initial propositions authorizing the equation of the ego and the same, one will never be.”<sup>48</sup> This refers to Levinas’ idea that the relationship of the I to the otherness of the world is not real otherness, thus a “false (finite) heterology.” Levinas believes the I reduces this otherness to itself, to the Same, a “concrete (nonformal) tautology.” Derrida is correct in that Levinas introduces this theme at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, but he forgets to mention that this structure is concretized in the analysis of enjoyment, as Moati correctly observes. Add to this that Derrida himself admits in a footnote that the themes of enjoyment and dwelling are topics he will not be able to cover in the essay.<sup>49</sup>

Do these “initial propositions” change if we take into account their concretization in, e.g., the analysis of enjoyment? We will take one of the qualms that Derrida has with this formal structure, namely the positing of the Same as absolute, which ties into its anti-Hegelian purpose. For the sake of the absolute difference between the Same and the Other, Levinas’ philosophy must be anti-Hegelian. If the Same and the Other constituted each other in a dialectical play, they would stand in a relation of dependency, and thus not be infinitely separate. The Same is therefore posited as absolutely independent, drawing its power to exist from itself, which means that Levinas can posit the alterity of the Other as nonnegative. This, however, is difficult for Derrida:

how can alterity be separated from negativity, how can alterity be separated from the ‘false infinity’? Or inversely, *how could absolute sameness not be infinity?*<sup>50</sup>

“False infinity” refers here to the possibility of a Husserlian infinity which would be, for Levinas, a “false infinity,” because it would reduce infinity to an object and thus as adequation to the Same. For Hegel, the negation of false infinity would be a crucial step toward true infinity, for a notion of false infinity indicates on its own a prior contact with the true notion. Insofar as Levinas places the false infinity within the realm of the Same, however, how can he maintain that the true Infinity of the Other does not depend on a dialectical play of negations?

Equally ridiculous, how would an absolute sameness not constitute Infinity? It would by definition and on principle have nothing that limits its extension, making it infinite. This false infinity, this false play of alterity within the Same, is strangely enough that which would have to be absolute; it would in fact be necessary “to consider the false-infinity (that is, in a profound way, original finitude) irreducible.”<sup>51</sup> Why “original finitude”? Because the false infinity of the Same, rather than being absolute, would precisely be an opening unto the question of infinity by being finite, by already having been opened by a condition it cannot recuperate. Rather than absolute, the Same must be an open thrownness depending on what is impossible for it for its own possibility.

Levinas, however, ventures on the analysis of enjoyment precisely to suggest an alternative to the thrownness of Dasein, and it is through this analysis that the idea of, e.g., an absolute sameness that is not infinite gains its intelligibility. Heidegger interprets enjoyment as belonging to the inauthentic mode of Dasein, thus as belonging to the everyday turning-away from anxiety and the not-being-at-home of Dasein.<sup>52</sup> Levinas, in contrast, argues that enjoyment is sincere, and that it testifies to the fact that the Same is at home in the world. Enjoyment is genuine; it is not looking for something else beyond the sensible matter that it consumes but seeks and finds satisfaction in it. Its joys are borne by needs to be sure, but the wonder of the ego is that it enjoys the fact that it has needs, precisely because they can become satisfied. As such, the ego in fact not only enjoys, but enjoys that it enjoys; the regenerative structure of needs and their satisfaction constitute the happiness of the ego. It is in this way that the Same can be absolute without being infinite:

<sup>48</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 116–7.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 402.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 148–9, my emphasis.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>52</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 42.

Objects *content* me in their finitude, without appearing to me on a ground of infinity. The finite without the infinite is possible only as contentment. The finite as contentment is sensibility.<sup>53</sup>

To be content is to be self-sufficient, to not need anything more, and thus to not be limited. It is “finite” in the sense that it is not all-encompassing, but crucially, this finitude is not a concern for it. The world can surely resist it, but rather than limiting it, this resistance belongs to the happiness of an ego that can overcome challenges, master its surroundings, and secure its own happiness.

This happiness is not limited but absolute, for it has and seeks no alternative. The troubles that challenge happiness belong to happiness as challenges to be overcome, for a troubled and starving ego does not turn away from life; “The suffering of need is not assuaged in anorexia, but in satisfaction.”<sup>54</sup> Our worldliness is immanence, sustaining itself from a life in which we are agreeably and sincerely steeped. The point is not that nature is without cruelty, but that our existence as embodied beings is primarily and even in its most desperate hour oriented to the nevertheless self-explanatory and self-justifying meaning of enjoyment:

The happiness of enjoyment is greater than all disquietude: whatever be the concerns for the morrow, the happiness of living – of breathing, of seeing, of feeling (“One minute more, Mr. Hangman!”) – remains in the midst of disquietude as the term proposed to every evasion from the world troubled, to intolerability, by disquietude. *One flees life toward life.*<sup>55</sup>

Against Heidegger’s disquieting and alienating anxiety, Levinas posits that we are in fact at home in the world. We are not foreign creatures forever troubled by the enigma of our thrownness, the finitude of our horizon, and the inevitability of our death, but sincerely occupied with the satisfaction of our needs. The homes we build and master revolve around this primordial agreeableness of life.

We are thus finite neither in the traditional nor the Heideggerian sense; “Finition without reference to the infinite, finition without limitation, is the relation with the end [fin] as a goal.”<sup>56</sup> Our projects and goals do not gain their significance first and foremost in reference to the totality of our projects, but in the genuine enjoyment they constitute as ends in themselves. This is why Levinas opens *Totality and Infinity* with a rewriting of Rimbaud’s poem: “The true life is absent.’ But we are in the world.”<sup>57</sup> The original poem reads, “we are not in the world,” but it is this existential theme of alienation that Levinas challenges with his analysis of enjoyment. We are indeed in the world, and our worldliness is agreeable and self-sufficient.

It is therefore starting from the self-sufficiency and complacency of the enjoying ego that Levinas starts his investigation of transcendence, and the importance of this beginning for the meaning of transcendence must be understood. For if the search for transcendence begins from a finitude depending on that which is impossible for it, the relation to transcendence will always signify as a failure and fault in the subject, *even when this fault or erring is interpreted as positively contributing to the possibility of the self.* The position of original finitude is essentially that an original and irrecoverable insufficiency is what makes an opening unto history and being possible, an original “suffering that would be the mother of wisdom.” Levinas argues that this conviction unites most of Western philosophy: that which is ungraspable for philosophy is perceived as both its limit and possibility, death and wellspring, which is a conviction which would unite, e.g., Hegel and Heidegger.

If we begin instead with the complacent and self-sufficient self, transcendence takes on another meaning. It becomes “a luxury with respect to needs,” that which regards the self which already has all it needs to exercise its existence.<sup>58</sup> The separation between the Same and the Other can be interpreted positively, for it does not consist between a faulty being and the infinite with which it seeks to be reunited. Furthermore, the transcendence of the face can here express itself independently, for its transcendence

<sup>53</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 135.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

regards the self in a way that is wholly unpredictable precisely because it does not correspond to a prior need. A true surprise is always an excess with regards to my expectations.

Although Derrida seemingly leaves the door open to Levinas, the way in which he does delineates transcendence in the opposite direction of where Levinas is heading. As we have seen, Derrida describes it as “a wounding of language, revealing transcendence through the cracks of philosophy.” The Other signifies as the *limit and end* of philosophy, of that which as “impossible for philosophy to think” reveals the finitude of discourse; “this irruption of the totally-other...nothing can to such an extent reawaken the logos to its origin as to its *mortality*, its other.”<sup>59</sup> Transcendence signifies as the *death* of philosophy, and can only signify as such, because it can only be measured to the extent that it breaks with philosophy’s solidity.

This way of thinking belongs to the exact tradition of philosophy that Levinas seeks to challenge; for this choice – the choice to automatically interpret that which philosophy cannot know as the *failure* of philosophy – means that one has already placed one’s bets; “The spontaneity of freedom is not called into question; its limitation alone is held to be tragic and to constitute a scandal.”<sup>60</sup> The possibility of something that cannot be known is from the outset interpreted as a failed or partial knowledge, designating our finitude understood as a limit, a failure or incapacity of the self. Levinas’ point, however, is that knowledge in its capacity or incapacity is irrelevant here: “there is no meaning in speaking here of knowledge or ignorance, for justice, the preeminent transcendence and the condition for knowing, is nowise, as one would like, a noesis correlative of a noema.”<sup>61</sup> The ethical does not signify as what is impossible to know, but as what belongs to a wholly different order and direction than knowing, the vulnerable exposure to the Other rather than the assemblage and mastery of comprehension.

The prohibition against murder does not limit the self: “the realization of my finitude does not amount to the realization of the limits of my freedom, but rather a moral justification of my freedom in front of the Other.”<sup>62</sup> The logic of limiting in fact follows from and is inextricably tied to the spontaneity of the self; “Limitation is produced only within a totality, whereas the relation with the Other breaks the ceiling of totality.”<sup>63</sup> To perceive the Other as a limit on my freedom is to interpret transcendence from the view-point of immanence. The philosophy of separation, on the other hand, sees the inhibition against murder as responding to an inquiry of an entirely different order. To become ashamed of one’s arbitrary brutality is to recognize an absolute inequality between my spontaneity and the face of the Other. My unworthiness when facing the Other, therefore, does not signal the failure of the subject, unable to cross a certain limit, but the revelation that there is something that bears more weight than my happiness and which is immeasurable in terms of it.

## 5 Ambiguity and meaning

The crucial point is that Derrida sees the Other as a limit-phenomena, whereas Levinas does not. Derrida argues that the thought of the wholly Other is only possible to indicate by showing how it is impossible to think; as such, this thought has a strange potential in that it demonstrates that philosophy is finite, because it always has something that is “other” to it. Levinas, however, begins his analysis from his conception of the Same, which is not finite but content and complacent. If the grasp of the Same is self-sufficient, then the fact that something exceeds this grasp does not need to signify the failure of this grasp. The Other can then be understood as the surplus to the grasp rather than only being indicated in the incapacity of the grasp.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics,” 190, my emphasis.

<sup>60</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 83.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–90.

<sup>62</sup> Moati, *Levinas and the Night of Being*, 146.

<sup>63</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 171.

Nevertheless, it does not seem like Levinas can completely evade Derrida's problematic. Even if Derrida limits himself to one understanding of transcendence because he presupposes that we are originally thrown rather than complacent, and even if we can delineate Levinas' alternative as different from this, the Levinasian alternative is still beyond being, ungraspable by language, etc., and at the same time somehow presented to us in Levinas' philosophy. How can the Other be philosophically presented by Levinas while simultaneously being ungraspable by philosophy?

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas engages with this side of the problematic. He acknowledges the necessity of a negative approach in philosophy in its attempt to describe transcendence, which means that transcendence can only become manifest in philosophy at the cost of a betrayal. Simultaneously, however, he continues to argue that this does not confer a negative meaning onto transcendence, or that transcendence can only signify as the failure of philosophy:

The significations that go beyond formal logic show themselves in formal logic, if only by the precise indication of the sense in which they break with formal logic...But logic interrupted by the structures of what is *beyond being* which show themselves in it does not confer a dialectical structure to philosophical propositions. It is the superlative, more than the negation of categories, which interrupts systems, as though the logical order and the being it succeeds in espousing retained the superlative which exceeds them.<sup>64</sup>

Methodologically speaking, transcendence can only become manifest in language by demonstrating how the notion of "saying" breaks with the formal logic of the said. It is by showing this breaking, this incapacity of language, that transcendence can be shown. Nevertheless, the fact that we are necessarily forced to use such a dialectical approach (e.g., signifying saying as "*non*-thematizable") does *not* mean that saying is a product of negation – in fact, saying exceeds the said.

Levinas therefore continues to use the type of language that would invoke the same problematic explored in "Violence and Metaphysics." Just as Levinas previously depended on a spatial metaphor (exteriority) in order to designate the non-spatial exteriority of the Other, so in this work as well, Levinas is forced to describe transcendence as "non-presence," as "pre-originary" and "an-archical". Derrida would be quick to point out that all those three metaphors are difficult to read as anything but negations of presence, origin and order (*arche*)."

Levinas furthermore adds an element of ambiguity to transcendence that it did not have before or at least did not profile as much. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas stresses first and foremost the straightforwardness of transcendence, which, because of its meaning as ethical imperative, "does not leave any logical place for its contradictory."<sup>65</sup> Ethics does not present itself as an ambiguous choice, but as an austere command. In *Otherwise than Being*, however, transcendence is repeatedly delineated in its ambiguity, "the ambiguity of subjectivity, the enigma of sense and being."<sup>66</sup> Transcendence is described as almost indistinguishable from nothingness, "the infinite which blinks."<sup>67</sup>

Crucially, however, Levinas continues to argue for the non-dialectical nature of this ambiguous transcendence, whose enigmatic status does not make off it an insufficient or lacking knowledge: "its ambiguity is not an indetermination of a *noema*, but an invitation to the fine risk of approach qua approach."<sup>68</sup> To approach in proximity has a signification that is both irreducible to determination and something else than indetermination. If we remain between these two options – determination and indetermination – then any meaning can only be measured after the success or the failure of comprehension, but the significance of responsibility is neither one of these. It signifies in giving and sacrifice, a vulnerable exposure that departs from the security of the presence, the signification of the-one-for-the-other. The question is if this departure can signify otherwise than how it becomes insufficiently manifest in the present.

<sup>64</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 187.

<sup>65</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 201.

<sup>66</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 165.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Having digested Derrida's critique, Levinas admits a certain ambiguity to the epiphany of the Other. Transcendence can only show itself in language in terms of how it breaks with it, in the way that language is incapable of determining it. Levinas maintains, however, that transcendence does not gain its meaning in and from this ambiguity. "God writes straight with crooked lines," that is, is straightforward and ambiguous simultaneously.<sup>69</sup> We *could* decide to interpret this ambiguity *in* its ambiguity and thus only *as* ambiguous, which would again mean that transcendence could only signify as the insufficiency and indeterminateness – in different ways, as the *failure and limit* – of understanding. Levinas is aware of this possibility; "The diachronic ambiguity of transcendence lends itself to this choice...But is this choice the only philosophical one?"<sup>70</sup>

In other words, does this necessarily imply that the transcendence which language is unable to contain can only signify out of this incapacity? This seems perhaps obvious, but it must at least be admitted that it presupposes something. It takes for granted that any possible meaning must be determined on the basis of its accessibility: either in its accessibility or as non-accessible. But can this be taken for granted? For, could not an argument be made that if, e.g., ethics were to have meaning, its meaning would need to both (1) not be reducible to the grasp of comprehension (because it gives rather than grasps) and (2) signify positively (because it is an imperative and the goodness of responsibility)?

Whether it can be taken for granted, whether every meaning can or cannot be determined on the basis of its accessibility; I believe, with Derrida, that these questions can never be answered. My question, however, is, if Derrida, in his own posing of this question, does not limit himself to one possible interpretation of what the other to philosophy could signify. That something breaks with philosophy can perhaps only become visible in philosophy in the way it breaks, but that does not of itself imply that it is, in its meaning, a breaking, a failure, the limit or death of philosophy. To consider Levinas' choice would mean to accept another form of finitude, a finitude not with regards to the capacity of philosophy to disclose something in its intelligibility, but a humble recognition that disclosure does not exhaust meaning and is thus prohibited in some cases – not out of a lack of strength, but in the same way a sword resting against the throat of another cannot go further. Why can't the sword go further here? Not because of any incapacity, but because of an imperative that cannot be measured by asking about capacity.

It might be possible to argue that Derrida considers this alternative at one point in "Violence and Metaphysics." In his discussion about God, Derrida asks whether the meaning of God is bound to the same conditionals that make the thought of the absolutely Other impossible. The question first appears in the discussion of Husserl and the alter ego, where Derrida notes that "God no more really depends upon me than does the *alter-ego*. But he has *meaning* only for an ego in general."<sup>71</sup> The fact that the Other must *appear* as such, and thus be given as a phenomenon for an ego, does not mean that I constitute the Other no more than it does for God. Similarly, the possibility of God revealing Godself depends on my precomprehension being open to such a revelation, so that I could recognize God *as* God; it "supposes some precomprehension of the Deity, of God's Being-god."<sup>72</sup> This precomprehension would be neither theistic nor atheistic, but rather be presupposed by both possibilities. The necessity of this precomprehension for the possibility of either option signals again the simultaneous productivity and incapacity of original finitude and their necessary belonging:

That the gods or God cannot be indicated except in the Space of the Sacred and in the light of the deity, is at once the *limit* and the *wellspring* of finite-Being as history. Limit, because divinity is *not* God. In a sense it is nothing...Wellspring, because this anticipation as a thought of Being (of the existent God) always *sees* God *coming*, opens the possibility (the eventuality) of an encounter with God and of a dialogue with God.<sup>73</sup>

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69 Ibid., 147.

70 Ibid., 95.

71 Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," 164.

72 Ibid., 182.

73 Ibid., 182.



As an always-already yet-to-come, God can neither be known nor forgotten, but only and always anticipated. God is precisely a *possibility*, and possible only *as* possibility. God can only have meaning if God is always-to-come, but never-yet-there; “‘Ontological’ anticipation, transcendence toward Being, permits, then, an understanding of the word God, for example, even if this understanding is but the ether in which dissonance can resonate.”<sup>74</sup>

But there is another possible way to understand and approach this difference. For, even if this play between presence/absence is necessary for our access to God, could this play of difference be said to encapsulate the meaning of God? Derrida raises this question himself against the idea of a precomprehension of God: “Is not God the name of that which cannot be anticipated on the basis of the dimension of the divine? Is not God the other name of Being (name because nonconcept), the thinking of which would open difference and the ontological horizon, instead of being indicated in them only?”<sup>75</sup> That my relation to God is necessarily ambiguous: does this follow from the inherent ambiguity necessary to anticipating God? That God must be both possible and not-yet-there in order to have meaning? Or is the meaning of God the cause of this ambiguity? And the ambiguous finitude of the human condition a consequence of its relation to infinity?

This article began by asking whether our finitude is original in the sense that what makes it finite can only be thought of beginning with this finitude. It still seems incontestable that this question can only be asked from and within the confines of the finite human condition. What this article has hoped to demonstrate, however, is that the necessity of beginning in finitude does not imply that finitude is original. In other words, finitude is not necessarily original in the sense that what makes it finite can only be thought of *in terms of the significance it gains through being thought* beginning with finitude. The necessity of beginning in thought does not necessitate that thought is the beginning, however strange that sounds. It is true that by a metaphysical necessity, any possible meaning must pass through the finite horizon of intelligibility, but that does not of itself imply that this meaning can only be determined in view of this necessity. For intelligibility is not necessarily the ultimate drama of existence. The opening of the question, “original finitude,” is not necessarily first, even if it is the necessary place to begin asking about what is first. And what eclipses the question must not necessarily be determined in view of how the question is unable to encompass it; it could have a positive meaning. To admit to this is to submit oneself to the fact that our finitude is so profound that it cannot know if it is original.

The horizon of intelligibility could be the ultimate horizon of philosophy, even when it depends on something irreducible to it, which could only be gestured towards as impossible, as the end, limit or death of intelligibility. Or there could be something otherwise, something which although irreducible to intelligibility has its own, positive meaning, a meaning that transcends philosophy even in its complacent success. Philosophy can show that there is a difference between these two alternatives, but it cannot decide in favor of either one. With reference to what horizon could such a decision be made?

It is doubtless the *true order*. But it is indeed the *order of truth* which is in question.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 187.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 135.

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