"The Essence of Discourse is Prayer": Emmanuel Levinas, the Structure of Human Communication and Its Religious and Ethical Implications

DIEGO FONTI

To Professor Bemhard Casper, theologian and philosopher, a friend of great heart and lofty thought[1]

Is it still possible to pray? Does the word and experience named "prayer" still make sense? The process of "secularization" or "de-theologization" of the image of the world operated by Modernity and science has meant that the all-encompassing religious "grand narratives" about origin, meaning and goal of the world—personal human life included—have lost much of their power of conviction and their capacity for unifying the different levels of life. Sociologists tell us that a main trait of Modernity has been that social relationships and legitimacy do not depend anymore on charismatic or symbolic relationships, but on mere procedures, functions and bureaucratic institutions. Finally we have the experience of how words have lost ancient meanings which depended on their original contexts. To these epistemological and scientific changes we must add the contributions of Analytic Philosophy, which have cast a mantle of doubt on the references of religious language, and the studies undertaken under Marxist or Nietzschean influence, which have revealed the social, economical and power influences within religion.

Here is where we must ask ourselves again (with Freud) if religious experience is merely an illusion which, because of the advance of modern knowledge, has now become unnecessary. This is no new question. Throughout the history of Christianity we find the concern of how religious life and meanings relate to historical experiences, particularly those coming from philosophy, science and society. In our effort to articulate a meaningful approach to religious experience we could choose to evade the hard questions and take flight into some individualistic, emotivist or spiritualized version of such experience; this, however would mean remaining only at the surface of the modern situation and of the spiritual life. On the other hand, we could choose to look at the problem more directly and honestly. This is what I intend to do here, asking whether it is indeed still possible for us to pray, whether this form of communication is still meaningful.

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In particular, I want to consider the contribution philosophy, with its distinctive way of exposing problems and phenomena, making sense of them, and finding their practical implications, can make in helping us respond to these questions. I will follow the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and his phenomenology of a basic anthropological experience: We are communicative beings endowed with language. Levinas finds in this experience a structure and meanings which I consider useful and worthwhile for our current situation. This is, of course, no "evidence"—for example of the "reference" of the language involved in prayer—but a way of showing how a concrete experience, communication and language, can help to create a new understanding and more meaningful practice of prayer and religious spiritual life.

But why approach this fundamental theological and religious question *philosophically*? What are the possible benefits of such an approach? One possible answer, perhaps the most simple and direct one, is: because in a way we are all thinking philosophically often enough in trying to make sense of our experiences and language in an understandable way. Despite the truth of this, such a response neglects to add that philosophical thinking is always demanding. Like any game, it has its own rules, and to enjoy the game you have to respect those rules. Learning to enjoy this game means (for some of us anyway) confronting a cliché, often expressed in relation to philosophical discourse, that these rules always mean abstract and lifeless thought. In fact it is the opposite, at least as I am approaching philosophy here. If there are difficult concepts or abstract thinking, which in fact there are, they are always aiming at understanding and clarifying lived experience. The particular lived experience at the center of this discussion is prayer—understood as the "locus" where language and religious experience come together. My argument is that prayer as religious relationship can be better understood—and hopefully more deeply lived—by means of a critical philosophical examination of its distinctive approach to communication.

I want to focus my attention especially on the relationship between language and prayer. In particular, I want to consider whether a critical-philosophical examination of our experience of communication can help us grapple with the complexity and even the emptiness of our epoch, and the difficulties we often feel about the very possibility of prayer. I am aware of course that there are other possible approaches. For example, in my own context—the "deep South" of Latin America—we find solid scholars who argue for the worth of the "popular wisdom" of popular religiosity.[2] This shows that religious relationship has its own worth and structure, and that analyzing it "scientifically" could mean its paralysis or death. But a philosophical analysis of the structure of this relationship need not be paralyzing. On the contrary, it can bear real fruit in our effort to understand better why we are such commu-

nicative beings, and ground the mystery of prayer precisely in relation to that fundamental communicative structure. This kind of philosophical reflection can help us be more aware and critical about what it is we do when we pray, and profit from a greater sensitivity to language in our religious relationship. But philosophy can profit from this work also, since such reflection reveals that in every communication there are elements closely bound to this religious relationship. Still, it is also necessary to consider: what *kind* of philosophical approach is best suited to helping us deepen our understanding of prayer. In what way should we philosophize? My own conviction is that the most helpful approach to such work is through *practical philosophy*. "Practical" here means both: born within concrete experience *and* dealing with freedom, that is, capable of exercising an influence upon experience itself. It deals not with theoretical and immutable entities or ideas, but with the meanings and actions with which we approach a particular area of human life, and how we relate this area to other areas of our real and lived experience. This philosophy searches the meanings and structure of this experience, its limits and consequences.

This analysis will not therefore follow the way of *logos apophantikós* (which depends on statements that force the intellect to assent, and whose truth lies in the logic of the proposition) but rather that of *logos hermeneutikós*, whose meanings are grounded in and motivate actions, and whose truth and value has neither a logical nor an empirical "proof" but arise in response to how we exist and live our lives. My primary purpose here is to show that the fundamental religious "event"—what happens or "comes to us" in prayer—implies already a kind of communication which precedes and gives birth to dialogue, which is not just an interaction but a kind of responsibility. For Levinas this responsibility is existentially experienced as a kind of hostageship (the experience of being called and "taken" by another before every free choice). Drawing on this insight, I want to argue that our experience of prayer is not (just) a matter of emotions or feelings, but is integrated into the very the structure of human language. Why? Because prayer mirrors the very structure of human communication, especially its "practical" relationship with otherness. I am already bound to the Other who calls me, responsible for this call, even "taken hostage" by his/her call, before I become conscious. For this reason, my answering is inextricably bound to justice, thus overcoming the allegedly neutral, objective, purely detached posture of "scientific" analysis.

Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy of language, which is summarized in the sentence "The essence of discourse is prayer,"[3] will provide the point of departure for a more reflexive understanding of the "religious" structure of human communication, as well as an awareness of the ethical structure of religious experience. At the same time, it forces philosophy to go beyond the analysis

of speech acts and meanings, leading it to take into account experiences such as transcendence, commitment, call and responsibility as conditions of possibility for every other communication. And this is neither more nor less than the ancient task of providing a philosophical understanding for an event and, therefore, making it more meaningful; at the same time it forces philosophy to go beyond its conventional limits. Levinas himself summarizes his attempt when he writes that his aim is to find the origin of and overcome "the underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets."[4] This sentence means that there are two sides of Western culture: the Jewish-born religious experience and the Greek philosophical way of thinking. They were often taken apart, therefore a serious answer to the challenge posed by both—here: the relationship of prayer and language—cannot do without the demanding "otherness" of Jewish experience.[5] I think that if this "otherness" is really considered in our own experience as communicative beings, and if our use such of philosophical tools serves to bring to light the meaning and demands of this experience, then philosophy may bear fruits in a deeper and more existential level.

THE ORIGINAL SUMMONS: RESPONSIBILITY PRIOR TO DIALOGUE

It is not uncommon for us to link religious life and ethical behavior. Through different mythological or historical narrations, this connection is tied to a "founding" event, for instance that of God providing Moses with commandments, or more recently, finding biblical roots for developing a theory of human rights.[6] Nevertheless from Kant onwards, Modernity has understood this as a kind of Heteronomy that is unacceptable for the autonomous rational subject, who is in this view the sole origin and source of legitimate moral norms. The problem of the origin and legitimacy of norms has a long and complicated history in philosophy. And the legitimacy of this connection of religion and morals was always suspect—both because of its metaphysical commitments and because religious foundations were seen as being linked to non-critical beliefs. But if we focus on human experience, we find that Levinas has a point when he argues that heteronomy—understood as call of the Other—is the origin of every kind of subjectivity; and that this is not only legitimate but a basic anthropological structure, clearly visible in the religious relationship and especially clear in prayer. What happens in this communicative act we call prayer belongs to the very structure of our being human and that this structure has a moral meaning and impact. This is simple to say but harder to show.

Distancing himself from Greek philosophical tradition, and at the same time proving his lasting dependence on it, Levinas states that "first philosophy" or the basis for every philosophical understanding is neither Metaphysics nor Epistemology but Ethics.[7] He does not mean by Ethics neither a sort of

legal doctrine nor the formal procedure for providing legitimate norms, but a kind of relationship to the Other who is infinite, that is, who refuses every attempt of one's own consciousness to reduce his/her presence to a concrete representation such as concept, idea, definition. Ethics means a kind of relationship, and this bears an analogy with what Christianity understands as Truth: not a definition but a Person and a relationship with this Person. In this regard, both Truth and Ethics require a kind of transcendence towards the Other. But the "presence" of the Other is at the same time in and beyond the concrete phenomena and physical encounter. I see a concrete hungering or rejected face and I may attempt a concrete answer. In this, according to Levinas, the Other calls me from *before* the moment of my awareness and *beyond* his/her concrete manifestation and my limited answer. Both ethical event and prayer have no beginning in my personal decision and no achievement after the end of my personal action. There is no "appeasement" of the Other. That is why according to Levinas, this manifestation of the Other remains beyond the possibilities of consciousness of "donating meaning"—*Sinngebung*. This act of providing a meaning to phenomena is considered by phenomenology a main trait of consciousness, but when it has to do with the manifestation and demand of the Other, reason tries to reduce its otherness by means of concepts, definitions, and clear normative institutions. And it is in vain since, as Levinas insists, no concept is able to provide a comprehensive meaning to the Other, no norm provides for a full answer to his/her demands.

Often enough we find in the mystical tradition, such as in Augustine, Eckhart, Silesius, expressions that invert daily experience. We may read them metaphorically, but in phenomenological language there is an expression closely linked to these expressions, which is not a metaphor. Levinas argues that, phenomenologically speaking, what happens when the Other meets us is an inversion of intentionality. Consciousness, as thought of by Phenomenology, is intentional, that is, a tension or tending towards a content, which at the same time receives a meaning by consciousness in this tension itself.[8] But what happens when that "content" is the Other, is that this "direction" of our consciousness is inverted and converted. Our experience shows that no concept can "reduce" the Other, and that the Other remains beyond definitions. The hermeneutical horizon of meanings is disrupted by this manifestation of the Other. In this case, the "correlation" between my consciousness and its content is broken, or better, it is anticipated by a challenge and commandment that precedes, subverts and overwhelms intentionality.[9] That is why the Other is related with "Infinity," with the endless work of tending towards an always necessary and always elusive and incomplete answer.

Ethics means a kind of relationship with this manifestation. As distinct from our usual understanding of the necessary condition for ethics, it is not

that there is first a previous decision of a freedom that is its own origin. Before every free choice, suggests Levinas, there is a relationship that is already given and that shows itself always as already being there. The different traditions that arose from biblical Monotheism have this in common: the Other "grasps" the subject and demands that the subject pay heed to this call and commandment. Of course, such a commandment may be left without response. Or, one may answer "here am I." In this regard, ethical relationship in Levinas' terms requires freedom but is prior to it. With this approach, Levinas leads us to consider what is meant with "the Other." Ethically speaking, this Otherness is placed in the face of concrete human beings demanding our responsibility. Religiously speaking, this Otherness is that of God demanding our answer. But at the same time this does not mean two distinct but "analogically" related ways. On the contrary, no religious response in prayer is genuine without the recognition of ethical responsibility.

If we consider prayer born in a grace or gift given freely to us by the Other, which is an experience not born in our will to power, then this understanding of the ethical relationship and prayer show a common root. Neither prayer nor ethical relation begins with an act of my own will caused by reason and logical thought. I can freely relate myself to that call, but the vocation itself comes before and takes hold of my whole life, and yet remains always transcendent. It is therefore no coincidence that Levinas uses for this fundamental ethical relationship the term "religion," because it is a discourse where both terms—me and the Other—remain separated.Although the term religion refers to a "binding,"more fundamentally and originally, it means the experience of bridging and relating those who remain separated. The absolute Other, God, cannot be reduced to a concept or a definition, and the same happens with the human Other. Religion is this possibility of relating to the Other who remains transcendent to me. "In the concrete the positive face of the formal structure, having the idea of infinity, is discourse, specified as an ethical relation. For the relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results in no community of concept or totality—a relation without relation—we reserve the term religion."[10]

Religion has often been linked to a kind of "correlation."[11] This supposes a mutually shared capability of establishing and holding a relationship. Hermeneutics generally agrees with this statement, insofar one of its main assessments is that being is given under the form of language, and not just any language but concretely as dialogue. Gadamer takes over Heidegger's thought about speech as constitutive of the being of human existence and composed by language, hearing and silence, and places this experience within dialogue as the essential locus of hermeneutical experience. Being shows itself within dialogue, and genuine dialogue is actually a protection against dogmatic abuse

and instrumentalization of language. This is true for genuine prayer insofar as "using" prayer to state one's case would be at least a monologue, if not an actual attempt to manipulate God. The primacy of dialogue and the structure of question and answer always involve a kind of relationship of two speakers who hear, interpret, understand, speak back and ask again. Therefore,language is not a possession at the disposal of the interlocutors but the creation of "a common language."[12] Common language requires the co-implication of speakers, their equality, and their sharing a common world. The great contribution of Hermeneutics is, therefore, that language is not just a neutral tool, but a way of opening and creating a common world, and, at the same time, of being oneself open to transformation by means of communication. In genuine dialogue "something emerges that is contained in neither of the partners by himself."[13] Gadamer reminds us often how the Greeks considered even personal thought as a kind of dialogue.[14] Dialogue is at the core of factual experience of language and according to Gadamer this facticity has a goal that is mutual understanding. "Factual" means that this understanding is based in concrete lived experience and not on some theoretical previous idea or category that we impose upon reality. And mutual understanding as goal does not just point to a final purpose but to the process itself, as a way of disclosing and sharing the world. Here "world" does not mean a collection of objectified data but a common life and a set of shared meanings.

Levinas agrees with the idea of a transformation of the self through communication with the Other, and that this happens within the facticity of language; but he adds that there is something that necessarily happens *before* dialogue itself, and affirms the impossibility of a common ground between the subject and the Infinity of the Other. Language is beyond the powers of the subject, since the subject is not only constituted by language, but by a kind of language that both proceeds from the Other and is experienced as a kind of commandment from and responsibility for the Other. Without an encounter with the Other that imposes upon the subject the obligation of responsibility, every dialogue is at risk of becoming an exercise of power. Without the original summons that comes about facing the Other as a meaning without context, which is before and beyond every interpretation that limits its meaning, dialogue may turn into alternating and empty rhetoric. Within a context of authentic dialogue, manipulation is fundamentally impossible since the *noema* or "content" that appears in the manifestation of the Other is not on the same level as the *noesis* or the "ray" with which my own consciousness tries to make sense of it by placing it within a concept.

In Heidegger's understanding, a proper phenomenology of Dasein, that is, the way of being for humans, is more fundamentally exposed in the phenomenology of comprehension of being, of language and care. But language, as

***Dialog*. Courtesy of Emilia Lasota**

seen in Heidegger and Gadamer, is always immanent to the world and at the same time remains within the boundaries of shared meaning, of the donation of meaning by one's consciousness, and finally a reduction of this relationship that leaves no room for transcendence. Thus, the overwhelming of the powers of reason and of donation of meaning leads Levinas to disagree with a main idea of Hermeneutics. There is a phenomenological description in Levinas with hermeneutical conclusions: he affirms that the meaning of the face, through which the Other manifests his/her demands, is beyond the capabilities of both reason and context.[15] Dialogue supposes a shared "world" and context, which are still linked to meaningful information, whereas the origin of communication in the command to attention of the Other places him/her as Master. Mastery means, according to Levinas, that the person and the message of the Other become one, and that the Master and I remain in different levels.[16] Reciprocity is preceded by this mastery, and the responsibility for this "presence" is prior to any "given" meaning. Before reciprocity and shared world, language implies a "revelation of the other."[17] This otherness supposes as well as the mastery of

the Other, our mutual separation and therefore plurality. Neither representation nor thematisation is the essence of this meeting, but responsibility. This responsibility is prior to dialogue and to the thematization proper of language: it means being put into question by the proximity of the Other.[18] The relation of those who remain separated transcends dialogue, or better expressed: dialogue depends first and foremost on the summoning by which the Other puts my subjectivity into question.[19] Prayer places us back in that most original situation of human communication: we receive language and together with it a challenging call to answer. And although we can begin a dialogue in search of understanding—which is also challenging back—this common and shared horizon is never under the powers of my own consciousness.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF HOSTAGESHIP: PERSECUTION, ELECTION, KENOSIS

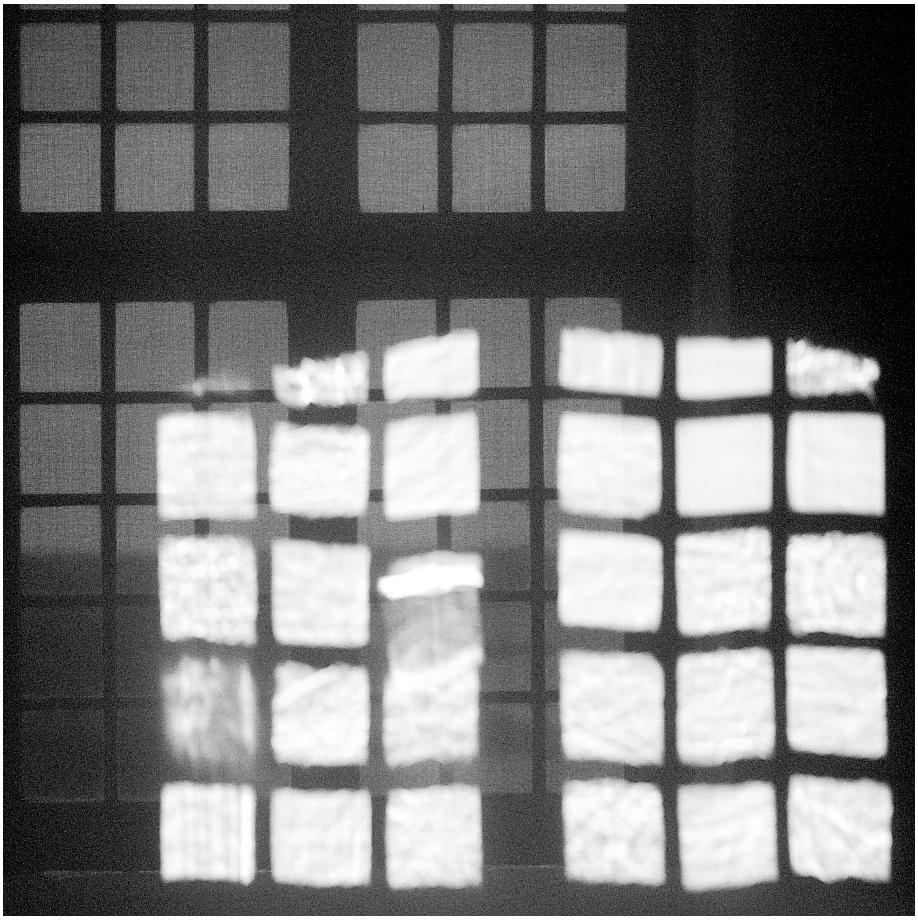
Levinas finds the origin of this phenomenology of communication and the birth of our responsive language in a call prior to every choice of ours. This idea leads to an understanding that our existence is primarily born in *answering* because, as it happens with language, I become conscious and responsive *after* receiving this call and *after* I have given a concrete answer. We are *named*, we are endowed with language and only after that we are we able to make our response. Responsibility does not mean a consciousness identical, present and transparent to itself which freely engages another and accepts a contractual relationship, but the summoning that questions identity as identical to itself. This previous call has the same structure as religious experience, since a call means that I was elected or chosen for answering. It means freedom too, because I could always reject this call, but no rejection can impede this being-called itself.

This sequence of a primordial encounter which is revealed *within* and *as* language during the very act of answering has an ethical-religious structure. Levinas appeals to the Jewish understanding of religious language to make this clear: "religious language which admittedly, in the last analysis, relates it fundamentally to a thought which is already a discourse (reading and studying the Torah) but which, between the Torah and the discourse allowing transcendence to signify, brings in attitudes of will as carriers of meaning, a psyche of obedience "older" than thought living on poetic imagination, a discipline which is heteronomous to the point of depending on an educational community, and anterior to the specific possibilities of language play."[20] This notion of an experience "older" than factual experience will be resumed below, but what is remarkable and significant here is that religious experience *as* language has a deeper meaning than all interpretations and possibilities of linguistic expression. The Jewish experience of being spoken to and commanded is not limited to the "People of the Book", but can be understood as a concrete historical

example of a structure, which may serve as primary analogue to understand other structurally related experiences. This is the heteronomical origin of a call which presupposes transcendence and gives birth to the possibility of meaning and to subjectivity.

Why does the Other put me into question? Levinas writes: "To posit the transcendent as stranger and poor one is to prohibit the metaphysical relation with God from being accomplished in the ignorance of men and things. The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face."[21] It is in this regards that Levinas calls the encounter with the Other "absolute experience."[22] First of all, this means not reducible to a concept or definition. But it is also radical because the "place" *par excellence* of this experience is the nudity of the face of every concrete human being. The face is not just what I see when I see the Other, the phenomena I can describe. More than this, it is an "epiphany" with a positive ethical structure.[23] Transcendence and Infinity are revealed in the face of the needy that rupture the tranquility of the self-sufficient subject. In this regards the biblical figures of the poor of the Lord—the stranger, the widow, the orphan—take precedence, because it is in facing this nudity and want that I am called to a kind of responsiveness.[24] I am addressed and called to a *responsorial* relation. This "manifestation" of the Other overwhelms my consciousness; it apprehends my subjectivity and does not leave me in peace. It is a kind of persecution, which is an experience close to that of the vocation of the prophets.[25] In Jeremiah's words: "You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced; you have overpowered me: you were the stronger." This heteronomy has a "positive value"[26] which may be expressed by the ancient Jewish notion of *election*, as well as a "negative" one—paradoxically also with a positive meaning—which is expressed by the Christian notion of *kenosis*.

Election always has a passive meaning: The subject is *subjected* to its being-chosen. And it is not just any kind of being-chosen, it is a pre-voluntary being chosen by the Good.[27] Whereas this Good leads Levinas to call this original movement towards the Other "desire," it is not directly linked to an object particularly "desirable" for its beauty. Instead, it is related to the face of the Other in his/her greatest suffering. It takes even "ugly" shapes: we see it begging on the streets, in prisons, in slums. Towards this demand I offer a concrete answer. This is called by Levinas "saying": every finite and limited answer, every institution or legal tool to provide an answer to the infinite call of the Other. But the very demand of the Other remains, in Levinas' terms, a "say" beyond and before every "saying": a movement placed from outside within the subject that moves it constantly and insatiably beyond itself in responsibility.[28] In every genuine answer, both in prayer and in ethics, the more I answer, the more I realize that my words and actions are limited, and that the drive inspired in me by the Other grows with every response of mine.



***Coat Tails* © Sarah Hadley**

This movement may and must be made concrete in always-limited words, actions and institutions. There is no way around them. But for a genuine answer not to turn idolatrous, it is indispensable that I remain aware that concrete means of communication are never a definitive response to the original call. As it happens with Greek *eros* and Christian *agape*, no action satisfies them; on the contrary: the demand grows when it is attended. Being elected involuntarily by the "authority" of the Good has never a definitive answer.[29]

According to this structure, the experience of being chosen equals the first act of becoming hostage: before and beyond personal wishes or desires, even against foreseeable rational order, the subject finds itself dependent on a call, and every answer to that call as always limited and subject to an infinite demand.[30] This election also makes the subject aware of its uniqueness, since facing the infinite and concrete demand of the Other, the subject is not replaceable, and because his/her answer or "saying" is unique. This is a kind of

sincerity made of exposure and an answer without detour.[31] In good logic A equals A, I am equal to myself, but this movement of identification is broken when becoming aware of the—ethical and/or religious—call of the Other: I accept a relationship with God, I accept my responsibility towards the Other . . . and things will never be the same afterwards.

According to this description, subjective identity is thought of as non-identical because subjectivity does not equal itself but is the answer to being addressed and challenged by the Other. My subjectivity is not the fruit of an effort of my will, but of the recognition that my will rests on a prior emptiness filled with the call of the Other, towards which I utter my answer. This answer produces what Levinas refers to as the "infinition" of the subject, since responsibility is never ending, and no answer ever responds adequately to the debt that has always been there. I am elected, and this is not a product of my will but a result of my original emptiness filled with a call. The principle of identity means in good logic that A equals A, and this means anthropologically speaking that I equal myself. But when being engaged by the Other and called to responsibility this principle of self-sufficient identity is broken: I am not equal to myself. Paradoxically, this impossibility of me being equal to myself is the condition of possibility for authentic human identity. I become myself after being held hostage or elected to responsibility by the Other.[32]

There is at first sight a difficulty in Levinas' Kantian sense of duty facing the Other. One sees an intense feeling of duty but little room for eudemonia and joy. And to make things worse, he does not accept the most basic and modern assumption of Kant, that is, his notion of the autonomous subject, who out of his/her reason can produce the norms without external influences. There is duty without delight, and without autonomy. Little human, all too little human. And yet Casper relates Levinas' understanding of language with the thankfulness (*Dankbarkeit*) felt when receiving a gift: "It is this because of this character of gift of that what is brought to speech in language, that speech points constantly to an *excess*," and due to this overwhelming of the gift, it never becomes a possession.[33] The gift here means that I am given to myself in the shape of a responsibility through the Other, and that responsibility and thankfulness are the first fruits of this gift. The theological notion of grace could help here, but the difficulty with this concept is that no supernatural level is required. Nevertheless there is another theological notion implied, when Casper relates this gift to Eckhart's "re-born thankfulness" (*Widergebärende Dankbarkeit*). The reception of the Other makes me fertile, fruitful. It make me me. I *owe* me to the Other, because I am given to me through him/her. Even if it is not clear how much this has to do with eudemonia, what is clear indeed is that in thankfulness and responsibility I "prove" this basic structure of desire that shapes my life facing the Other. And it shows also within this

movement a basic desire for this compelling Other, never fulfilled but always thriving and life-giving.

Being held hostage means that I had no choice facing the Other and his/her demands. Paradoxically, this structure of hostageship is what allows the subject to acquire his or her identity. Using Casper's words, it is "the identity in the non-identity of election to responsibility for the Other."[34] There is a trauma here that the poets express better, like Celan when he writes: "I am you, when I am."[35] Also Levinas reminds us with biblical scholars that the work of loving your neighbor is what "you yourself are."[36] I become me, unique and personal, when I am chosen, and I respond. But such a response lies beyond my powers: "This uniqueness not assumed, not subsumed, is traumatic; it is an election in persecution."[37]

The construction of subjectivity as thought of since Modernity—a rational, self-dominated and self-made man—is undermined. Subjectivity is seen by this phenomenology as dependent but also despoiled. To explain this stripping, Levinas uses a word cherished by the Christian tradition: *kenosis*.[38] Levinas finds testimonies of this humility of greatness both in "Old Testament" and in the Talmud. Nevertheless what is interesting is not so much the converging of religious traditions, but a shared anthropology: the greatness of human beings lies not so much in their alleged achievements or the modern omnipotence by means of techno-science, but in *association*.[39] In association, the radical separation between me and the transcendent Other is maintained, and yet I go beyond transcendence by my responsibility for this otherness. Association implies a kind of communication whose condition is transcendence and a bridging of this separation. As it happens with communication, prayer is the service which "nourishes" these separated worlds.[40] In prayer a relationship or association is nurtured, but the Other remains other and transcendent, beyond my capabilities of apprehending and conceptualizing.

Prayer is where language shows me dependent on the Other. At the same time it shows something paradoxical. The Other depends on me, and this happens not only in my relationship with the absolutely Other human being, but also with the absolutely Other we name God. "Paradoxically, everything depends on him [or her]– he [or she] whose body is at the lowest level, located within the order of action and work, at the level of matter. Everything depends on him, even the outpouring of God, which confers being and light on the entire hierarchy of worlds."[41] There is not only a social demand here, but a theological one as well, with a deep Jewish root. Levinas follows Rabbi Haim of Volozhin when he writes that there is a mutual conditioning here, as if God depended on a "food provided by man, a food made of actions reflecting the will expressed in the Torah."[42] My answer in prayer is always food for the Other, even for the omnipotent God whose will is only fulfilled if I nourish

our relationship. God can neither fulfill this association nor do the part of the human being in his/her work of nourishing and caring for the world. This is my share as human. But my activity is not that of Prometheus, the great myth of Modern humanity defying God and making its own laws, neither that of Zarathustra killing God, but more humbly as receiving the transcendent Other and nourishing relations with the Other in all his/her manifestations.

DIACHRONY AND SYNCHRONY OF COMMUNICATION

"Too late have I loved Thee" confesses Augustine. If his confession is correlated with our analysis, we see that the call of the Other has an origin not born in his own freedom. In all freedom I may say now "yes" or "no," I may follow in a present time a call that I cannot place in a concrete moment in time. But both events—that of discovering myself already and since always called and that of answering now—happen together. I am already taken hostage or haunted by this responsibility when I decide to answer—or not. The question of grace or a gift already granted by the Other steps in again with its paradox: this answer does not happen due to my efforts, since the call of the Other precedes them, but neither does it happen without my efforts. My answer becomes a testimony of the call, both for me as well as for others. The act of witnessing to this call of the Other—Levinas calls it too the "Glory" of the Other—seems the sole "proof" for this theory of knowledge.

In the chronology of this relationship there is at first sight a tautology. The subject discovers the call of the Other while giving witness and answering to it. Yet it is not a tautology but a paradox, because it does not mean that the call is proved by the answer and vice versa, but that the answer, as it happens with language, is being spoken before an act of consciousness, and when that consciousness is reached, then it only brings to light what always was there. When I answer in present time I bear witness of an origin more ancient than any chronological time that could be recovered by memory. The Seventh Book Chapter XVII of Augustine's *Confessions* gives us a new hint of what this experience means: there is a "loving memory" that goes back to a time that is neither fixed in a chronological event nor able to re-present that event; instead it remains a way of loving under the shape of memory. My existence itself is deployed as search for a future under the motion of this love. From that encounter no phenomena is left, except some traces. It is a form of hope, again far from a metaphysical thought that only represents my own wishes. It is a way of opening my existence in sight of a future inspired by the other, and my own language and expression is born out of this hope, to go back once again to Augustine in Chapter I of the Tenth Book of his *Confessions*.

This provides also a possible answer to the question: Since when am I persecuted and held hostage? Which is the chronological origin of this experi-

ence? Levinas answers: "Anarchy is persecution."[43] Whereas philosophy has dealt traditionally with the search for origin, *arche*, we find in this experience of being called and responsive beings that there is an-archy at the source: The persecution of the Other appears as origin beyond fundaments. While classical ethics searched a *fundamentum inconcussum* that bases results beyond discussion—thus placing Ethics under the pre-contemporary notion of science as evidence—the understanding of the beginning of Ethics as encounter with the Other, who at the same time imposes his/her call *and* is weak and may be rejected, signifies an experience whose "power" lies elsewhere. It is not a metaphysical understanding or a logical argument that forces the understanding, but the experience born beyond and before me, through which I find myself already called through the Other. The "concept" of persecution is related to the phenomenology of hostageship: Something is done to me before every doing of mine; and every doing and answering is *second act* to that primordial encounter that—chronologically speaking—"never" happened. Although Levinas speaks of the encounter with the Infinite or Glory of the Other as a "revelation,"[44] this should not be understood as a sudden shock that forces a conversion, but only that what shows itself is neither product of a representation nor relative to a subjectivity that constitutes an object. Before every objectifying effort, the Other "reveals" itself as already being there. Without origin in chronological consciousness of time, without a decision or founding pact of sociality, the Other has already imposed himself when the subject becomes aware. Once and again something critical and necessary is brought to our attention: the anteriority of a "time" that is always "older" than measurable time and chronology. In order to express this, Levinas quotes Valéry's expression "deep past,"[45] a past older than any present, and therefore a past that is not re-presentable.

Language as thematization depends on a kind of time that is closed, which *was* being—*quod quid erat esse*. Objective knowledge means to apprehend what has already happened and passed by.[46] This means the possibility of having grasped something in its presence and that this presence has come to its end. But the relationship with the Other resists this structure because it cannot be chronologically fixed. If the original summons is that of a pre-dialogic encounter, this encounter is—regarding its timeliness—an-archic. The relation with this *anarchy* is also named by Levinas *patience*.

The paradox conveys into a methodological problem, that of naming what occurs before names and is their condition of possibility. The problem is serious because naming is a way of subordinating to ontology and Western conception of being, while on the other hand, denying this work would mean (it seems) making the task of philosophy impossible.[47] The answer is to find hints of that unsaid within factual language: The subject finds itself responsible and

answering to that responsibility with a movement "prior to every memory" and "ulterior to every accomplishment."[48] If the accomplishment of language in prayer finds a subjective fulfillment or satisfaction, if no questions are left and no further action is required, then this very accomplishment should force us to be suspicious that it was we ourselves who forced this "non plus ultra."

In prayer I become aware that my subjectivity is not born in synchronic and chronologically fixed decisions of my freedom, but on the immemorial burden of responsibility, which resists any ulterior fulfillment or subjective accomplishment. No effort of memory can take me back to the concrete moment in which I accepted this burden. The responsibility manifests itself as being there before I noticed. If personal identity and call were simultaneous, there could be an agreement or conjunction. But, Levinas contends, "diachrony is the refusal of conjunction, the non-totalizable, and is in this sense, infinite. But in the responsibility for the Other, for another freedom, the negativity of this anarchy, this refusal of the present, of appearing, of the immemorial, commands me and ordains me to the other, to the first one on the scene, and makes me approach him, makes me his neighbor."[49] Present consciousness and concrete task is born out of an anarchical order which is never limited to the unique Other facing me, but is open to all-Others, what Levinas calls the "third party" or the neighbor as society.

The word given to the Other is not given all at once. It is progressively disclosed, it is given and corrected and given again; and this progression leads Levinas to an understanding of patience as the answer to that anarchical birth of subjectivity. No activity of subjectivity can recover this "lost" time. Patience means also that no enjoyment of a self-sufficient subject who achieves its own goals is possible. Enjoyment would mean that my subjectivity is equal to myself, that my duties and responsibilities match my present achievements. But infinity as shown in responsibility for the Other means that no such matching is possible. Therefore neither initiative nor conclusion, neither *arche* nor *telos* are under the powers of subjectivity. So the answer that constitutes subjectivity is patience that manifests itself daily in the fact of our own getting older: "In the patience of senescence what is unexceptionable in proximity is articulated, the responsibility for the other man, "contracted" as it were on the hither side of memorable time."[50] I get older, and aging means the patience being daily exposed to the Other, and providing him/her with an always-limited answer. This "proves" both the limits of my personal will to power and also the "foundation" of personal identity in "being for another." This responsibility is infinite and therefore never fully answerable. Every limited but necessary word is a response that remains restless, a restlessness that, in Levinas' words, is "better"—because closer to the Good—than any rest or *ataraxia*. My relationship with the Good is not that of a contemplation without any pathos or the fulfill-

ment of our mutual understanding. My relation with the Other is the always limited attempt to get closer to the demands of the Good.

There is one more aspect that should be taken into account. Patience needs a kind of impatience that Levinas does not usually mention, except in a negative form, for instance the impatience of the will of satiation.[51] The thought of Rosenzweig, now and again considered fundamental by Levinas himself, provides for a fuller understanding.[52] There is a necessary but dangerous impatience shown in prayer, by which there is at once the possibility of, negatively, tyranny of those who attempt to force the coming of the Kingdom by prayer, but also of, positively, providing movement within being in the direction of that justice meant by the Kingdom.[53]

If my words try and often fail in their effort, if I must patiently (perhaps more than once) attempt an answer, it is because language and prayer happen in history, which is the field where the relationship with the Other is incarnated. Levinas, following a long tradition of Jewish thought and practice that counts also Rosenzweig among its followers, sees that there is a "time" parallel to history, not involved in history but from whose viewpoint history itself may be judged. According to Rosenzweig, it is not in history that God should be recognized, because that would hallow history and its unacceptable events. Better, it is in every ethical action that God is present, which at the same time denies history's preeminence and reinstalls in it a divine perspective.[54] The kind of history that is denied is that which leaves transcendence outside, and finds every fulfillment within historical events. On the contrary, ethical actions are at the same time part of history and freed from the rule and power of history because they may judge it. And with this same understanding Levinas explains that there is a notion of duration or permanence of certain values that are diachronic but the very foundation of temporal action. That is why Liturgy has as a primary responsibility keeping that immemorial responsibility alive and present. Prayer and language are ever renewed events, which imply too a way of relating in time this responsibility with the broader notion of justice. There is no real prayer which only relates the single person to God, leaving aside the needs and sufferings of all-Others.

PRAYER *AS* JUSTICE AND VICE VERSA

I have pointed to a danger in this essay, regarding the use of philosophy and the necessary abstraction required to provide a different analysis of the experience of language and prayer, and how this abstraction can end up losing track of live experience. I have argued that this dangerous activity is necessary, because otherwise our experience could remain a-critical. This criticism applies to a forced use of religious language, trying to make fit in categories—philosophical or religious—what remains always beyond the capacity that words have for

naming. Another danger to pay attention to here is that of anthropomorphizing. Because someone could ask if I am not forcing things, just to end up, like Feuerbach, turning religion and religious thoughts into anthropological projections. And yet the connection at this practical level remains.[55] When I say that I am provoked and called in my very answering-word to the Other, this claim is not saying that there is no difference between the language of prayer and any other communicative experience. There are important differences between my relationship with the Other as God and my relationship with the human or "wordly" Other. I may decide not to enter in relationship with God, and yet my responsibility for the Other human being and the world remains whole. On the other side, my answer to God is never full if it does not include responsibility for the Other human being. Nevertheless they bear a shared structure of responsibility, and therefore the words of the first letter of John 4:20 become clear: "For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen." Even if there are differences, it remains clear why my responsibility born in a call and my identity born in my answer remain an endless task and a search for justice. After this recognition I can thematize this event, bring it to consciousness, and even try to encompass this original experience within contemporary ethics of communicative action. But if that original summons is forgotten, it may happen that the "said" or concrete ways of answering to the demands of the Other, the institutions and laws, will be idolatrized, considered achieved and absolute. This may happen in religious experience too. Among the downfalls of religious experience, Casper notices a "tyranny" of pursuing in the relation with the Other my own will in my own time. But he adds that there is a danger in removing myself from the seriousness of history by thinking my relationship with God in prayer detached from historical problems. Another downfall of religions is the endless repetition of formulas which forget the origin and meaning of language.[56] And finally there are several degenerations of religion characterized by forgetting that the "place" of the access to the Other is facing the other human being.[57]

Obsessed by this endless task, Levinas goes beyond my responsibility for the Other in a one-to-one relation. It is so because I do not just follow an impulse facing the demands of the Other, but reason and consciousness must step in, in order to analyze, measure and judge considering that beyond me and the Other there is the "third party" or society itself.[58] There is me, the neighbor, and another Other. That is why sociality leads beyond religious and ethical action, which until now were considered a matter of two sides. Now we realize that there must be justice and the necessary political action that leads to it, taking into account that those who communicate are "incomparable," without common measure. This responsibility for an always better and yet never achieved society parallels the biblical notion of the "Kingdom of God." The

Kingdom remains as a teleological concept, as an absolute and non-contemporaneous *telos* of an achieved society, which requires concrete, revisable and always limited historical responses. Jesus used to advise mistrust against those who considered that the Kingdom was fulfilled in a concrete institution (Lk. 17:21). No society, institution or system is ever freed from the responsibility of searching for a more just order, an order closer to the Kingdom.

It is not a mere coincidence that a Jewish philosopher finds in the origin of language a kind of responsiveness to a call prior to freedom, a call that is concretely found in the very answer lived as responsibility for the Other. This basic experience of Jewish tradition is that of the prophets, who after being called—a call not brought about by their will or aptitudes—answered with a word which meant a position: Here am I. And it is not a coincidence either, that this vocation towards the Other, especially the other who suffers the weight of unjust historical conditions. That is why the name of religion may also be justice and equality, and that justice is due in the first place to the "poor of the Lord."[59]

But equality means a *system* in search of justice, which requires a common language and measure. This implies a return to what was shown by Greek philosophy and its search for a common logos.[60] If my personal relationship with the Other is a kind of infinite responsibility, social life requires justice as a common measure through the use of consciousness and with a concept of time that here and now—synchronically—must judge what belongs to each one. And it answers to the reality that sociality is not made of two but of many who require a common word.[61]

But justice as language is also creative, it must name what never was named, and therefore render it visible, no matter how horrible it may be.[62] It is so enticed to face the worst side of humanity, and insofar it takes upon also a basic movement of prayer: The recognition of a fallen humanity, the need for pardon and salvation, and the lack of personal or social strength to do so.

One of the weaknesses of this exposition of the binding between language, prayer and justice is the lack of institutional, social and political mediations. This is not to be found in Levinas' works, but it is a most challenging issue for whoever wants at the same time to be honest with his/her personal experience and at the same time to provide for concrete answers in a pluralistic world. There are two parallel problems here, just as it is difficult to understand which are the differences between the relationship with the God as Other and the relationship with the Other human being, it is also hard to see how this anthropological structure of Ethics relates to concrete institutions. In both cases, the problems of differentiating levels and of concrete mediations among them remains unanswered.

There are certainly some noticeable absences in this philosophy of language of Levinas in its relationship with the event of prayer. One of them is that the Other is always related to the divine or humanity, never to other beings. This is a key element in a world facing its ecological destruction at the hands of humanity. Another difficulty is that of mediations, that is, how those "permanent values" should relate with concrete institutions, laws and words, in a society that has to live, so to say, after God's death and the end of metaphysics. Nevertheless Levinas' philosophy recalls something that was brought first to attention by Latin American liberationist theological thought: The right direction is from orthopraxis to orthodoxy and not the other way around. The factual experience of language and its responsive structure is the praxis out of which every legal or institutional structure springs, and that factual experience is also the fundamental event of religion.

NOTES

1. I make my own Levinas' dedication of *In the Time of Nations*.
2. See Juan Carlos Scannonesj, "Religiosidad popular, sabiduría del pueblo y teología popular," *Communio. Revista Católica Internacional*, Encuentro, Madrid, eds. V (Septiembre–Octubre, 1987): 411–422.
3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous. On-Thinking-of-the-Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 7.
4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority* (Den Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 24.
5. I would argue too that this is a challenge for every other culture: to bring to light or—in Levinas' own terms—"put on the scene" the worth and demands of its own "otherness" or "alterity," although this is a task that exceeds the limits of this essay.
6. Daniel Breslauer, *Judaism and Human Rights in Contemporary Thought* (Greenwood Press, Westport, 1993); Raquel Hodara, "La bibliahebrea y los Derechos Humanos," Fernando Geberovich et al. *Deseo de Ley* II (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2003).
7. Emmanuel Levinas, Éthique *comme philosophie première* (Paris: Rivages Poche, 1998).
8. Emmanuel Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 51–62, 75.
9. Bernhard Casper, *Angesichts des Anderen. Emmanuel Levinas—Elemente seines Denkens* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009), 19–22. For the use of concepts such as "overwhelming," "inversion," "conversion," "subversion," see Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: MartinusNijhof Publishers, 1987), 98, 134, and Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 47, 101, and 151.
10. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80.
11. Alexander Altmann, *Von der mittelalterischenzurmodernenAufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1987), 300–317; John P. Clayton, *The Concept of Correlation: Paul Tillich and the Concept of a Mediating Theology* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 1980), 87–105.
12. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London/New York: Continuum, 2006), 371.
13. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 458.
14. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 422.
15. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

16. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 69–71, 101. The publication of Levinas' war and postwar writings shows how important is this idea, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Parole et Silence et autres conferences inédites au Collègephilosophique*, Œuvres d´Emmanuel Levinas (Paris: Grasset-IMEC, 2011), 146.
17. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73.
18. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 111.
19. This is a vestige of Rosenzweig's thought in Levinas' philosophy: Rosenzweig is not only meaningful as a philosopher of separation and breaking down of the All of Totality, but also as philosopher of dialogue. Nevertheless the event of dialogue is not just the mutual and sober recognition of two subjects but the questioning and "judgement" of the subject by the demanding exteriority of the Other. Paraphrasing Leora Batnitzky, this is Dialogue or Affirmation as Judgment, because the identity of the subject springs out of this demanding call. Leora Batnitzky, "Dialogue as Judgment, Not Mutual Affirmation: A New Look at Franz Rosenzweig's Dialogical Philosophy," *Journal of Religion*, The University of Chicago Press, 79.4 (October 1999): 523–544.
20. Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse.Talmudic Lectures and Readings* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 87.
21. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.
22. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65.
23. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197.
24. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.
25. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.
26. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 74.
27. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 11.
28. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 5–8.
29. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 15.
30. In this kind of election *as* hostageship before and even against free will throbs the ancient Jewish experience of the prophet, as found in 1 Samuel 3:4, Jeremiah 1:4 and 20:7.
31. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 50.
32. Casper, *Angesichts des Anderen*, 63–74.
33. Casper, *Angesichts des Anderen*, 125.
34. Casper, *Angesichts des Anderen*, 63.
35. Paul Celan, "Lob der Ferne," Gesammelte Schriften Erstes Band (Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1983), 33.
36. Emmanuel Levinas, *Wenn Gott ins Denkeneinfällt* (Alber: Freiburg/München, 1999), 115.
37. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 56.
38. Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 114–132.
39. Levinas recovers the doctrine of Rabby Hayyim de Volozhyn, who teaches that God's greatness is that by creation his mastery becomes an *association* of different worlds.
40. Rabbi Hayyim de Volozhyn, L'Ame de la Vie, Nefesh Hahayyim (Paris: Verdier, 1986), 27.
41. Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 124.
42. Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, 122.
43. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 101.
44. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 25, 26, 66.
45. Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 145.
46. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65.
47. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 7.
48. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 10.

49. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 11.
50. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 53.
51. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 72.
52. This relationship of patience and impatience is developed with the ancient adage "*festinalente*" in Diego Fonti, *Levinas und Rosenzweig: Das Denken, der Andere und die Zeit* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2009), 238–250.
53. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1985), 283.
54. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch und sein Werk, GesammelteSchriften 1, Briefe und Tagebücher*, 1. Band, 1900–1918, (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 112. It is important to notice here the deep impact that Rosenzweig suffered through two events: His own return to Judaism and the after War collapse of the apparent German-Jewish-Greek climax in the Prussian Empire. It had been Idealism who argued for the realization of God in History and State, and that historicism had been shared by Rosenzweig before his rejection of it, see Alexander Altmann, "Franz Rosenzweig on History," in Paul Mendes-Flohr, *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (Hannover-London: University Press of New England, 1988), 124–137, and Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Franz Rosenzweig and the Crisis of Historicism," in Paul Mendes Flohr, *The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (Waltham, Brandeis, 1988), 138–161.
55. In this regards, Rosenzweig makes a claim that is even bolder: "The theological problems are to be translated into the human, and the human driven forward until they reach the theological", Franz Rosenzweig, *The New Thinking* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 89.
56. Bernhard Casper, *Das Ereignis des Betens. Grundlinieneiner Hermeneutik des religiösen Geschehens*, (Freiburg/München: Alber, 1998), 137–152.
57. Bernhard Casper, *Das Ereignis des Betens*, 35.
58. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 16.
59. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 64, 212–213.
60. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 71.
61. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 128, 150.
62. Lyotard shows that historical appearences of painful experiences often lacked the name to turn them into a case, thus turning it hard even to provide these situations with an entity. The example par excellence is the Shoah. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2003).