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The American University in Cairo
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

The Divine and the Problem of Violence

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Philosophy
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By
Wafaa E. Wali

Under the supervision of **Professor Steffen Stelzer**

April 2017

The American University in Cairo

A Thesis Submitted by

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Has been approved by

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To my father

Outline:

- I. The “Violences” there are.
- II. Levinas’s “Infinitely Other” and the Violence of Totality.
- III. Situating Levinas’s Philosophy within Phenomenology and Ontology
- IV. “jewgreek greekjew”
- V. What it is to Philosophize?
- VI. Deconstructing Derrida.
- VII. Another Take on Violence.
- VIII. Ontology of the Socratic Dialogue
- IX. Ethical Sacrifice and the “Infinitely Other”

In 1961, Emmanuel Levinas published his seminal work *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*¹ in which he proposed his theory: ethics as First philosophy. Levinas proposes that an ethical relationship with an “infinitely other”, a relationship that is based on a face-to-face encounter is what can save humanity from violence. In 1967, Jacques Derrida published an essay, “Violence and Metaphysics,”² in which he responded to Levinas and criticized him for committing ‘violence’ towards Greek *logos*. According to Derrida, Levinas’s philosophy is in contradiction with the premises of Greek philosophy and language. This paper examines both texts and further explores the question of violence.

I. The “Violences” there are.

It is a black and white picture with colors that are slightly faded, with low contrast. Below it, the caption reads as follows.

The façade of the Lycee de Ben Aknoun, a former monastery, near El_Biar. J. D. (Jacques Derrida) starts here in the first year, is expelled the following year (October 1942) with the application of anti-Jewish laws. The school is transformed into a military hospital on the arrival of the Allies. J. D. joins the school again after the war and finishes his secondary school there. (Bennington)³

The picture and the above text printed on one of the pages of *Jacques Derrida* by Geoffrey Bennington, a text that documents the “logic” of Jacques Derrida by entering all of his philosophic texts into a computer program then commanding the program to process the information and “produce” a summary of his philosophy without quoting one single sentence from any of his writings. Parallel to Geoffrey Bennington’s text, below it, on the same pages, Jacques Derrida writes his own memoir, an autobiographical philosophic text. Until both drafts of text, Bennington’s and Derrida’s, go into print, both “writers” are ignorant of what the other has written. The memoirs which *seemingly* refer to thoughts, incidents and emotions that shaped Derrida’s life in many ways add another layer to the philosophic text above; another layer that

¹Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer: Boston, 1991

²Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics”. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

³Bennington, Geoffrey & Jacques Derrida. *Jacques Derrida*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. London: Chicago Press. 1991, p 57

we will see dealt with, albeit in a different manner, in his “academically philosophic” writings. In memoir 11, he refers to the incident of being expelled from school. He says:

...I am addressing myself here to God, the only one I take as witness, without yet knowing what these sublime words mean, and this grammar, and *to*, and *witness*, and God and take, take God, and not only do I pray, as I have never stopped doing all my life, and pray to him, but I take him here, and take him as my witness, I give myself what he gives me, i.e., the i.e. to take the time to take God as a witness to ask him ... why I talk to him in Christian Latin French when they expelled me from the Lycée de Ben Aknoun in 1942 a little black and a very Arab Jew who understood nothing about it, and to whom no one ever gave the slightest reason...⁴

As I am sitting here, in this one-room studio by the beach in Sinai, the land of *hospitality*⁵, news of two bombs detonating in two churches on Palm Sunday⁶, one in Tanta (where one of my current students, a Christian, comes from) and another in Alexandria, my hometown, reach me. Forty-five people, Christians, Copts, Egyptians are dead. Fearing for my student, I email his classmates asking them for news of him; thankfully, he is fine; physically fine, that is to say. A few days ago, I walked into my early morning class after having viewed the images of a Syrian father, closely holding the bodies of his two children; they had died because of chemical bomb attacks on the Syrian town of Khan Sheikhoun. As I was looking at the youthful faces of my students, I questioned what one teaches on days like this; what methodology would enable me to “roll the ... overwhelming question”, “squeeze[] the universe into a ball”⁷. “How are your essays coming along?” I need to say. The movie *Yume (Dreams)*⁸ by Kurasawa, depicts his “real” dreams throughout his life. In the dream “The Weeping Demon”, we see a man, wearing a suit and carrying a briefcase, as if returning from work, roaming in what appears to be a post-apocalyptic wilderness. He meets a demon who claims to have once been a man, but a war, a nuclear war, destroyed plants and animals and caused men to grow horns. The horns are very painful; they cause them to hit their heads against the ground, the walls, all night.

⁴*ibid*, p. 56

⁵In “A Word of Welcome” Derrida makes a reference to the section on “Hospitality” in *Totality and Infinity*, in which Levinas identifies Sinai as the land of hospitality; hospitality being associated with the feminine. Derrida, Jacques. “A word of Welcome” *Adieu Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas. Stanford: California. 1999, p. 66.

⁶Palm Sunday marks the first day of the Holy week, the last week of Lent, celebrated in all Christendom. In Egypt, Palm Sunday is a day when Coptic Christians go to church to mark the day.

⁷Quotes are from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Eliot.

⁸*Yume, (Dreams)* by Akira Kurasawa (1990)

Stanford Encyclopedia documents that Jacques Derrida was born (with the birth name of Jacqui Elie Derrida) into a Sephardic Jewish family, originally from Toledo, Spain, in Algeria. His family were naturalized when the French government granted citizenship in 1870, after the *Cremieux Decree*, to the Jews of Algeria⁹. As an adult, Jacqui changed his name to the “proper” French name of “Jacques”.

Emmanuel Levinas, a Jew born in the Ukraine, was born Emmanuallis, the Ukrainian version of his name. He also changed his name to its French version “Emmanuel” after he became a naturalized French citizen in 1931.

To what extent, if at all, do histories, our personal narratives, dictate how we view the world? To what extent are our philosophies and the trajectories we follow in life dictated by the times and places in which we live? To what extent are we held hostage to our histories, including the history of our “names”? During my encounters with both of them, Derrida and Levinas, I was haunted with the “phenomenology” involved in thinking, making, philosophy. Is it coincidental that both Derrida and Levinas are preoccupied with the question of violence and both seek answers to their questions within the realm of Greek philosophy, even if they follow different trajectories? For Levinas, violence, is what one people inflicts on another; it is what forces people to “play roles in which they can no longer recognize themselves, makes[s] them betray ... their own substance... [and] destroy every possibility for action.”¹⁰ In the introduction to *Totality and Infinity*, he says that it is “prophetic eschatology”¹¹ that can save us from war and violence, for only eschatology can “superpose itself upon the ontology of war.”¹² On the other hand, Derrida relates to violence in a different manner; for he views the source of violence to be language itself. It is the limitations that language inflicts on thought that Derrida considers to be violent. In “Violence and Metaphysics”, Derrida explains that *logos*, which is Greek at its origin, is what restrains thought. In his philosophic writings, Derrida attempts to follow a ‘trace’ of Greek thought, *logos*, at its origin; reading between the lines and in the margins, deciphering the thought; not to destroy it but rather to free it. His philosophy, referred to as deconstruction, implies that only by criticizing the thought from within the thought, can the thought stay alive. In

⁹Jacques Derrida. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/>

¹⁰Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer: Boston, 1991, p21.

¹¹*ibid*, p 22.

¹²*ibid*, p. 22.

“Changing One’s Heritage,” he describes himself as an “heir”¹³ of Greek thought, an heir who “dreads fixation on the past, nostalgia and remembrance.”¹⁴ To deconstruct Greek thought at its root is the only way to avoid the violence inflicted by *logos*, i.e. language, on human beings.

II. Levinas’s “Infinitely Other” and the Violence of Totality

In his essay “Faith and Knowledge”¹⁵, Derrida addresses the question of religion, something he had not done in any of his earlier writings. He reports within the body of “Faith and Knowledge” on how when approached by the co-organizer of the conference about a theme for the conference, he *responded* without thinking or hesitating: “religion.” The time, political and religious, during which the conference took place was indeed full of strife; on the one hand, Europe was still recuperating from the fall of the wall and the wars that raged in the Balkans, the Second *intifada* (political uprising) in Palestine was at its peak; and, maybe, of direct relevance to Derrida, a civil war was taking its toll on all political and religious factions in Algeria.¹⁶ Thus, “Faith and Knowledge”, which appears originally in French in 1996 and in English in 1998, needs to be contextualized within those conflicts, for it pins a discourse, a way of speech regarding religion that has prevailed in the world since the mid-seventies with the internationalization of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and that culminated in the bombing of the twin towers in 2001; all this against the backdrop of globalization that Derrida refers to as *globalatinization*; a term of his own coinage.

Derrida, in “Faith and Knowledge” relates what he calls the “return of religions”¹⁷, (for “how dare we speak of [religion] in the singular without fear and trembling...?”¹⁸) to the thoughts of Kant, Hegel and Heidegger, without necessarily embedding his thoughts within theirs. In the backstage of Derrida’s text, is, amongst several figures, Levinas, for even though Derrida mentions Levinas only twice within the body of the text and only in relevance to minor points,

¹³Derrida Jacques & Elisabeth Roudinesco “Choosing One’s Heritage”. *For What Tomorrow*. Translated by Jeff Fort. Stanford: California. 2004. p 3.

¹⁴*ibid*, p 4.

¹⁵Derrida Jacques. “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion”. Translated by Samuel Weber. In *Acts of Religion*. Editor Jil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 2002.

¹⁶Among the chapters in *Acts of Religion*, there is a chapter with the title “Taking A Stand for Algeria,” in which Derrida comments on the civil war taking place in Algeria at the time.

¹⁷Derrida Jacques. “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion”. Translated by Samuel Weber. In *Acts of Religion*. Editor Jil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 2002. p 45.

¹⁸*ibid*. p 42.

the absence of Levinas from the arguments Derrida makes on religion, this absence itself indicates a presence. For the absence of the presence is a presence, Derrida taught us. At the beginning of his “speech” delivered on the Italian island of Capri, Derrida tells us that when people speak of “religion”, they speak of Christianity, housed within Italy, that is, Europe. The attendees of the conference where he is giving the speech, he notes, are speakers of German, Spanish, French and Italian; which are all predominantly Christian cultures, “barely even a Judeo-Christian.”¹⁹ Derrida, one of the most important thinkers of modern France, thus, chooses to speak about religion, in a community of “European philosophers” who speak different versions of Latin²⁰, when almost twenty years earlier, specifically in 1967, he published his text “Violence and Metaphysics” in which he criticized Emmanuel Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity*, a book in which Levinas develops his theory of ethics as First philosophy.

According to Levinas, man is in a relationship with an “infinitely other”, a term that he borrows from Descartes and which refers to a “supremely perfect being” that “overflows thought.”²¹ The “infinitely other” is described as an other who is not ego, (and also not interior) not alter ego, an other who defies “thematization”, who overflows the idea of an “infinitely other”. The “infinitely other”, the “absolutely other” who is both absent and present, looks at me, in a face-to-face encounter. Through his glance, I am summoned, prior to even thinking, to assume responsibility towards that other who is not me, myself, not my alter ego, and not the same. I am separated by a distance that cannot be traversed; for it is this absolute separation, this distance that keeps me close to *him*²². My relationship with the other is not based on need; for need implies that I “use” the other, consume the other to serve my needs, the way we usually consume other people, or objects, to serve a specific purpose and hence make the other ‘same’, which according to Levinas is totalizing, that is, violence. When I consume the other, make them “me” or “mine” and in turn assume “knowledge” of the other, make them part of my *world*, in a totality; by doing so, I am *violating* their “infinity”, “alterity.” What I consume in need, what

¹⁹Derrida Jacques. “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion”. Translated by Samuel Weber. In *Acts of Religion*. Editor Jil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 2002. p 45.

²⁰It might be of relevance to note that those languages are not all “Latin” in origin as Derrida says; for he, most probably, is not referring to the linguistic families of the languages he lists, but rather to the cultures to which those languages belong to. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger states that German, along with Greek “in regards the possibilities of thinking, is at once the most powerful and the most spiritual of languages.” p 62

²¹Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer: Boston, 1969, p 25.

²²I am using the generic pronoun “him” to refer to the “infinitely other” whenever the sentence structure requires it as to to avoid, the sometimes, cumbersome political correct terms of “her” or “them”.

I use to serve me, what I can traverse a distance towards and hence become close to, what I can “know” is not an ‘other’ but a ‘same’. The same, that I can know, that can be consumed by me and that I can reach, becomes part of my world. But I find myself also in relation, an intentional relation with an “infinitely other” who overflows, in “desire”; the more I desire, the more distance keeps us apart and it is this distance, this separateness, that maintains desire. The “infinitely other” cannot be consumed by me; hence he can never become part of me, can never be same; he will always remain other, “infinitely other.”

It is this face-to-face encounter with the absolutely other, this summoning that is based on “desire”, a desire that quenches itself on the fact that it is never gratified by what it desires, that can lead us to avoid violence. This relationship with the “infinitely other,” a relationship of desire, is what leads, in Levinas’s view, to ethics. In “God and Philosophy”, Levinas says,

Ethics is not a moment of being, it is otherwise and better than being; the very possibility of the beyond. In this ethical turnabout, in this reference [*renvoi*] from the desirable to the Undesirable, in this strange mission commanding the approach to the other, God is pulled out of objectivity, out of presence and out of being. He is neither object nor interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility- the non-erotic *par excellence* – for the other. And it is from the analysis just carried out that God is not simply the “first other”, or the “other *par excellence*,” or the absolutely other,” but other than the other, other otherwise, and other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical obligation to the other and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence.²³

Levinas’s ethics as first philosophy should not be confused with Descartes’s third meditation concerning the proof of the existence of God. Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* operates within the premise of ontology as First philosophy. Descartes’s starting point is the ego. If *I* think then *I* exist. Levinas’s ethics as First philosophy, on the other hand, begins with the other, the “infinitely other” who summons me. In this summoning, in the face-to-face encounter with the other, I realize my existence, my humanity. So unlike Descartes, Levinas’s ethics as First philosophy does not start with the ego, with the self, but with the other. It is through ethics, through my encounter with the other, that I can recognize my existence and humanity.

²³Levinas, Emmanuel. “God and Philosophy” In. *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Translated by Bettina Bergo. California: Stanford University Press, 1998. p 69.

In the process of explaining his “First philosophy”, Levinas situates his ideas within Greek ontology and metaphysics while simultaneously launching an attack against “the two Greeks”²⁴ Husserl and Heidegger, claiming their responsibility for “casting a movement of beings hitherto anchored in ... identity, a mobilization of absolutes ... from which there is no escape.”²⁵ As Derrida explains, Levinas believes that because ontology and phenomenology are not “respectful” of “Being and meaning of the other,”²⁶ they would be philosophies of violence.

Totality and Infinity calls for a “return” to prophetic eschatology to save humanity from the “ontology of totality,” for for Levinas, theology “complete[s]”²⁷ philosophy and does not need to be “assimilated”²⁸ within it. However, it needs to be strongly emphasized that Levinas does not reject Western philosophy; for he situates his “logic” of the “infinitely other” within phenomenology and ontology; but he does not stop there, for within his arguments, he simultaneously challenges those philosophies by trying to prove that both phenomenology and ontology, by virtue of them being philosophies of “being”, of “ego”, inflict violence on being and possibly on philosophy itself, for they “reduce the other to the same.”²⁹ The relationship with the other then becomes a relationship with the same, a relationship that does not require one to act in an ethical manner towards the other, for the other is same. Levinas refers to this relationship, towards the other as same, as one of “injustice” and “power.”³⁰ He explains in “God and Philosophy” that Western philosophy celebrates thought as long as it does not “have to think beyond that which belongs to the “gesture or movement of being [*geste d’etre*]”; or at least not to have to think beyond that which modifies a previous adherence to the “gesture of being.”³¹ Rationality is not an attribute that follows or is a consequence of the “gesture of being” but is rather an expression of it.

²⁴Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics”. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. p 83.

²⁵Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer: Boston, 1991, p 21.

²⁶Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics”. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. p 91.

²⁷Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer: Boston, 1991, p22.

²⁸*ibid*, p 22.

²⁹*ibid*, p 46.

³⁰*ibid*. Levinas uses those two terms separately on pages 46 & 47.

³¹Levinas, Emmanuel. “God and Philosophy” In. *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Translated by Bettina Bergo. California: Stanford University Press, 1998 p 55.

One wonders about the “rationale” for positioning one’s thoughts within a philosophy that one strongly criticizes. Why does Levinas accept that he situates what he terms “rational theology” within a philosophy that admits to nothing beyond rationality? Does one remain hostage to the name one carries, whether the name is given or “taken up?”

Derrida is critical of Levinas since he claims to be “contesting”³² the rules of “formal logic” at its “roots.” For Derrida, those roots are “not only the root of our language but the root of all of Western philosophy.”³³ Levinas commits “violence” to his thoughts, according to Derrida, by attempting to position them within western metaphysics and ontology. He says:

... this impossibility of translating my relations to the “Other” into the rational coherence of language – this contradiction and this impossibility are not the signs of “irrationality”: they are the sign, rather, that one may no longer draw inspiration from *within* the coherence of the *logos*, but that thought is stifled in the region of the origin of language and difference. This origin, as the concrete condition of *rationality*³⁴, is nothing less than “irrational,” but it could not be “included” in language as dialogue and difference. This origin, as the concrete condition of rationality, is nothing less than “irrational,” but it could not be included in language.³⁵

In order to understand Derrida’s objections to and “unease” with Levinas’s ideas, a quick overview of modern Western philosophy might be helpful; for then it might be clear in which ways Levinas challenges philosophy, and in turn language, Western and Greek, at its roots, as Derrida argues.

III. Situating Levinas’s Philosophy within Phenomenology and Ontology

Edmund Husserl’s introduction of the “science” of phenomenology in his text *Ideen*³⁶ (Ideas 1), published in 1913, is one of the most important developments of Western philosophy in modern times. Through his method of bracketing (setting aside all of one’s beliefs concerning a specific phenomenon in order to examine the way this phenomenon presents itself to consciousness), Husserl attempted to discover how the world appears to consciousness, that is, how we perceive the world, beings, for he expounded that our consciousness experiences phenomena we

³²Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics”. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p 91.

³³*ibid*, p 91.

³⁴Italics mine.

³⁵Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics”. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p 128.

³⁶Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas I*. Translated by Daniel O. Dahlstrom. Hackett: Cambridge. 2014.

encounter in a way that does not necessarily correlate with “the nature of things in themselves,”³⁷ a question that has beguiled Greek philosophy since its inception. In *Cartesian Meditations*, a text in which Husserl elaborates on his theory of phenomenology, he says:

...[B]y my living, by my experiencing, thinking, valuing and acting, I can enter no world other than the one that gets its sense and acceptance or status (*Sinn and Geltung*) in and from me, myself. If I put myself above all this life and refrain from doing any believing that takes “the” world straightforwardly as existing – if I direct my regard exclusively to this life itself, as consciousness of “the” word – I thereby acquire myself as the pure ego, with the pure stream of my *cogitationes*.³⁸

Through my consciousness of the world, my “intentionality” towards the world, the world of my experience becomes the world “there is” for me. That is, the only “world”, the “true” world for me is the world of my experience regardless of the world “there is” (and/or might be) outside my personal experience. Thus, phenomenology, as propounded by Husserl, implicitly refutes Descartes’s Third Meditation regarding the existence of God.³⁹ Because Levinas’s ethics as First philosophy concerns itself with the other, our intentionality towards the other, it is closer to phenomenology (despite Levinas’s criticism of phenomenology) than it is to Descartes’s meditations.

Descartes’s Third Meditation concludes that the assurance of my existence comes from the *cogito*, my awareness that I think and doubt. In order for me to think that I exist, then I must have a consciousness that allows this thought. In turn, if my thoughts are “informing” me of the existence of a God, a “perfect being” that I have not experienced myself or have no knowledge of, then this thought of the existence of a God must have been placed in me by that “perfect being” himself. In the Third Meditation, Descartes says,

Nor can we suppose that several causes may have concurred in my production, and that from one I have received the idea of one of the perfections which I attribute to God, and from another the idea of some other, so that all these perfections indeed exist somewhere in

³⁷Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Translated by Dorian Carns, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999, p 12.

³⁸Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Translated by Dorian Carns, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999, p 21.

³⁹Descartes, Rene. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Translated by John Cottingham. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.

the universe, but not as complete in one unity which is God. On the contrary, the unity, the simplicity or the inseparability of all things which are in god is one of the principal perfections which I conceive to be in Him. And certainly the idea of this unity of all Divine perfections cannot have been placed in me by any cause from which I have not likewise received the ideas of all the other perfections; for this cause could not make me able to comprehend them as joined together in an inseparable unity without having at the same time caused me in some measure to know what they are [and in some way to recognize each one of them] ⁴⁰

Descartes's seminal work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, published in 1641, follows a series of syllogisms, in the Aristotelian manner, to deduce his five "meditations", that is, the five propositions that he proves in the text. Needless to say, this book, in spite of its relevance to modern philosophic discourse poses questions in terms of the logic that Descartes pursues.

In many ways, Levinas's philosophy of ethics builds upon Descartes's thoughts even though it should not be confused with it. For Descartes, ontology is First philosophy. On the farthest end of Descartes, "transcendental Phenomenology"; a term that describes how phenomenology explains the way our minds interpret the objects that are given to us, is in conflict with Descartes's theory. Descartes Third Meditation proves that the idea of God is placed in me by God himself. That means that there is no phenomenon of God, a sensual experience of God that one can experience. God is not a phenomenon that we can encounter in our everyday existence, in our world of representation. Hence, according to transcendental phenomenology, we cannot claim that God exists. Transcendental phenomenology builds on Kant's philosophy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁴¹ In the section entitled Transcendental Dialectic, which falls under Transcendental Logic, Kant explains that in order for us to "know" or understand something, this needs to appear to us in our phenomenal experience, and that when we apply reason to experiences that are not within our reach, not within our world of phenomena, we cannot claim that we "know" them. Kant refers to claims of knowledge that are beyond the scope of reason as "logic of illusion."⁴² It is this position of Kant which implies that concepts do not entail knowledge of an object. This means that as long as we don't have an "intuition" of an object, even if we have a concept of what this "intuition" is - for example the way we may have a

⁴⁰*ibid*, p. 18

⁴¹Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer & Allred W. Wood. Cambridge 2009.

⁴²*ibid*, A63/B88. p 199.

concept of the soul but not an “intuition” of it - then we cannot claim that this object exists; we cannot claim that the soul exists nor that God exists, for we don’t have “intuitions” of those concepts. We can only claim knowledge of an object if we have both a concept and an intuition of that object.

With Kant’s publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, more than 100 years after the publication of *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes’s Third Meditation proving the existence of God could no longer maintain validity. Phenomenology, conversely, builds on the ideas of Kant; only, it asserts that the experience of the world is “subjective”, rather than objective, while maintaining itself as a science. In the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl maintains that our subjective experience of the world is anything but chaotic. In the Second Meditation, Husserl states:

Transcendental subjectivity is not a chaos of intentional processes. Moreover, it is not a chaos of types of constitution, each organized in itself by its relation to a kind or a form of intentional objects. In other words: the *allness* of objects and types of objects conceivable for me – transcendently speaking: for me as transcendental ego – is no chaos; and correlatively the allness of the types of the of infinite multiplicities, the types corresponding to types of objects, is not a chaos either; noetically and noematically those multiplicities always belong together, in respect of their possible synthesis.⁴³

Thus phenomenology maintains that our subjective experiences of the world are synthesized in a manner that renders an “allness” to the world. Our subjective experiences are not random; they correspond in a way that creates the world as a whole.

It is in view of those philosophies that we need to understand Derrida’s objections to Levinas’s ethics as First philosophy. The “infinitely other,” according to Levinas, is not part of my world; the ego and the “infinitely other” cannot be “together” in a totality; they are separate and remain in their separateness; they are not within each other’s reach. The ego cannot “know” the “infinitely other”, for this other is beyond knowing, for to “know” the “infinitely other” implies that the “infinitely other” is part of my world, within reach, and hence falls into the realm of the ideal. The “infinitely other” is not a transcendental phenomenon and hence does not fall within the realm of phenomenology. Phenomenology assumes that once an object is part of our

⁴³Husserl, Edmund. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Translated by Dorian Carns, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999, p 54.

experience, then we can claim that we “know” the object, that it is an ideal, and in that case it ceases to be “other” and is reduced to the same, an ego; it becomes part of me, something within “me” (interior) rather than an “absolute other” that I cannot “integrate” within me, that does not become part of me in a totality.

If our knowledge of the world, if our perception of it is based on our experience, then this in turn implies, according to Levinas, that we, as entities, “take the world in,” make it ours, in a “totality.” We use the world around us to serve us so that it ultimately becomes ours. This act of consumption is what creates totality, which is definitive violence for Levinas. To make something mine implies first the belief that I “know” it. It is by assuming that knowledge that I deprive the “infinitely other” of its alterity. I dispossess it of what is integral to it, its absolute alterity that is beyond knowledge and beyond consumption. The “infinitely other” cannot be consumed; it cannot become part of who we are in a “totality.” The “infinitely other” is not a thought, not a concept to contemplate (and definitely not an “intuition” in the Kantian sense of the term), for I have no concept and no thought regarding it. Even though Levinas’s description of the face-to-face encounter with the “other” implies the exchange of a glance, a concept that is key to our understanding of phenomenology as expounded by Husserl and later developed by Heidegger and Sartre, yet Levinas seems to imply a Cartesian understanding of this intentionality, an intentionality that was placed within me by the “infinitely other,” who is beyond my grasp.

Derrida claims that Levinas’s concept of “phenomenology” with reference to the “infinitely other” suspends “formal logic,” for it contradicts the foundations of Western philosophy which is based on concepts of representation and of the ideal. Derrida expresses his concern when he says:

At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of mantling and dispossession.

1. In Greek, in our language, in the language rich with all the alluvia of its history ...this thought summons us to to a dislocation of Greek *logos*, to a dislocation of our identity...; it summons us to depart from the Greek site... and to move toward what is no longer a source or a site, but towards an exhalation, toward a prophetic speech already emitted not only nearer to the source than Plato or the pre-Socratics, but inside the Greek origin, close

to the other of the Greek...A thought [that] seeks to liberate itself from the Greek domination of the Same and the One...⁴⁴

Derrida explains that if the “infinitely other” defies representation; that is, is not a phenomenon that is to be experienced, then it is a “nonphenomenon,”⁴⁵ hence, we cannot speak of an “other”; for the whole trajectory of Western philosophy, based on the concept of “platonian light” and representation, would falter. It would not be possible and there would be no “language” to account for it. For Levinas, an object, an ego, a same, is an “other” that I have an intentionality towards; that is, an “other” to be consumed in a totality, to become part of “my world.” It is because of this that he claims Husserl’s phenomenology to be violent.

The “phenomenology” that Levinas describes is, however, one which has an “intentionality” that is directed towards not what one needs and hence can consume in a totality, but rather an “intentionality” of desire, where there is no consumption and where the “infinitely other” never becomes “my world,” my phenomenological world, that is. I meet the “infinitely other” in a face-to-face encounter, in a “relationship” of desire, a relationship where there is separateness and distance that is not a distance of space or time, a distance that is not to be traversed, for it is this distance, this separateness that maintains the desire for the “infinitely other.” The “phenomenology of the infinitely other” thus allows for fecundity, hospitality and fraternity. In this face-to-face-encounter, I am held responsible towards the “infinitely other” in an ethical relationship.

Levinas’s philosophy of ethics also implies a break with Heidegger, at least where ontology, according to Levinas, precedes metaphysics. For Levinas, ontology is violent because it subordinates the “relation of *someone*, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being of existents*, which ... subordinates justice to freedom.”⁴⁶ In his seminal work, *Being and Time*⁴⁷, Heidegger designates the modes of *Dasein*, the German for “being there.” The

⁴⁴Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics”. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p 83.

⁴⁵Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics”. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p 91. According to Derrida, the term “nonphenomenon” is used on purpose to imply an object that does not fall within the realm of phenomena; that is, it does not fall within the dichotomy of phenomena and “no-phenomena.”

⁴⁶Levinas, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer: Boston, 1991, p 45.

⁴⁷Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: HarperCollins Publications, 2008.

most important aspect of these modes is what he calls “being-in-the-world.” “Being-in-the-world” is not something that *Dasein* sometimes has (or does not have at other times). By necessity, to refer to *Dasein* implies being, which in turn means being-in-the-world, participating in it and acting with or towards its beingness, the beingness of *Dasein* and the beingness of the world. *Dasein* in its “existence” is “open” to the world, ready to interact with beings “ready at hand.” This is the primary mode for beingness. Also, *Dasein* implies a “being-with” while, according to Levinas, one cannot “be” with the “infinitely other”. The criteria that Heidegger proposes poses a problem for Levinas. The “infinitely other” is not a “being,” for had it been a being, it would be the same and not “infinitely other” in that it would lose its absolute alterity. Also, if *Dasein*, is being-in-the-world, that is, has a relation with the beings of the world, while the “infinitely other” is not a being-in-the world, then how would a relation ensue, how would *Dasein* be open to “nonbeing;” that is, not “being-in-the-world”? Levinas’s phenomenology attempts to create a relationship with the “infinitely other” that is not being in Heidegger’s sense of beingness. For Levinas, when the conditions of a relationship with the other is a relationship of beingness, then it would be a relation of totality, for being-in-this-world implies, according to Levinas, a relation of “possession”⁴⁸ where the other becomes “mine”, where there is totality.

Does this “existent,” the “infinitely other”, that is, an existent *not being*, “be” as “first existent, the excellent and truly existent”⁴⁹ as Derrida notes? Derrida argues against Levinas by saying that, according to Heidegger, beingness is not a “predicate” but that which allows for predication. According to Derrida, Levinas’s discourse “places ethics under the heel of ontology,”⁵⁰ For Levinas, the “infinitely other” precedes ontology which is why he would most probably not object to Derrida’s accusation, for according to Levinas, ontology deprives the “known being [of]...its alterity.”⁵¹ Levinas describes that alterity

...may appear as a concept thought. Then the individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought. The third term maybe called sensation, in which objective quality and subjective affection are merged. It may appear as *Being* distinguished from the *existent*: Being which at the same time is not (that is, not posited as an existent) and yet corresponds to the work plied by the existent, which

⁴⁸Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer: Boston, 1991, p.45

⁴⁹Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics”. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p 137.

⁵⁰*ibid*, p135.

⁵¹*ibid*. p 42

is not a nothing. Being, which is *without the density of existents*⁵², is the light in which existents become intelligible.⁵³

As is clear, Levinas is attempting to create what he calls a “third term”, a term that is existent but not “dense” in the “physical” sense of the word, a term that is but is not, and most importantly, an “entity” that in spite of its being/nonbeing and existent/non-existent “nature” appears in the light, the light of Greek philosophy that designates beingness to existents. Derrida explains that to use language, philosophic language, that is, to speak and/or write, implies the copula (“is”); there is nothing prior or other than the copula; even when one is not speaking of being or using “being” as a copula, a copula is still implicit within all linguistic structures. For to speak about the “infinitely other,” there is an implication of “being.” Since the “infinitely other” “is,” one cannot escape beingness, ontology, if one is to use language at all.

IV. “*jewgreek greekjew*”

Levinas is indeed walking a very thin line within the folds of Greek philosophy to make the arguments he is presenting in *Totality and Infinity*; however, even if he breaks the rules of formal logic as Derrida accuses him of doing, he does so knowing that his ideas would still be accepted within philosophy. Levinas is shaking the shackles of ontology at its “roots” to allow for a discourse that he deems necessary. In the first paragraph of “God and Philosophy” and under the heading of “the Priority of Philosophical Discourse, and Ontology”, Levinas says,

“Not to philosophize is still to philosophize”. The philosophical discourse of the West asserts the amplitude of an all- inclusiveness [*englobe- ment*] or an ultimate comprehension. It compels every other discourse to justify itself before philosophy. Rational theology accepts this vassalage. If, for the benefit of religion, it pulls out some domain over which the supervision [*contrale*] of philosophy is not exercised, then this domain shall have been, on good grounds, recognized as philosophically unverifiable.⁵⁴

Here Levinas refers to his philosophy, ethics, as First philosophy, using the phrase “rational theology,” embedding his philosophy in a space, within philosophy, that is not utterly under the jurisdiction of philosophy and he does so for “the benefit of religion.”

⁵²my italics

⁵³Derrida, Jacques. “Violence and Metaphysics”. In *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, p 42.

⁵⁴Levinas, Emmanuel. “God and Philosophy” In. *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Translated by Bettina Bergo. California: Stanford University Press, 1998, p 55.

One needs to read Levinas's philosophy alongside his other line of writing: readings of Talmudic sermons. The first section of the introduction to *Nine Talmudic Readings* reads, "Translating into 'Greek.'⁵⁵ Annette Aronowicz, the translator of the text and the writer of the introduction, explains that Levinas's interpretations of those ancient texts read more like interpretations from an ancient language, ancient culture, into a language that a person who has been brought up in the Western world would understand; that is, Levinas "interprets" ancient Jewish texts for an ontologically Greek culture. Levinas lived during two world wars and was taken prisoner in the Second World War. Did he need to envision a world where one is not absolutely "Greek" or "Jew", or anything else for that matter, a world where one can be both Greek and Jew? In the last sentence of the last paragraph of "Violence and Metaphysics", Derrida, the "little black and a very Arab Jew," quotes from Joyce's *Ulysses*: "jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet," he says. The question of Jewishness vs. "Greekness", of which identity precedes the other (if it is possible for one to exist with the other at all let alone precede it), of the possibility of a reconciliation of both worlds seems to be a question that lingers, not only for Levinas and Derrida, but for those whose names, the multiple names they carry, bring this question to a stand.

Levinas was born in Lithuania to a Jewish family that practiced Judaism and spoke Hebrew at home. During the First World War, the family moved to Ukraine and Levinas attended a Russian school where he was introduced to Russian literature. When he was 16, he moved to France to attend the University of Strasbourg. So even though Levinas was brought up in a Jewish environment and spoke Hebrew at home, he was equally exposed to secular thoughts through his education. Before the Second World War, in 1928-1929, he enrolled in the University of Freiburg and studied with Husserl and Heidegger. It is within that same time frame, specifically in 1933, that Heidegger joined the Nazi party and became rector at Freiburg. Young Levinas found himself caught up in the war that drew closer. He was taken prisoner in 1940 and worked in a camp until his release at the end of the war.

V. *What is is to Philosophize?*

At the beginning of this paper, I posed the question of the relationship between the personal history of a philosopher and their philosophies, the milieu they live in and the ideas they choose

⁵⁵Levinas, Emmanuel. *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Translated by Annette Aronowicz. Indiana: Indianapolis University Press, 1994. P ix.

to believe in. Could we, possibly, have a better understanding of the question of violence if we follow that “trace?” Possibly. Levinas’s Talmudic writings concern themselves with bringing a “face” to the ancient texts so that they better address a modern readership versed in western thought, for he saw that forging a relationship between ancient Jewish sources and a Western audience might lead “one humanity to come to being.”⁵⁶ Levinas believed, according to his translator Aronowicz, that “Western wisdom” is not sufficient to create a world that is more humane, more equal and more responsible; hence the need for “Jewish wisdom.” His immediate audience was mostly Jewish as those lectures were delivered in the *Alliance Israelite Universelle*, a Jewish organization that created schools in neighborhoods where a majority of Jews lived. One of the objectives of those schools was to educate Jews in a way that would make them active citizens within the European community. Hence, Levinas’s lectures were appropriate for the mission of the school as they maintained Jewishness as an identity and also made Jewish teachings relevant to contemporary life.

When one reads Levinas’s references to God in his Talmudic texts, one finds that he refers to God in the same manner that he does with his philosophic writings. In “Toward the Other,”⁵⁷ he explains a quote from Mishna, a collection of oral teachings collected by Rabbi Judah Hanassi at the end of the second century CE. The section that Levinas sheds light on explains how God forgives those who wrong him but not those who wrong others except after they have asked for their (the others) forgiveness. According to Levinas, we are forgiven for wronging God because of God’s good will. Yet, God forgives us for the way we wrong others only when they have forgiven us. In his explanation, Levinas says that God forgives “in a sense, the other, *par excellence*, the other as other, absolutely other.”⁵⁸ There also seems to be little difference in the way Levinas approaches texts, whether philosophic or Talmudic.

Levinas’s interpretations of the Hebraic writings are based on his own “exertion.”⁵⁹ Aronowicz explains that he uses the term “solicitation” to refer to the methodology he uses to interpret text, a word which does not sound arduous in English the way it does in French; in English, one would use the term “wresting” or “squeezing” the text; or what Levinas himself

⁵⁶*ibid*, p xiii.

⁵⁷Levinas, Emmanuel. “Toward the Other”. In *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Translated by Annette Aronowicz. Indiana: Indianapolis University Press, 1994

⁵⁸Levinas, Emmanuel. *Nine Talmudic Readings*. Translated by Annette Aronowicz. Indiana: Indianapolis University Press, 1994, p.16.

⁵⁹*ibid*, p. xvii.

explains, quoting Rabbi of Haim Volozhin: “The embers light up when one blows upon them; the intensity of the flame that thus comes to life depends on the length of breath of the person who interprets”⁶⁰ (qtd. in *Readings of Nine Talmudic Sermons*). Even though this citation refers to his interpretations of Talmudic writings, Levinas uses the same strategy when “interpreting” philosophic texts - to “blow on” the text till it reveals the flame.

While Levinas’s “project” is to reveal the universality of ancient Judaic texts, he believes that texts from all traditions, if exposed to the same kind of interpretation, would reveal the universality of humans. It is this universality that Levinas is interested in, a universality that deludes both the “Greek” and the non-Greek, living side by side, sometimes in the same neighborhood but not speaking to one another. By speaking of the “infinitely other” within the folds of Greek metaphysics and by interpreting Jewish text to a Western-educated audience, Levinas might have wanted to reveal the manner in which different traditions contribute to whole understanding of humanity. Aronowicz explains Levinas’s approach as follows:

We must learn to assume that the other man is master, that he has something to say, that the relation to him points us in the direction of that which is true. Later, we can sort out, as indeed we *must* do, again and again, the problem of the One and the Many, what and how are the different specificities do indeed contribute to mankind.⁶¹

This attempt at finding the common grounds for humanity while acknowledging the differences, the “one” and “many,” needs to be acknowledged, brought to light. According to Levinas, one can understand the humanity of oneself only by understanding the humanity of the other. I recognize my humanity by realizing that the other has priority over me. In the Foreword *Humanism and the Other*⁶², Levinas writes:

... the otherness that infinitely obliges splits time with an unbridgeable *meantime*: “the one” *is* for the other of a being who lets go of itself (*se dé-prend*) without turning into a contemporary of “the other”, without taking place next to him in a synthesis exposing itself as a theme; the one-for-the-other as the-one-his-brother’s keeper, as the-one-responsible-for-the-other. Between the one that I am and the other for whom I answer gapes a bottomless difference, which is also the non-difference of responsibility, significance of signification, irreducible to any system whatsoever.⁶³

⁶⁰*ibid*, p xvii.

⁶¹*ibid*, p xxxi.

⁶²Levinas, Emmanuel. *Humanism of the Other*. Translated by Nidra Poler. University of Illinois, 2003

⁶³Levinas, Emmanuel. *Humanism of the Other*. Translated by Nidra Poler. University of Illinois, 2003. p 6.

Hence, Levinas's call for a universal understanding of humanity occurs within recognition that the other is not the same. The humanity that Levinas implies is one that is based on an ethical relationship and responsibility towards the other. By recognizing the other's humanity, I can experience my own humanity.

In many ways, Levinas's approach to the text, "squeezing" it till it reveals the flame, is also what Plato does in the Socratic dialogues. Ideas, words, concepts, are "squeezed" in a conversation with an other, in the hope of arriving at a common understanding of what the company is involved in discussing, maintaining the awareness of the differences the interlocutors may have among themselves, their multiplicity. But within this multiplicity, remains the attempt to arrive at a common understanding, a consensus.

In the Foreword to *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*⁶⁴, Levinas expresses how Judaism, after being influenced for centuries by European thought, attempted to return to its origins in the "aftermath of Hitler's exterminations."⁶⁵ Levinas belongs to a generation that lived in a milieu, a political milieu, along with Derrida, Heidegger and Sartre, that witnessed two world wars, or at least the outcomes of one and the flames of the other. It seems that philosophy did not provide an explanation, offer a solution, a solace, for the violence that prevailed in Europe during this period, a violence that was specifically inflicted on the Jews. This could be, at least partly, what lead Levinas to return to traditional Jewish texts hoping that those teachings would "respond to problems" that faced "Europocentric"⁶⁶ Jews. Aronowicz quotes Levinas,

Modern Jewish consciousness has become troubled. It does not doubt its destiny but cannot calmly witness the outrages overwhelming it. It has an almost instinctive nostalgia for the first, limpid sources for its inspiration. It must once gain draw its courage from it and again rediscover in it the certitude of its worth, its dignity and its mission.⁶⁷

The relationship between a philosopher and their philosophy cannot simply be explained by their life experiences, even if we admit that life experiences might play a role. No one knows that more than Derrida, who has sought to deconstruct the violence of naming. In "Of Spirit"⁶⁸,

⁶⁴Levinas, Emmanuel. "Forward". *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Anthlone: Paris. 1963.

⁶⁵*ibid*, p xiii

⁶⁶ In the Introduction to *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Levinas refers to himself as "Europocentric", for even though he is a Jew, yet his cultural affiliation is European.

⁶⁷*ibid*, xii

⁶⁸Derrida, Jacques. "Of Spirit". *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Winter, 1989), pp. 457-474. Web.

Derrida analyzes Heidegger's "Rectorship Address" from 1933, and tries to trace Heidegger's use of the word "spirit" (*Geist*). Derrida explains that Heidegger had consistently "avoided" using the word "spirit" in his writing until this address and that in the instances that he had used it, for example in *Being and Time*, he always placed it between quotation marks, for he tried to distance himself from the metaphysical or ontotheological associations of the word.

Derrida questions the reasons Heidegger changes his position. In the Rectorship Address, Heidegger speaks of his obligation to "guide" the university "spiritually" and that he himself is guided by an "inflexible spiritual mission."⁶⁹ The address echoes Nietzsche's fifth lecture at the University of Basel in Winter 1872⁷⁰ which Derrida also analyses in "Otobiographies."⁷¹ In his lecture, Nietzsche criticizes the state of the German university and attacks what calls itself "academic freedom." In one paragraph of the lecture he speaks about how students need a leader and how those who lead them need to have leaders themselves. He says,

For I repeat it, my friends! All culture begins with the very opposite of that which is now so highly esteemed as 'academic freedom': with obedience, with subordination, with discipline, with subjection. And as leaders must have followers so also must the followers have a leader—here a certain reciprocal predisposition prevails in the hierarchy of spirits: yea, a kind of pre-established harmony. This eternal hierarchy, towards which all things naturally tend, is always threatened by that pseudo-culture which now sits on the throne of the present. It endeavors either to bring the leaders down to the level of *its own* servitude or else to cast them out altogether. It seduces the followers when they are seeking their predestined leader, and overcomes them by the fumes of its narcotics. When, however, in spite of all this, leader and followers have at last met, wounded and sore, there is an impassioned feeling of rapture, like the echo of an eversounding lyre, a feeling which I can let you divine only by means of a simile.⁷²

Heidegger's address evokes similar emotions and exhibits a similar care for the future of the German people, their *Geist*, and the role the university plays in fostering this spirit. Already, the reference to Nietzsche, whose rhetoric was employed by the Nazi propaganda machine, is

⁶⁹*ibid*, p 465.

⁷⁰Nietzsche, Fredrick. "On the Future of Our Educational Institutions" Lecture 5. Basel Winter 1872. <http://www.thenietzschechannel.com/lectures/fed/fed-eng.htm>.

⁷¹Derrida Jacques. "Otobiographies" In *The Ear of the Other*. Translated by Avital Ronell, Schocken Books: New York. 1985.

⁷²Nietzsche, Fredrick. "On the Future of Our Educational Institutions" Lecture 5. Basel Winter 1872. <http://www.thenietzschechannel.com/lectures/fed/fed-eng.htm>

problematic, and this is what Derrida addresses in “Otobiography.” Does this not deter us from judging the choices that philosophers make and that we might find unexplainable? Two years after the “Rectorship Address”, in *Introduction to Metaphysics*.⁷³ and after he had resigned from the position of rector in Freiburg, Heidegger again uses the word spirit, albeit in a more “educational” tone. Heidegger speaks of the “spiritual decline”⁷⁴ of the people, a decline that was so overwhelming that it went unnoticed. Within the same context and in connection to the decline, he laments the “darkening of the world, the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the reduction of human beings to a mass... .”⁷⁵ The traces of Nietzsche remain.

The sentiment that Heidegger expresses, and which now seems to disassociate itself from the political dimension of the “Rectorship Address,” echoes what Levinas articulates in *Totality and Infinity*,

...violence does not consist so much in injuring and annihilating persons as in interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitment but their own substance, making them carry actions that will destroy every possibility for action.⁷⁶

Here Levinas explains the devastation that violence inflicts on its victims, but he specifically speaks of how “playing roles” that one does not identify with is also a violent act. How can we be saved? To think of ethics as First philosophy, to put metaphysics prior to ontology, to create a space for the “infinitely other” within the creeds of Greek metaphysics and simultaneously interpret ancient Jewish to a non-Jewish audience might curb this violence. In many ways this resembles Heidegger’s attempt to save the German people from “spiritual decline”⁷⁷ by reinterpreting pre-Socratic philosophy into German, to retrieve its ‘*Geist*’ that was lost when it was translated it into Latin.

⁷³Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. London: Yale University Press, 2014.

⁷⁴*ibid.* p 42.

⁷⁵*ibid.* p 42

⁷⁶Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Kluwer: Boston, 1991, p 21.

⁷⁷Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. London: Yale, p 42.

VI. Deconstructing Derrida

Derrida has “constructed” his philosophic discourse upon deciphering and demarcating the philosophic ideas of others and on finding different ways to read those texts. Geoffrey Bennington’s *Jacques Derrida*⁷⁸ provides an explanation for deconstruction:

... deconstruction is not something that someone does to metaphysics, nor something that metaphysics does to *itself*. If things have “gone wrong” ..., this is neither because a catastrophe external to its system has come to spread trouble and ruin in it, nor because metaphysics has more or less slowly rotted according to a law of internal decline: on the contrary, *metaphysics only subsisted from its very beginnings through this deconstruction*. It lives in it before dying of it, or, rather, it lives in it only by dying of it. Metaphysics lives only in what we have imprudently called incoherence: we do not have the means to correct this incoherence. In following ... through metaphysics, we have been obliged to borrow all our language and criteria of coherence ... we are working in a milieu where possibility and impossibility imply one another, in a complexity that we are only beginning to glimpse.⁷⁹

Levinas’s ethics as First philosophy seems to be in line with what Derrida describes above: “borrow[ing] ... language and criteria of coherence... working in a milieu where possibility and impossibility imply one another.” What sets them apart is that Derrida attempts through deconstruction to find the cracks within metaphysics, where the logic falters. Levinas, on the other hand, “reinterprets” metaphysics in a way that makes it possible for ethics as First philosophy to precede ontology.

Bennington analyzes metaphysics in the above citation as a philosophy that contains the seeds of its deconstruction within it and indicates that because of this specific capacity, or quality, the capacity for “*de-construct-ion*”, where the “de” implies “undoing”, or “unravelling”, and the “construct” necessitates creating and building, that it is pertinent to the present day. Metaphysics stays relevant because of its capacity to be “reinterpreted.” Levinas’s project of “interpreting” the Talmudic texts, echoes the same concept. Aronowicz, the translator of Nine Talmudic Texts describes in her introduction how Levinas’s “translations”⁸⁰ are written in a humorous manner and reference contemporary jokes and events. The capacity of a text or idea to

⁷⁸Bennington, Geoffrey & Jacques Derrida. *Jacques Derrida*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. London: Chicago Press. 1991.

⁷⁹*ibid.* p 38.

⁸⁰I am using here the term translation to mean both translation and interpretation.

relate to a milieu other than the milieu in which it was originally created in and to address an audience other than the audience it was intended for, to have within its fabric the grain of its own “destruction” and “construction”, to rise again, might imply this capacity is engrained within the fabric of the text or idea.

Derrida speaks of the “return of religion” and the “machine for the making of gods” in the words of Bergson in “Faith and Knowledge” (qtd. in Derrida)⁸¹. The title of the text, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” pays homage to two texts, for the first part of the title “Faith and Knowledge” refers to a text published under the same title by Hegel in 1802. The second part of the title; “Within the Limits of Reason Alone,” references an important book by Kant that carries the same name and in which he explains his theory of religion as a lived experience, rather than a belief in the divine or a dogma, and its impact on humanity. Derrida’s referencing of those two books already tells us something about the position he intends to take, for he does not go into “conflict” with the ideas presented by Hegel and Kant in their respective writings. What he does, what he consistently does, is “reread” the ideas presented in those texts and deconstruct them in light of a pertinent contemporary discourse. Derrida’s title seemingly insinuates the never-ending conflict between faith in a God, “the holy, safe, sound, unscathed, immune, sacred – in a word everything that translates *heilig*,”⁸² and assuredness in an objective science as spearheaded by the Enlightenment, between “revelation” and “revealability.”⁸³ However, what Derrida addresses is the manipulation, the use of those terms, “holy, safe, sound, unscathed, immune, sacred – in a word *heilig*,” and the concepts that belie them to serve the “tele-technoscientific machine,”⁸⁴ a term that Derrida coins to refer to the world in its current state: global, market-oriented, immune, capitalistic and dogmatic.

Derrida warns us that the tele-technoscientific machine has rallied all members of the world community and conspired with what calls itself “religion” offering the “consumers”, the “Anglo-American consumers,” and Europeans, those who speak Latin, but who also, at least partly, belong to the globalized Anglo-American culture, protection. This protection has been

⁸¹Derrida Jacques. “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion”. Translated by Samuel Weber. In *Acts of Religion*. Editor Jil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 2002, p 77.

⁸²*ibid*, p 84.

⁸³Those are the terms used by Derrida in “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion”. Translated by Samuel Weber. In *Acts of Religion*. Editor Jil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 2002, p 46.

⁸⁴*ibid*, p 84.

so far within the jurisdiction of religion. What now calls itself “religion,” what is currently being propagated as religion, is not the same as the religion that “held sway”⁸⁵ against the rule of what termed itself “objective knowledge” during Enlightenment. People are being sold an “immunity”, the immunity granted by the “holy, sacred, safe, unscathed, *heilig*,” only they are offered an immunity that does not involve the “sacrifice” that is usually required by “religion.” Religion, traditional religion, requires us to pray, to sacrifice in order to maintain safety and immunity; this new religion requires us to sacrifice the sacrifice, to sacrifice all that is holy, to violate the laws of sacrifice, the laws of faith in order to have access to this new form of immunity.

In attempting to find a way out of the problematic the world faces with regard to the “return of religion,” Derrida reviews the ideas of Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. In one section of the text, he speaks about the relationship between philosophy and religion:

In its most abstract form... the aporia within which we are struggling would perhaps be the following: is revealability (*Offenbarkeit*) more originary than revelation (*Offenbarung*), and hence independent of all religion? Independent of the structures of its experience and in the analytics relating to them? Is this not the place which “reflecting faith” at least originates, if not this faith itself? Or rather, would the event of revelation have consisted in revealing revealability itself and the origin of light, the originary light, the very invisibility of visibility?⁸⁶

It is clear that Derrida perceives philosophy, in spite of its apparent failure at saving the world from its current state of evil, to be still capable of providing answers, for at least philosophy does not relate itself to any dogma, something which he recognizes as one of the problems of religion. Derrida seems to perceive religious dogma to be at least partly responsible for the “violence” that the world is witnessing. For Derrida, “reflecting faith,” one of the “two families of religion”⁸⁷ as described by Kant in *Within the Limits of Religion Alone*,⁸⁸ seems to be the better option for combating the “radical evil which seems to mark our time as no other,”⁸⁹ for it “agrees with the

⁸⁵The expression “held sway” is an expression that Heidegger uses repeatedly in *Introduction to Metaphysics* and other texts.

⁸⁶Derrida Jacques. “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion”. Translated by Samuel Weber. In *Acts of Religion*. Editor Jil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 2002, p 55.

⁸⁷*ibid*, p 49.

⁸⁸Kant, Immanuel, *Within Limits of Religion Alone*, 1793. Web.

⁸⁹Derrida Jacques. “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion”. Translated by Samuel Weber. In *Acts of Religion*. Editor Jil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 2002, p 43.

rationality of purely practical reason”⁹⁰ and prescribes that one needs to be “good” prior to anything else. It does not make claims about any specific religious belief and hence avoids falling into two traps, that of being “irrational” and that of being dogmatic.

Nowhere in “Faith and Knowledge” does Derrida make any reference to Levinas’s philosophy. By not making a reference, one assumes that he does not make a shift in the position he made in “Violence and Metaphysics” regarding how the eschatology Levinas insinuates within the arguments of *Totality and Infinity* breaks the rules of formal logic. However, within the folds of “Faith and Knowledge,” one finds multiple “hidden” references to Judaic beliefs, among other references to the problematics he sees with the “gathering” in which he is participating with his talk. The talk/text is divided into three parts and a total of 52 sections divided among those three parts.

The title of the first section is “Italics” and the whole text of this part of the article is typed in italics, making a reference to the fact that the lecture is being presented in Capri, Italy, and hence the use of italics, i.e., “Italy,” the country that houses the epicenter of Christendom, the home of the Vatican. The use of the italics font throughout this part of the article seems to fulfill two functions. First we are asked to take note of the use of the italics font and relate it to the arguments Derrida is making. We are also asked to read a text that is “difficult” to read, for our eyes, as consumers of written text, are accustomed to regular 12-inch Times New Roman Font and hence it is tiring to read page after page of text typed in Italics; it is as if Derrida does not want us to get too comfortable, lest we forget the problematic of the conference in which this text is being read, that is, that it is taking place in Italy and dominated by Christian, i.e., Latin culture. Through the use of the Italics font, we are made aware of his distress at the setting of the conference.

The second part of the text is titled “*Postscriptum*”; the Latin word for writing that occurs after writing. One wonders about the reason Derrida chooses to use the Latin word “*postscriptum*” instead of the English “postscript.” The writing after the writing, the thoughts that occur after the writing in this section are still linked to the ideas related in “Italics”. Derrida in this section is still speaking about religion within a globalatinized context and possibly this is the reason he is using the Latin word instead of the the English “postscript.”

⁹⁰*ibid*, p 43.

The title of the third section of the text, “Pomegranates”, references two biblical verses: first in Exodus 28:33-34⁹¹ where we find a description of the images of pomegranates stitched to the robe of a Hebrew High Priest. The verse states, “Make pomegranates of blue, purple and scarlet yarn around the hem of the robe, with gold bells between them. The gold bells and the pomegranates are to alternate around the hem of the robe.” Also, in Bible 1 Kings 7:13-19,⁹² pomegranates are said to be part of the decoration on two pillars on the entrance to King Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem. The verse says,

He cast two bronze pillars, each eighteen cubits high and twelve cubits in circumference. He also made two capitals of cast bronze to set on the tops of the pillars; each capital was five cubits high. A network of interwoven chains adorned the capitals on top of the pillars, seven for each capital. He made pomegranates in two rows encircling each network to decorate the capitals on top of the pillars. He did the same for each capital.

The temple that the above verse refers to is King Solomon’s temple, the First temple of Jerusalem that was destroyed in 578 BCE. Pomegranates are also considered sacred within Jewish traditions as it is said that there they have 631 seeds which correspond to the numbers of commandments of the Torah. What could it be that Derrida’s referencing pomegranates in the title of the third part of his text, and his evoking of the historic significance of Jerusalem, the temple that was destroyed in a siege want to communicate to us? Jerusalem is the “promised land”, but also the land where a lot of blood has been spilt, the blood of the believers of the three Abrahamic religions, those who believe in the one God. Is this possibly Derrida’s response to Levinas, that the “infinitely other” is not capable of saving us from violence?

Derrida has fifty-two sections within the text “Faith and Knowledge”, another allusion to a Judaic belief, for it is thought that the Jews will build a wall around Jerusalem as a protection in fifty-two days, only they will not build this wall for the Jerusalem of this earth; it is a wall they will build to surround, protect, provide “immunity” to the Jerusalem in heaven. In Neh, 6:15-16⁹³ the text reads:

The wall was finished within fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about it, and all the surrounding nations had seen it, they were deeply impressed and acknowledged that this work had been

⁹¹Exodus 28:33-34. *New International Bible*. Biblegateway.com.

⁹²King 7: 13-19, *New International Bible*. Biblegateway.com

⁹³Neh 6:15-16, *New International Bible*. Biblegateway.com

accomplished by the power of our God.

Derrida's allusion to a safe Jerusalem in heaven, in contrast to the earthly Jerusalem is a reference to St. Augustine's "City of God," a book in which St. Augustine depicts the difference between the earthly Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem.

Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head." In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love, the latter obeying, while the former take thought for all. The one delights in its own strength, represented in the persons of its rulers; the other says to its God, "I will love Thee, O Lord, my strength." And therefore the wise men of the one city, living according to man, have sought for profit to their own bodies or souls, or both, and those who have known God "glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened; professing themselves to be wise,"--that is, glorying in their own wisdom, and being possessed by pride,--"they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things." For they were either leaders or followers of the people in adoring images, "and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever." But in the other city there is no human wisdom, but only godliness, which offers due worship to the true God, and looks for its reward in the society of the saints, of holy angels as well as holy men, "that God may be all in all."⁹⁴

The biblical references within "Faith and Knowledge" compel an alternate reading of the text. Without noting all those references, our understanding of Derrida's argument would be insufficient.

⁹⁴St. Augustine "Of The Nature Of The Two Cities, The Earthly And The Heavenly" *City of God Book XIV Chap.* 28 354 – 430 AD. www.heavenlyjerusalem.church.

In an interview with *Speigel* Magazine in 1966, when asked about whether he believes philosophy can save the world from evil, Heidegger's response was "only a God can save us."⁹⁵ When asked about the appearance of this God, Heidegger says, "We cannot bring him [God] forth by our thinking. At best we can awaken a readiness to wait." Derrida voices a similar sentiment. Is this sentiment similar to a "promise" that Derrida believes in, the promise of God that he continuously refers to in his text in Geoffrey Bennington's *Jacques Derrida*? "I pray to God," Derrida says, but he does not know to which God and nor do we. At the very end of "Faith and knowledge", in an end note, between brackets, Derrida says

(This, perhaps, is what I would have liked to say of a certain Mount Moriah – while going to Capri, last year, close by the Vesuvius of Gradiva. Today I remember what I had just finished reading in Genet at *Chatilla*, of which so many of the premises deserve to be remembered here, in so many languages, the actors and the victims, and the eves and the consequences, all the landscapes and all the specters: "one of the questions that I will not avoid is that of religion" Laguna, 26 April 1995)⁹⁶

Derrida in this quote evokes a history, a history that cannot be solely termed as political, religious or even mythological. Possibly, it is a history that lies within the folds of politics, religion and mythology. The reference to Mount Moriah, situated in Jerusalem, is the site where Abraham is asked by God to sacrifice his son. Within the same sentence is the reference to Mount Vesuvius, the Volcanic mountain that erupted in 79 AD causing the destruction of the Roman city Pompeii. The city of Pompeii, was once a Greek city and is said to have been protected by the Greek God Mars Gradiva, a god that soldiers, on their way to war, would need to pay respect to. However, Derrida's text refers to "Gradiva" rather than "Mars Gradiva" referencing a novel by Wilhelm Jensen entitled "Gradiva." The novel tells the story of an archeologist, Norbert Hanold, that discovers the relief of a Roman woman taking a step forward in what seems to be a peaceful state of mind. Hanold keeps the relief in his home and names the woman depicted Gradiva. He then starts hallucinating about meeting and falling in love with her. One wonders about the reason Jensen depicts Mars Gradiva, the god of war, as a woman in a state of peace? In 1908, Freud analyzed the character of the archeologist and diagnosed him as

⁹⁵Heidegger, Martin. "'Only God Can Save Us': The *Speigel* Interview(1966)". *Religiousstudies.Stanford.edu.* p 57.

⁹⁶Derrida Jacques. "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion". Translated by Samuel Weber. In *Acts of Religion*. Editor Jil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 2002. p 101.

delusional. Does Derrida's reference to Gradiva, both the god of war and the relief of the woman peacefully taking a step forward, within the same sentence as the volcanic Vesuvius an allusion to Freud's analysis? Is the delusion that Derrida implies by making this reference the delusion of finding peace in Capri, the Italian city, the seat of the globalatinized Christendom?

Within the first sentence, in the *postscriptum*, one year after giving the talk in the conference, Derrida juxtaposes two "myths", the myth of Abraham which evokes Abrahamic religions and the myth of Gradiva, a delusion of a nonexistent peace. Derrida's reference to the Abrahamic myth versus the Latin myth echoes "jewgreek greekjew. Extremes Meet," the last sentence in his text "Violence and Metaphysics?" Is Derrida alluding to himself; being divided between Greek *logos* and Jewish eschatology?

The next sentence in the text refers to Jean Genet, a French writer who had spent time with Palestinian refugees. Genet wrote "Four Hours in *Chatilla*,"⁹⁷ a text that documents the *Chatilla* massacre, a massacre that is said to have claimed 3500 Palestinian lives at the hand of Israeli soldiers who had conspired with Lebanese Christian militias to execute the slaughter. Genet at the time was living within the vicinity of the Palestinian Refugee camps in Lebanon with the refugees. The implication of the Christians and the Jews conspiring to slaughter the Palestinians, who are both Christian and Muslim, is very disturbing; the peoples of the Abrahamic religions are all implicated in a crime against one another in the name of the promised land. In those two sentences, Derrida evokes memories, histories and mythologies, all revolving around religion. Those memories, histories, and mythologies do not just belong to the past; they are ever present. Genet says,

A photograph doesn't show the flies nor the thick white smell of death. Neither does it show how you must jump over bodies as you walk along from one corpse to the next. If you look closely at a corpse, an odd phenomenon occurs: the absence of life in this body corresponds to the total absence of the body, or rather to its continuous backing away. You feel that even by coming closer you can never touch it. That happens when you look at it carefully.⁹⁸

Derrida ends his true "*postscriptum*" with a quote from Genet, "one of the questions that I will not avoid is that of religion." What triggers the sentiment that Derrida expresses through the

⁹⁷Genet, Jean. "Four Hours in *Chatilla*". Translated by Daniel R. Dupecher and Martha Perrigaud. Radioislam.org.1983.

⁹⁸*ibid*

Genet quote? After having read Genet and during editing “Faith and Knowledge” one year after giving the talk, Derrida thinks of the possibility of having “avoided” the question of religion. How did Derrida “avoid” the subject of religion when the whole conference was dedicated to “religion?”

The English word “avoid” is a translation of the French “éviter” which is the word that Derrida uses in the original French. The word “éviter” has the meaning of “avoid, evade, fend, flee, ditch, shun, fence.”⁹⁹ Read with the multiple meanings of the French “éviter”, the sentence reads that “one of the questions that I will not evade, fend, flee, ditch, shun, fence is religion.” If Derrida accuses the tele-technoscientific machine of offering people a pseudo-religion to save them, he also has “avoided” religion, emptied it of what it is. Has Derrida realized that possibly “emptying” religion, “avoiding” it is the problem rather than the religion itself? Is he “awakening the readiness to wait”¹⁰⁰ for God?

So in the text of “Faith and Knowledge” Derrida makes the argument that the “return of religions” is not going to save us from the “radical evil which seems to mark our time as no other.”¹⁰¹ The “return” that we are witnessing is not the return we think of; for it is driven by the tele-technoscientific age that only means to serve its interests.; religion is being appropriated (the sacred, the holy, the immune, the safe, *heilig*) to serve the tele-technoscientific machine. In another reading of the text, within the margins of “Faith and Knowledge”, Derrida makes those not so subtle allusions to to God, God of the Christians, Jews and Muslims; makes a reference to Jerusalem, the “promised land”, admitting to his emotional involvement in the question of religion, making a promise not to “avoid” religion anymore. If read in this manner, Derrida’s conflict concerning the question of faith and knowledge becomes clearer; he embeds his “rational” discourse on religion; that is, on the incapability of religion saving us from pure evil, in the realm of reason yet maintains a connection, a relationship to the God of the Jews, Christians and Muslims and the dream of a Jerusalem in heaven. In maintaining this connection, he resorts to mythology, to beliefs that lie beyond the realm of reason. Does he feel he “ought to speak on behalf of those mute witnesses without speaking for them?”¹⁰² The Muslim and the

⁹⁹“Éviter”. Online dictionary. <http://www.wordhippo.com/what-is/the-meaning-of/french-word-yviter.html>.

¹⁰⁰Heidegger, Martin. ““Only God Can Save Us”: The *Spiegel* Interview(1966)”. *Religiousstudies.Stanford.edu*. p 57.

¹⁰¹Derrida Jacques. “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion”. Translated by Samuel Weber. In *Acts of Religion*. Editor Jil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 2002, p 43.

¹⁰²*ibid*. p 45

woman and all those others who are not “present” in Capri?¹⁰³ Is he in “Faith and Knowledge” speaking “on behalf” but not “for” Jews who are not even absent? In spite of this seemingly possible change of relation with religion; in spite of praying to God; he still prays to him in Latin¹⁰⁴, like a Christian, a European, rather than a “little black Arab-Jew.” One wonders about the reason those arguments are placed in the titles and the postscript of the text rather than within the body of writing. Could Derrida, who is aware of the problematics, of the politics of “naming” as he makes clear in “Otobiography” with reference to Nietzsche and Heidegger, not “avoid” the names and labels he carries. He is also the “little black Arab Jew.” And in contrast to that, does Levinas’s attempt at entrenching the “infinitely other” within philosophy and reinterpreting Judaic texts to address a Western audience also stem from a “name” he carries?

VII. Another Take on Violence

In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger laments the loss of the people, the Western people who have lost their path in the process of “Latinization.” He attributes this loss to a point in history, the history of Europe when philosophy, when *logos*, got translated from Greek to Latin; hence losing its essence. The only “way out” for Western philosophy and Western people to regain their spiritual strength, to reconnect with the essence of being, is to retrace the steps of Greek philosophy to the pre-Socratics. Heidegger traces the meaning of the word “*phusis*” to its Greek origin before it got translated to the Latin, *nature*. The word *phusis* implies the “struggle of opposites” and “emergence”; a belief that seems to be common among the pre-Socratics. When the Greek *phusis* was translated into the Latin *nature*, the connotation of “thrust”, “unity in opposition” was lost; for the Latin *nature* does not carry within it the connotations of a struggle, opposition, a fight. Once translated into Latin, *phusis* becomes a “philosophy of nature, a representation of all things according to which they are really of a material nature”¹⁰⁵, thus losing its originary meaning. The implication of “struggle of opposites” of the Greek *phusis* hints at a violence, a violence in opposition, in a pull of two equal entities that leads to the emergence of something new, similar to the push of a new seedling against the earth so that it

¹⁰³At the beginning of his talk in Capri, Derrida makes a point that there is not one single Muslim nor a woman among the speakers at the conference; even though the issues raised in the conference are very relevant to Muslims and women. He indicates that their “voices” will need to be represented through other people who are attending the conferences

¹⁰⁴Bennington, Geoffrey & Jacques Derrida. *Jacques Derrida*. Translated by Geoffrey Bennington. London: Chicago Press. 1991, p 57

¹⁰⁵Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. London: Yale, p 15.

emerges from the land, or how a fetus has to struggle against the mother's flesh. This is a violence that is necessary for creation, a sacrificial violence, for it implies that something needs to be torn in order for a new being to come into existence. The word *logos, legein*, itself, Heidegger says, contains two meanings within it, "laying one thing next to another, bringing them together as one – in short, gathering; but at the same time, the one is contrasted with the other;"¹⁰⁶ which implies a *phusis*, a "struggling in opposition", a pull, a cut in the flesh or the earth, a sacrifice that needs to be made for the new to emerge, whether this new is a plant that needs to push against the earth to grow, a fetus that needs to cut at the mother's flesh to be born, or a concept that a philosopher struggles with till it is formed, the way one witnesses concepts "being born" in the Socratic dialogues. Heidegger's interpretation of Heraclitus's statement, "oneness is the belonging together of what strives in opposition"¹⁰⁷ refers to a violence that "brings together", brings closer, a sacred violence, an *ethical* violence, a violence that "struggles in opposition" to bring together, not a violence that leads to destruction, but rather to the emergence of the new. It becomes clear then that the violence that Heidegger is referring to here is different from the violence we have been investigating so far. One asks then, are there different types of "violences"?

Kierkegaard's interpretation of the story of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* can be read along the lines of violence that "struggles in opposition."¹⁰⁸ According to Kierkegaard, Abraham is summoned by God to obey God's command and to sacrifice his son to God as an offering. Abraham, fearing God's anger, takes his son to the place that God ordered him to go to, "a certain Mount Moriah"¹⁰⁹ in order to execute God's command. Kierkegaard explores this moment when Abraham needs to make a choice, referring to this choice as the "suspension of the ethical," for on the surface it seems that killing his son is the unethical choice. However, Kierkegaard implies in his interpretation of the story that in the moment when Abraham suspends his belief in what is considered ethical according to human standards and instead submits himself to the will of God, to the call of the "infinitely other", that he can actually be

¹⁰⁶Heidegger, Martin. *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. London: Yale, p 137.

¹⁰⁷Patricia Curd (ed) *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*. Translated by Richard D. McKirahan. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995.

¹⁰⁸Kierkegaard, Soren. *Fear and Trembling: Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de Silentio*. Translated by Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

¹⁰⁹Derrida Jacques. "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion". Translated by Samuel Weber. In *Acts of Religion*. Editor Jil Anidjar. Routledge: New York, 2002, p 101.

“given” his son. Abraham is given a difficult choice, to “re-pond” to the command of God, a command that requires him to inflict violence on the son and commit an act of violence that is unethical by human standards. By doing so, Abraham can circumvent the wrath of God. The other choice is not to obey the command, not to sacrifice his son, not to commit an ethical crime. How does one in that situation evaluate an ethical choice; which choice is more ethical? Which violence in this situation is an “ethical violence”? According to Kierkegaard, the “ethical choice” of responding to God’s command, of offering his son to God, is the choice that ultimately saves Isaac. It is in absolute submission to God, absolute denial of ego, that ego can maintain itself. The *logos* that Kierkegaard implies in *Fear and Trembling* is a *logos* that resembles the *logos* that Levinas speaks of in *Totality and Infinity*. By “re-ponding” to the command of violence, can the “real” violence be thwarted. It is an ethical violence that calls for a “re-sponse”, a “re-sponsi-bility;” this is “heilig.”

VIII. *Ontology of the Socratic Dialogue*

That Levinas perceives Heidegger’s ontology to be violent is a question that propels us to examine ontology within Greek philosophy. It is true that Heidegger perceived Greek philosophy to have started losing its way after the Pre-Socratics, yet the Socratic dialogue as a form for philosophizing requires a close look, for it might reveal a missing link. The Socratic dialogue in many ways manifests the ontology of *logos* as described in Heraclitus statement: “oneness is the belonging together of what strives in opposition.”¹¹⁰ There is a “gatheredness” in the opposition of the interlocutors, what one can term a dialectical violence. The interlocutors agree to a debate about a topic which they might have conflicting views about with participants they might actually not even like with the purpose of “coming to a shared understanding about the facts of the matter.”¹¹¹ Most of the characters that Socrates converses with are sophist; for whom he did not have much admiration. Yet, Socrates and his interlocutors agree to engage in a dialogue, converse with one another, assume responsibility, for by doing so they can together attain the purpose of the dialogue; the truth. The question of the verity of the dialogues, whether they actually happened, whether the characters portrayed can be historically verified...etc. has been the subject of research. However, regardless of their “truthfulness”, it is relevant that Plato chose

¹¹⁰Patricia Curd (ed) *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*. Translated by Richard D. McKirahan. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995, p 35.

¹¹¹Gadamer, Hans-Georg. “Plato’s Dialectical Ethics: Phenomenological Interpretation Relating to the Philebus.” Translated by Robert M. Wallace. Yale University Press: New haven. 1991 p 40.

the dialogue as a form, a form that is *literary*¹¹² in nature, to communicate the philosophy of Socrates. As readers, we witness within the discourse of the dialogues a “coming togetherness of opposites”. We observe a quarrel, “struggle in opposition”, a violence, albeit a dialectical violence; for its ultimate goal is the birthing of new concepts, new ideas.

When debating the nature of virtue and whether it is composed of one quality or several ones in the *Protagoras*, Socrates feels that Protagoras is providing long and convoluted answers that do not address the question at hand. Socrates, upset, decides to interrupt the dialogue:

“Protagoras, I have a wretched memory and if someone addresses me at any length I forget the subject on which he is talking. So, just as you, in entering on a discussion with me, would think fit to speak louder to me than to others if I happened to be hard of hearing, please bear in mind now that you have to deal with a forgetful person, and therefore cut up your answers into shorter pieces, that I may be able to follow you.

Well, what do you mean by short answers? he asked: do you want me to make them shorter than they should be?

Not at all, I said.

As long as they should be? he asked.

Yes, I said.

Then are my answers to be as long as I think they should be, or as you think they should be?

Well, for instance, I have heard, I said, that you yourself are able, in treating one and the same subject, not only to instruct another person in it but to speak on it at length, if you choose, without ever being at a loss for matter; or again briefly, so as to yield to no one in brevity of expression. So, if you are going to argue with me, employ with me the latter method, that of brevity.”¹¹³

One notices that the dialogue does not progress haphazardly. It has a structure that needs to be observed and if this structure is not observed, Socrates will interfere. However, as the above citations reveals, there is tension in the conversation, the exchange does not always proceed smoothly.

In the dialogues, Socrates uses *logos* to demarcate terms, to explain them and define their boundaries. According to Gadamer, the Socratic dialogue “embodies, for the first time, ... the

¹¹² I am italicizing the word “literally” to stress the relationship between the dialogue as a valid form of philosophizing but also to stress their appeal to fiction; what is not “real” or necessarily rational. There seems to be no conflict between those two areas; rationality and fiction to exist side by side in the dialogue.

¹¹³ Plato. *Protagoras*. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>. 335a

logos of science, which is speech that exhibit the facts of the matter in a logical sequence.”¹¹⁴ Parallel to this clear line of argumentation, i.e. of “*logos*” that runs within the Socratic dialogues, there is an appeal to myth and mythical narratives that all interlocutors engaged in the conversation recognize, understand and respond. The mythologies that are referred to tell “fantastic” stories of relationships, love stories, fights and feuds among the gods. The interlocutors are all Greek, and hence are familiar with those myths and their “rationale”. The possibility of mythological speech, a speech that is based on fictitious narrative, or, to put it in a milder form, a speech that does not associate itself with any phenomenological experience, allows us as a species to “speak” of what we cannot perceive with our sense perceptions and still not be accused of making “fictitious” or “unsound” arguments. The etymological history of the Greek “*muth*” indicates that the term means “speech, thought, story, myth, anything delivered by the word of mouth.”¹¹⁵ The dictionary explains that the Greek *muthos* was translated into the Latin *mythos*. One wonders if the power of *muth*, as a paradigm of speech, was lost in this translation.

In “Plato’s Pharmacy”¹¹⁶, Derrida states that within his discussion of Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*, he will refer the reader to the Greek terms as the translation of those terms does not render the range of meanings associated with the Greek words. He provides the word *pharmakon* as an example. The translation of the word into English (pharmacy, drug) misses the multiplicity of meanings in the Greek word. On the problem of the loss of the multiple meanings of *pharmakon* when translated, Derrida says,

It will also be seen to what extent the malleable unity of this concept [*pharmakon*] or rather its rules and the strange logic that links it with its signifier, has been dispersed, masked, obliterated, and rendered almost unreadable not only by the imprudence and empiricism of the translators, but first and foremost by the redoubtable, irreducible difficulty of translation. It is a difficulty inherent in its very principle, situated less in the passage from one language to another, from one philosophical language to another, than already, as we shall see, in the tradition between Greek and Greek; a violent difficulty in the transference of a nonphilosopheme into a philosopheme. Within this

¹¹⁴Gadamer, Hans-Georg. “Plato’s Dialectical Ethics:Phenomenological Interpretation Relating to the Philebus. Translated by Robert M. Wallace. Yale University Press: New haven. 1991p 20

¹¹⁵ “*muth*”. Online Dictionary for Etymology. <http://etymonline.com>

¹¹⁶Derrida, Jacques (1981), "Plato's Pharmacy" In: *Dissemination*, translated by Barbara Johnson, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, pp. 63-171

problem of translation we will thus be dealing with nothing less than the problem of the very passage into philosophy.¹¹⁷

So the problematic of translating concepts, words from one language to another combined with understanding the meaning of the word within philosophic language as opposed to non-philosophic language, might explain, at least partly, the problematic of understanding the role of myth within the *logos* of the Socratic dialogue. Does the existence of both *logos* and *muthos* within the Socratic dialogue exhibit some kind of “struggle in opposition” between two “speeches”? In this another quarrel taking place; a quarrel between two paradigms of speech? In Book x of the *Republic*, Plato warns us against the poets. He says,

Must we not infer that all these poetical individuals, beginning with Homer, are only imitators; they copy images of virtue and the like, but the truth they never reach? The poet is like a painter who, as we have already observed, will make a likeness of a cobbler though he understands nothing of cobbling; and his picture is good enough for those who know no more than he does, and judge only by colors and figures¹¹⁸ (600e, Book X).

In this citation, Plato makes his position towards poets clear. He believes that poets are dangerous because they write about a variety of topics and hence claim knowledge of those topics when in fact, they cannot have knowledge of all the sciences they write about. It is this that makes them spread false information. The position that Plato is taking here reflects the position already taken by the Pre-Socratics, Heraclitus and Parmenides. One of the fragments we have of Heraclitus says,

People are deceived about the knowledge of obvious things, like Homer who is wiser than all the Greeks.¹¹⁹

With all this in mind, the Socratic dialogue needs to be read as a “struggle in opposition”, in a struggle with an other, an other that I do not necessarily agree with or even like. This struggle, quarrel, among the interlocutors and between *muthos* and *logos*, represents a *phusis* that is later missing in Aristotle’s treatises. A manner of speech is lost, possibly a way of being.

Aristotle “abandons” the dialogue and opts for writing his philosophy in the form of a

¹¹⁷*ibid.* p 65.

¹¹⁸Plato. *The Republic*, Book X, 600e.

¹¹⁹Patricia Curd (ed) *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*. Translated by Richard D. McKirahan. Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1995. Hippolytus, refutation 9.9.5=22B56. P 30.

treatise. Gone is the *phusis* of the Socratic dialogue, the coming into being and the tension of “struggling in opposition”. He created a system for reasoning and delineated areas of knowledge into specific disciplines. He standardized a system for logic that is capable of withholding rigorous scientific investigation and conducting inquiries in methodical terms, hence, defining and fixing the trajectory of Greek philosophy that identifies itself as Greek philosophy. It is Aristotle’s *logos* that the world recognizes as Greek philosophy.

Derrida explains in “White Mythology” that the metaphors we use, whether in our everyday language or in philosophy, are related to a “sensible”¹²⁰ experience; sensible being used to mean related to our “senses”; hearing, smelling and seeing...etc. Derrida quotes Anatole France: “The vocabulary of mankind was framed from sensuous images, and this sensuousness is to be found ...even in the technical terms, concocted by metaphysicians...(p.201).”¹²¹ However, those “sensuous images” or metaphors are used to express ideas or concepts; that is, the imagery is not referred to for its “imageness,” but rather for its capability to refer to an idea. This analysis by Derrida reinforces the idea that metaphor, sensuous language, is a kind of speech that is capable of expressing ideas and hence has within it a *logos*, a *logos* that is not expressed within non-metaphoric scientific language.

If analyzed as such, we could possibly say that *logos* and *muth* are two forms of speech capable in their different approaches of referring to concepts. We could possibly perceive of them as two different paradigms for expression. By relegating *muth* to the realm of poetry and metaphor, the validity of mythology as a “rational” way of speech has been taken away from us.

IX. Ethical Sacrifice and the “Infinitely Other”

What happens when one form of speech persists, becomes predominant, and the other is relegated to less favorable domains? How does this process influence ontology, if we perceive speech as an expression of thought to be integral to ontology? We might need to investigate other spheres for a possible answer to this question. In *Sacred Violence*¹²², Rène Girard distinguishes between two kinds of violence: a violence that perpetuates violence, the spilling of blood that leads to more bloodshed and another kind, the one that curbs the perpetuation of

¹²⁰Derrida, Jacques. “White Mythology”. In *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. University of Chicago Press: Chicago. 1982,

¹²¹*ibid.* p 211.

¹²²Girard, Rene. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1977

violence, that ensures that violence is not mistaken for revenge, for revenge can only perpetuate the cycle of bloodshed. He refers to this violence as “sacred violence.” According to Girard, in “primitive societies,” when a member of one tribe commits an act of violence towards a member of another tribe, the tribe whose member committed the violent act chooses to sacrifice a member of its own tribe, for by doing so, they would curb the violence from being perpetuated. By “killing” one of their own, by choosing to “sacrifice” one of their own, they curb retaliation from the wronged tribe. For the new act of killing to be considered “sacred”, that is, capable of curbing the violence, the person on which the act is inflicted upon needs to be both “similar” to the perpetrator of the original crime yet also different, that is, this person needs to fulfill two functions, to compare to the perpetrator of the act of violence, to share something with him; but simultaneously, they need to be considered “less” in terms of the hierarchy within this community, that is, they need to be the “same” but also “different”. Also, the person (or animal in some cases) that is sacrificed needs to relate to the community, that is, they need to be from among the community. However, even though they need to belong to the community, they also need to belong to the fringes of that community. They should not be major figures from within the tribe. If those conditions are fulfilled, then what seems to be a violent act is considered a sacrificial act capable of curbing bloodshed and restoring peace.

Girard’s delineation between sacrificial and non-sacrificial violence corresponds to what Kierkegaard’s terms “suspension of the ethical.” Abraham saves his son only when he is about to sacrifice him to God. Only then, at the moment when he is about to incise his neck, does a ram appear to substitute him in the act of sacrifice. Girard reports on the Nuer tribes of Southern Sudan. The Nuers live side by side with their cattle and hence consider their animals to be part of the tribe. Hence, in acts of retribution, an animal can act as a sacrificial subject to appease a wronged tribe. That Abraham’s son is replaced with a ram seems to be within the realm of a sacrificial logic; it has existed within tribal societies which have a relationship of equality with their herds. But what kind of logic is this? In what ways does the *logos* of “sacred violence” relate to the *logos* developed by Greek philosophy? Could it be the *logos* that “struggles in opposition” or in the words of Heraclitus, a *logos* that implies that “the finest harmony is composed of things at variance and everything comes to be in accordance with strife.”¹²³ And if this *logos*, this way of viewing the world is lost to us who live in the civilized world, what are the

¹²³Heraclitus fragment is quoted in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 8.2 1155b4 =22b8.

implications of this? If dialectical violence, sacred violence, the violence of “struggle in opposition” that leads to emergence of the new is lost, what stays?

Could it be possible that a similar act, an act of so-called sacrificial violence, was inflicted on mythology? Could the “Greeks”, the Greek “philosophers”, make a decision to sacrifice mythology, that manner of speech that portrayed the gods negatively and possibly contributed to the corruption of the youth, in order to “save” Greek philosophy, *logos*? Did the Greeks “decide” that to save philosophy, *logos*, mythology needed to be sacrificed? The question of whether mythology fulfils the criteria of the subject for the sacrificial act remains, however. As explained above, the subject needs to be considered eligible for sacrifice, based on two criteria; it needs to be “similar” yet “different” from the original perpetrator of the violent act and it also needs to be from the periphery of the community. If we compare mythology to *logos* within Greek philosophy, we could conclude they they are “similar” and yet “different.” They are both valid “discourses” yet *logos* is perceived to be of a higher value than mythology. Could the Greeks have perceived *logos*, to be their forte, to be what distinguishes them as a civilization from others? It is the “speech” that eventually persists; mythology is perceived to be problematic and hence relegated to the realms of poetry. However, mythology does not fulfill the second criterion, it does not belong to the fringes of Greek philosophy, Greek culture and Greek being. On the contrary, it is deeply-rooted, within Greek being. In the *Apology*, Socrates, in the process of defending, himself recounts how his friend, Chaerephon, goes to the Oracle of Delphi to ask who the wisest man in Athens is. The Oracle pronounces Socrates to be the wisest man in Athens. Resorting to the oracle, trusting in its verdict and using it as an alibi against his accusers in his final battle against the angry Athenians can only indicate the role that mythology played in the lives of the Greeks at the time. Possibly the dismissal of mythology, relegating it to poetry, reducing it to metaphor, was not a “sacred” act of sacrifice; it was rather an act of unsacred violence.

The “*unsacred* violence” that was committed towards the other, the other of *logos*, *muthos* is both comparable and related to the violence committed towards the other as described by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. It is comparable because in reducing mythology to metaphor, in relegating it to the realm of poetry, metaphor is reduced to a “same”, the same of *logos*. In “White Mythology”, Derrida explains how metaphor has become incorporated within language; it is part of it and hence lost its relation to what lies prior to language, our senses. By making

metaphor part of language, reducing its otherness in a totality, an act of violence has been committed towards mythology. The Greeks perceived two distinct “speech,” *muthos* and *logos*, as existing side by side, not together. The distinctive nature of both speeches is apparent to any reader of Greek text and this is not clearer than in the Socratic dialogue where both speeches exist side by side. To incorporate one speech within the other, in a totality, is an act of violence and not of the sacrificial kind. The violent act committed towards mythology implies an act of violence committed towards ourselves; for no longer is mythological speech valid, a speech that allowed us to express what lies prior to *logos*, what lies prior to logical speech and that is still considered rational. It is the “speech” that Derrida resorts to in the postscript of “Faith and Knowledge” to bring his argument across.

Could it be possible then to say that this act of violence, the loss of *phusis*, its translation into nature, is what accounts for the violence that we witness in the world? The kind of violence that wreaks havoc instead of the “sacred violence,” that is the violence of “emergence” of what is new? By sacrificing *muthos*, by not allowing it to exist as speech, we have reduced the other, *muthos*, to be only conceivable only as part of *logos*, but *logos* as a paradigm of speech exists. Mythology has been incorporated within *logos*, in a totality; a totality that has violated its alterity. Could this be the reason the people, the “Western people”, lost their way? Maybe Levinas and Derrida are not really that far off from one another as they think. Levinas’s designating ethics as First philosophy, a philosophy of the other, attempting to resurrect an ontology that within its *logos*, addresses an “infinitely other,” is an expression of the inadequacy of Greek philosophy. Derrida’s philosophy of deconstruction attempts to dislodge Greek philosophy, make it uncomfortable with itself so that it reveals itself in a new form. Is this not also a realization of the problematics of Greek metaphysics?

Levinas’s attempts in *Totality and Infinity* to open up a space within the folds of Greek discourse is in a sense what he feels the world needs, a world where violence towards the other has become almost a norm. Levinas’s “infinitely other” does not associate itself with a dogma or promise the “return of religion.” His ethics as First philosophy is a command, a responsibility, a call for hospitality, not justice, for justice will not save us now as it lies within the realm of *logos*. Only a *hospitality*, only a *welcome* of the other can save us. In a “Word of Welcome”¹²⁴,

¹²⁴Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu: To Emmanuel Levinas*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. California: Stanford University Press, 1999

a speech that Derrida delivered in a conference that marked the first death anniversary of Levinas, Derrida poses the question of whether Levinas's hospitality "would be able to found a law and a politics ... within a society, nation, State, or Nation State." His response was, yes. In the rest of his speech he laid out the conditions that would make this possible.

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