

## THE LANGUAGE OF BEING AND OTHERNESS

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# The Language of Being and Otherness

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*Gadamer and Levinas in Dialogue*

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CHISOKUDŌ

Cover art: detail from Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*  
(ca. 1600–1602)

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*for Nené*

Standing, in the shadow  
of the stigma in the air.

Standing-for-nobody-and-nothing.  
Unrecognized,  
for you  
alone.

With all that has room therein,  
even without  
language.

—Paul Celan, *Breath-crystal*



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## Preface

“Hermeneutic” philosophy... does not understand itself as an “absolute position” but as a path of experiencing. Its modesty consists in the fact that there is no higher principle than this: holding oneself open to the conversation. This means, however, constantly recognizing in advance the possibility that your partner is right, even recognizing the possible superiority of your partner. Is this too little? —*H.-G. Gadamer*

Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language. —*E. Levinas*

**E**mmanuel Levinas and Hans-Georg Gadamer stand on their own as two autonomous and separate philosophical figures against the twentieth century Continental philosophical background. Nowhere in their many articles and books is there a lengthy reference to each other’s achievements or works.<sup>1</sup> In

1. With the exception of Gadamer, who (to my knowledge) mentions Levinas’s thinking on only two occasions. Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, “Letter to Dallmayr”: “Is there not in hermeneutics—for all its efforts to recognize otherness as otherness, the other as other, the work of art as a blow [*Stoß*], the breach as breach, the unintelligible as unintelligible—too much conceded to reciprocal understanding and mutual agreement? This objection is one that Habermas had earlier raised against me when he argued that distorted understanding makes what I call mutual agreement mere appearance and even a form of manipulation.... One can learn from Levinas how serious this objection is, even for those who favor no specifically political option but only seeks to give a thoughtful account that tries to say what *is*” (GDE, 97). And H.-G. Gadamer, “Hermeneutics and Logocentrism”: “Now Derrida would object by saying that understanding always turns into appropriation and so involves a covering-up of otherness. Levinas, too, values this argument highly, so it is definitely an observation that one cannot dismiss” (GDE, 119).

their long-standing careers as philosophers and researchers, they have never met. And yet both Levinas and Gadamer draw extensively on the same philosophical sources and teachers (namely from Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's existential analytics). They both deal with and almost exclusively concentrate their thoughts on the notion of language, communication, and discourse.<sup>2</sup> They have attracted the attention of commentators who have organized conferences, written articles and books about them, but have rarely attempted to reconcile their reflections, to discover similarities or differences in their respective philosophical meditations. This book is an attempt to construct a dialogue between these two major philosophical figures.

The understanding that Levinas and Gadamer respectively have of language has a point of departure and develops from two quite different—and almost irreconcilable—perspectives. Levinas's philosophy might be described as a serious endeavor to overcome the totalizing tendencies inherent in all Western thought, i.e., a thought that has always seen in the primacy of the ego and the unbroken presence of Being the foundation of all discourse, knowledge, and reason. According to Levinas, the Western philosophical tradition has constantly tried to subsume and integrate the otherness (or alterity) of the subject under the rubric of identity or selfsameness through comprehension.<sup>3</sup>

2. At the outset of this book, it is useful to remind the reader that the notion of language to which we are referring is quite different from that which is central to the analytic investigations and activities in the contemporary English-speaking world. The latter is primarily concerned with the clarification of meaning. Statements, proposition and words are taken in themselves, analyzed, rejected as nonsensical or accepted as meaningful. Levinas's and Gadamer's understanding of language, on the contrary, depicts the nature of language from a phenomenological and ontological perspective. What they are interested in, is not how language functions, the role of linguistic signs, the logical propositions that have to come under the scrutiny of epistemological verifications. Rather, language is seen as "contact" between interlocutors, as the *medium* through which all that "is" can be said.

3. As Levinas says: "In the word 'comprehension' we understand the fact of taking [*prendre*] and of comprehending [*comprendre*], that is, the fact of englobing, of appropriating. There are these elements in all knowledge [*savoir*], all familiarity [*connaissance*],

Philosophy, for Levinas, has always had an “allergy” to otherness, it has always tried to absorb and annihilate the irreducible relation with the other within the all-encompassing categories and tautological tyranny of the Same. Thus, Levinas constantly attempts to dislodge Husserl’s phenomenological doctrine of the intentionality of consciousness which, by not encountering anything alien to itself, reduces the other to a simple intentional object. At the same time, Levinas also moves against Heidegger’s ontological priority given to Being (*Sein*) over beings (*Seindes*) in which the otherness of the other is handed over to the anonymous Being-occurrence which unfolds in discourse. In this context, Levinas develops a concept of language that is neither seen as that bestowing of meaning (*Sinngebung*) articulated in that noetic-noematic structure which characterizes the activity of the transcendental Ego, nor as the language of *Dasein* whose being is determined equi-primordially by understanding. Rather, Levinas describes language as a relationship with alterity, as a mode of approach to the other in the form of “speaking” (*Saying*) which does not coincide with its “content” (*Said*). What emerges in language, therefore, is a new form of intelligibility, a unique and unthematizable linguistic relation with the face (*visage*) of the other that can never be reduced to knowledge and truth within any impersonal system of thought.

Gadamer, on the other hand, following the lead of Heidegger, starts from the fundamental historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) and finitude of human beings, and describes language as the *medium* through and in which the speakers can grasp what someone had really wanted to say. The main purpose of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is that of developing a theory of understanding and/or interpretation as standing within the happening of tradition (*Überlieferungsgeschehen*) to which the speakers belong, as a fusion of horizons (*Horizontver-*

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all comprehension; there is always the fact of making something one’s own. But there is something which remains outside, and that is alterity” (WRIGHT, HUGHES, AINLEY 1988, 170). Cf. also E. LEVINAS 1985, 60.

*schmelzung*) between strangeness and familiarity, in which an event of truth might occur. According to Gadamer's hermeneutics, it is only in tradition, "which exists in the medium of language" (TM, 351), that understanding happens. Nothing can be envisaged outside tradition in as much as every understanding takes place on the basis of prejudices, every interpretation evolves from a prior grasping of the thing to be understood which is not the work of subjective consciousness, but of the linguistic tradition itself. Moreover, Gadamer's ontological privilege given to language also helps to clarify his interest in conversation and dialogue. It is language that mediates between the speakers by making the subject matter (*die Sache*) that progressively re-veals itself in discourse common to them. For within the hermeneutical situation, the participants do not guide the conversation, but rather are involved in and directed by it, in the search for common agreement. It is what the living language of conversation communicates and reveals, more than on the one who voices the subject matter, that hermeneutics is concerned with and offers an ontological solution.

It is at this radical point of divergence between the two different lines of inquiry with which Gadamer and Levinas have approached the notion of language that this book attempts to stage an engagement by philosophizing with them. The dialogue this book will initiate is not to be seen as a confrontation between philosophers or theories; it does not aim to set one philosopher against the other, nor does it question their philosophical achievements. Neither Gadamer nor Levinas need each other; their thoughts are, in themselves, self-sufficient. Yet, in both, there is a reminder of something that is not described, that is forgotten, in their meditations. In Levinas, this is the content of what the absolutely other wants to communicate and teach to the Same. In Gadamer, it is the otherness of the other, which is not preserved within the linguistic process of interpretation. In Levinas, language exceeds any communication of ideas and insights in so far as what language accomplishes is an "access" to the a-symmetrical face-to-face relation, an exposure of the one who speaks to the other as other. In Gadamer,

language is always conversation and exchange between human beings; it always offers them words to communicate what they really want to say. However, we should not view their omissions, respectively, of the importance of the topic displayed in speech and of the role of subjectivity in language, as a lack of awareness on their part. Their respective philosophies simply wanted to emphasize different aspects, or to explore distinct facets, of the same phenomenon called language.

The study will first deal with the different concepts of language formulated by the two philosophers. Gadamer considers the notion of understanding not as a subjective attitude but rather as a process embedded within the historical situation of the speakers. The important concepts of prejudice, tradition, temporal distance, effective historical consciousness, application, fusion of horizons, experience, and *phronesis* are explored with a view to discovering the subject's essential belongingness to history. This also serves to analyze the dialogical relation—or the true hermeneutic experience—the I enters into with the Thou and to reflect on the phenomenon of language considered not as a tool, but as a *medium* of communication. In this way, the discussion is opened to the importance of the model of translation and to the metaphorical nature of language which, against the ancient and modern instrumental idea of it, accomplishes the co-belongingness of thought, words and objects. This relationship is then extended to include the linguistic character of our experience of the world, in as much as the world represents that ensemble of meaning which comes to be speculatively displayed in language. Language mirrors and reflects whatever is to be understood, but not in an exhaustive way: the totality of meaning is at once disclosed (said) and unspoken (unsaid) in every linguistic interpretation of the world. Everything that “is,” though, can be said and understood or interpreted through and in the *medium* of language. And it is this infinite possibility of conveying everything that one seeks to communicate which marks the universal character of philosophical hermeneutics. The concluding

section of this chapter concentrates on the main features of language itself, namely, its self-forgetfulness, I-lessness, and universality.

Attention will next be turned to Levinas, beginning with his criticism of Husserl's description of consciousness which, in its intentional and objectifying activity, constitutes the world and reduces the other to a simple content in the noetic-noematic structure of consciousness itself. This will be followed by an investigation into Levinas's criticism of Heidegger's account on language. For Levinas language is not the "house of Being" in which *Dasein* makes sense of itself and of the world, but is rather the face of the other (*le visage d'autrui*) that speaks and presents itself in its Saying (*le dire*). This final insight will lead to the description of the face-to-face "encounter" that founds language and signification. It is the epiphanic appearance of the other which, eluding any representation and context, speaks from its unthematizable alterity (*altérité*). In Levinas's understanding of it, the encounter with the other is ethical, a-symmetrical and an-archival (it takes place beyond any reference to a foundational principle), and it does not establish any immanent communality. Rather, the other is the infinite, it is what the Same (*le Même*) cannot grasp, comprehend, or conceptualize. For this reason, in the thinking of Levinas, the other expresses itself in its Saying (*le dire*) which escapes the totalizing power of the Said (*le dit*) of ontology and selfsame consciousness. The implications of the fundamental irreversibility of the self-Other relation in language are further explored with the concept of apology in which the Same responds to the other through responsibility. The unlimited responsibility of the Same towards the other is tempered by the appearance of the third party (*les tiers*), i.e., by all the others who live alongside the Same-other "relationship." Thus, the unthematizable Saying of responsibility enters into discourse, calculation and intentionality; it translates itself into the universal law of justice, politics and decision-making. This, however, does not obliterate the pre-original and fundamental obligation of the Same towards the other. It simply tries,

without ever succeeding and at the cost of a betrayal, to articulate its meaning into the language of ontology.

Building on the insights gathered in the preceding considerations, the core of the book will aim to show what Gadamer and Levinas might learn from each other and shed light on their respective philosophical paths.

We will begin from the subject matter (*die Sache*) displayed in language and that can become a topic of discussion between speakers. It will be shown how Gadamer's understanding of the living language of conversation and dialogue is able to account for the coming-into-language of the thing itself. Language is the language of things, the language in which things come into being and are known in their truth by the speaking subjects. By contrast, for Levinas the other, the signifier, the one who "says" itself in its speaking cannot become an object of discussion. Skepticism, the impossibility of synchronizing the stating with the statement, testifies to the incommensurability that exists between the other that commences discourse and its content. Yet Levinas remains silent with respect to what the other conveys in language. By constantly emphasizing the radical alterity of the other in speech, the "who" rather than the "what" of discourse, Levinas's language does not offer any "access" to the thing that can be discussed and shared among speakers. Gadamer's philosophy, at this point, might offer Levinas's the possibility of a "face-to-face" with the content conveyed by language. This offering would neither diminish nor alienate the infinity of the other that speaks, in so far as the aim of hermeneutics is the understanding of what the other has said and not what the other is.

After exploring the first pole of a possible linguistic encounter with the other (the subject matter revealed in language) the discussion then ventures into the topic of subjectivity, of the philosophical consistency regarding the speaking person. Gadamer's philosophy adheres to Heidegger's effort to overcome the subjectivism of modern thought and demonstrates through the concept of play (*Spiel*), the inadequacy of the distinction between object-subject. The concepts of theory, par-

icipation, experience (*Erfahrung*), effective historical consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichte Bewusstsein*), and tradition all point to an activity of language in which the self-consciousness of the speakers is absorbed and lost. In any interpretative event what comes to the fore is Being rather than consciousness. On the other hand, Levinas understands the notion of subjectivity as being a constant process of recovering the self to itself throughout all that happens to it. The analysis of enjoyment (*jouissance*), living from... (*vivre de...*) and the description of habitation, the feminine, and eros (in its double movement of voluptuousness and fecundity), aim at showing how the origin of subjectivity is located in the self's inner independence from the world and from others. It is only with the indiscreet presence of the other that speaks and remains completely exterior to what can be comprehended by the self (*le soi*) that the joyful order and unity of this very self is challenged and disturbed. This analysis, developed in *Totality and Infinity*, receives new emphasis in Levinas's second major philosophical work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. In it, Levinas places the constitution of the subject in proximity (*proximité*), in a contact with the alterity of the other in which the subject "is" for the other despite itself (*malgré soi*). The uniqueness of the subject is now discovered in obsession, in substitution, and in responsibility. What Levinas's defense of subjectivity might offer to Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy, then, is a more precise focus on the subject that speaks, on the one that communicates and answers, on that uniqueness of the "me" (*le moi*) without which there would be neither meaning nor utterance.

The overall conclusion of the study brings together the points elaborated above and suggests a way of reconciling the two different aspects of language: the subject matter which can be understood by the participants and the uniqueness of the other person that speaks.

I would like to express special thanks to Professor Hans-Georg Gadamer who, after each lecture at a Seminar on Hegel and Aesthetics held at the Institute for Philosophical Studies in Naples from 18 to



22 November 1991, generously took the time to respond to my numerous questions and clarify a number of points concerning his philosophy. My deep admiration and respect goes to the work of Emmanuel Levinas which has enriched me both philosophically and personally. I would also like to thank Josef Bleicher, whom I met at Caledonian University in Glasgow, for the few but fruitful encounters discussing the philosophical nature of dialogue.

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