Levinas and Wittgenstein in (Ethical) Critique of the Tradition

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This paper suggests an unthought complementarity between Levinas and Wittgenstein with regard to ethics. Unthought not in the sense that no one has ever thought it, but in the deeper sense of being unable to think and speak the complementarity *adequately*, as consciousness necessarily fails in its quest to comprehensively articulate the contents of the unconsious. Just the thing one is after slips into another crevice as one attempts to grasp it, hold it, see it, and know it. So it is with positing that Levinas and Wittgenstein might profitably be read *for* each other and *against* each other in the name of ethics. For whatever else separates these thinkers, a common obsession with the *possibility* of *speaking ethics* might be regarded as defining characteristics of their respective projects. This bond opens the possibility of understanding their seemingly divergent perspectives as complementary approaches to the problems of a shared philosophical tradition, just as conscious and unconscious share a history and create a psychic whole without being able to fully understand one another.

The ethical has no voice in Wittgenstein, early or late. Whether Wittgenstein has proscribed all talk of ethics, as in the *Tractatus*, spoken of its ineffability, as in the "Lecture on Ethics", or simply left talk of the ethical altogether, as in the *Philosophical Investigations*, the recurring message is that authentically ethical language is not a viable subject for philosophical discourse. One might quibble about the details of this picture, but the fact remains that the ethical meaning of Wittgenstein's work is not made *explicit* in his philosophical texts. This, of course, has not stopped a bevy of interpreters from gleaning the ethical meaning of Wittgenstein's work, especially his later thinking on language games, forms of life, following rules, justification, and certainty. In surveying this literature, and its persistent attempts to speak the ethics that Wittgenstein did not and would not say himself, one is left wondering whether such a task is possible and how one might go about it.

In response to such queries, this paper proposes that the language of Emmanuel Levinas provides the best means for articulating the ethics implicit in Late Wittgenstein. Levinas was equally attuned to the difficulties of ethical language; his entire corpus might be thought of as an attempt to say what *cannot* be said in the service of what *must* be said. And ethics are what must be spoken for Levinas, the necessary risk of being a linguistic-being-in-the-world-with-others. And so, on this model, Levinas makes conscious what is unconscious ethically in Wittgenstein. And conversely, while Levinas makes a claim of language's hidden, often unconscious, essence as response to the other, Wittgenstein demonstrates this unconscious essence (as well as its limitations) simply by tracing the contours of language's use, thus providing an account in consciousness of a reality that often remains below the surface for Levinas. So they act as conscious and unconscious to one another, depending on whether one is talking about ethics (conscious in Levinas, unconscious in Wittgenstein) or language's uses (unconscious in Levinas, conscious in Wittgenstein). Of course this model is simply a heuristic, but it offers a way of reading two great thinkers together in the service of articulating the most satisfying ethical language for the most pressing contemporary problems.

The crux of this paper, that which allows me to suggest this deeper complementarity between Levinas and Wittgenstein, is the similarity of their respective critiques of the Western metaphysical tradition. In spite of whatever *new* philosophical movement Wittgenstein might have helped spawn, much evidence points to reading Wittgenstein as an inheritor and transformer of the same tradition that the great continental thinkers of the century—Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Levinas, Derrida, e.g.—have also been working to transform. Wittgenstein's critique of the ontotheological metaphysical tradition is just as thorough and programmatic as any of the aforementioned phenomenologically based thinkers. Wittgenstein himself intimated such a convergence between his linguistic investigations and phenomenology, as evidenced by the entire chapter devoted to Phenomenology in the Big Typescript of 1933, the multiple uses of the word phenomenology in the *Philosophical Remarks*, and his succinct formulation from the Big Typescript that "Phenomenology is grammar."[1]

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1. Nicholas Gier, *Wittgenstein and Phenomenology: A Comparative Study of the Later Wittgenstein, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press. 1981), 93.

At the core of the best phenomenological thinking is a critique of the Western metaphysical tradition. Summing up the modern articulation of this tradition in one sentence, one might say "truth is knowledge of reality present to consciousness." Or, in other words, that "thought corresponds to reality, and thus the truth of the thinking subject converges with the substantial essence of reality." Or, in another vernacular, that "logic represents the real to consciousness." In Heidegger's reading of the Aristotelian tradition, the being of a being is determined as eternally present substance. Ontotheology speaks of a "supreme being," God, who is fully present everywhere all at once.

It is just this metaphysical tradition, in all of its overlapping formulations, which both Levinas and Wittgenstein (along with others) set out to critique and ultimately undermine. Why? For Levinas, this tradition culminates in a thinking that wants to incorporate all differences within itself; a universalizing, homogenizing monster that realizes itself politically in fascism and genocide. These are the stakes of the battle over philosophy for Levinas, and for Wittgenstein as well, I believe. Both were intimately involved in the cataclysmic horrors of the wars in their lifetimes, and a desire to understand and prevent such events can be read in every crevice of their respective thinking. These are among the twentieth century's greatest thinkers, and so by definition, doing the best thinking on the most important subjects.

Levinas' critique of the tradition is a dominant theme throughout his work. Consider the following quotes in which Levinas summarizes the tradition critically, opening the way for his reinterpretation:

> But the assimilation which occurs in philosophy qua philosophy is fundamentally a search for the truth. For, generally speaking, truth means the adequation between representation and external reality. [. . .] Truth is the original adequation that all adequation presupposes. Indeed, the I of knowledge is at once the Same par excellence, the very event of identification and the melting pot where every Other is transmuted into the Same. It is the philosopher's stone of philosophical alchemy.[2]

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2.   Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Height," in trans. and ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Hereafter *BPW*) (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press), 13.

> Intellectualism—whether it be rationalist or empiricist, idealist or realist—is bound up with this conception [understanding as equivalent with perceiving]. For Plato, for Hume, even for contemporary logical positivists, meaning is reducible to contents given to consciousness. Intuition, in the straightforwardness of a consciousness that welcomes data, remains the source of all meaning, whether these data be ideas, relations, or sensible qualities.[3]

Here Levinas outlines the basis of an inherited tradition that locates truth and meaning in an accurate representation of external reality through consciousness. This is precisely the pattern of thought that Levinas seeks to reinterpret and reorient.

Crucial to this reorientation is the move from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language embedded in sensibility and proximity with others. A fundamental strand of that suggested reorientation is outlined in the following quotes:

> But what can one seek beneath thinking other than consciousness? Finally what is this thinking we are seeking, which is neither assimilation of the Other to the Same nor integration of the Other into the Same [. . .]? What is needed is a thought which is no longer constructed as a relation of thinking to what is thought about, in the domination of thinking over what is thought about; what is needed is a thought which is not restricted to the rigorous correspondence between noesis and noema and not restricted to the adequation where the visible must be equal to the intentional aim (la visée), to which the visible would have to respond in the intuition of truth; what is needed is a thought for which the very metaphor of vision and aim (visée) is no longer legitimate.[4]

> Meaning cannot be inventoried in the inwardness of a thought.[5]

> It is not on behalf of a divorce between philosophy and reason that we hold to a meaningful language. But we are entitled to ask whether reason, presented as the possibility of such a Language, necessarily precedes it, or if language is not founded on a relation anterior to comprehension and which constitutes reason.[6]

> It is a question of perceiving the function of language not as subordinate to the consciousness that one has of the presence of the other (autrui), his neighborliness or our community with him, but rather as the condition of any conscious grasp.[7]

3. Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *BPW*, 35.
4. Levinas, "Transcendence and Intelligibility," *BPW*, 155.
5. Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *BPW*, 35.
6. Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental," *BPW*, 5.
7. Ibid., 6.

> To comprehension and signification grasped within a horizon, we oppose the signifyingness of the face.[8]

> In starting with touching, interpreted not as palpation but as caress, language, interpreted not as the traffic of information but as contact, we have tried to describe proximity as irreducible to consciousness and thematization. Proximity is a relationship with what cannot be resolved into "images" and exposed. It is a relationship not with what is inordinate with respect to a theme but with what is incommensurable with it; with what cannot be identified in the kerygmatic logos, frustrating any schematism.[9] (Levinas 1965, 80).

The line of this argument, drawn from articles written at various points in Levinas' career and arranged to form a kind of progression, is clear. Levinas wants to reorient philosophy, structuring it around a proximity that signifies prior to comprehension and opens the very possibility of understanding. In doing so, Levinas disrupts all the traditional categories of philosophy, re-describing them in terms that resist the reduction of the other to the same in the totalizing thematization of the real inherent in a metaphysics of presence.

In turning to Late Wittgenstein's critique of the tradition, the most obvious observation is that his method differs radically from Levinas. By working through elliptical, overlapping examples rather than sustained argument, Wittgenstein's texts embody the very critique of totality that they describe. Levinas was taken to task, most notably by Derrida, for speaking of a 'way out' of the tradition from within the language of the tradition itself.[10] Thus the shift in Levinas' vocabulary in his later works—to words like "obsession" and "hostage" that confound assimilation in the intellect's economy of understanding—might be thought as parallels to Wittgenstein's later work, in resisting totalization both conceptually *and* stylistically. Consider the following examples from the *Philosophical Investigations*:

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8. Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental," *BPW*, 10.
9. Levinas, "Enigma and Phenomenon," *BPW*, 80.
10. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1964), 79–153.

78. Compare *knowing* and *saying*:

How many feet high Mont Blanc is—
How the word "game" is used—
How a clarinet sounds.

If you are surprised that one can know something and not be able to say it, you are perhaps thinking of a case like the first. Certainly not of one like the third.[11]

114. (*Tractatus Logcico-Philosophicus*, 4.5): "The general form of propositions is: This is how things are."—That is the kind of proposition that one repeats to oneself countless times. One thinks that one is tracing the outline of the thing's nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.[12]

In asking the reader to consider how one might "represent" the sound of a clarinet, and calling into question the transparent relation between language and reality in the statement "This is how things are," Wittgenstein here calls attention to the problem of representation. What our common expressions often suggest to us, Wittgenstein says, is a deep correspondence between thought, language, and reality. In order to disrupt the totalizing formulations of this correspondence, all we have to do is look at the counter examples within our own forms of expression. A careful (and phenomenological) interrogation of our language will crack open the artifice of a metaphysical structure that is itself just another manner of expression, and not *the* manner of expression. Wittgenstein continues with his grammatical examination of the expression "This is how things are" in #136.

136. At bottom, giving "This is how things are" as the general form of proposi-
tions is the same as giving the definition: a proposition is whatever can be true
or false. For instead of "This is how things are" I could have said "This is true".
[. . .]
    Now it looks as if the definition—a proposition is whatever can be true
or false—determined what a proposition was, by saying: what fits the concept
'true', or what the concept 'true' fits, is a proposition. So it is as if we had a
concept of true and false, which we could use to determine what is and what is
not a proposition. What *engages* with the concept of truth (as with a cogwheel),
is a proposition.

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11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Englewood, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1958), 36e.

12. Ibid. 48e.

> But this is a bad picture. It is as if one were to say "The king in chess is *the*
> piece that one can check." But this can mean no more than that in our game of
> chess we only check the king. Just as the proposition that only a *proposition* can
> be true or false can say no more than that we only predicate "true" and "false" of
> what we call a proposition [. . .].[13]

Wittgenstein here rejects the picture of a proposition engaging with the concept of truth as a cogwheel, in which the propositions mesh and correspond (or not) with the true or the real. But rather than announcing the dialectical, supposedly "deconstructive," alternative suggested by his text, that propositions create the real, or that language produces the real, Wittgenstein provides another grammatical example that resituates the discussion. The question is not whether language produces or is produced by the real, but how the definition of the king functions in the practice of playing chess. Defining the king in chess as *the* piece that one checks might lead us to believe that our definition corresponds with a pre-existing reality, that our definition has uncovered the essence of the king in chess. And then we start asking questions about the essence of knowing or saying. But if this, or any, definition *is true*, it is so because it belongs to a particular practice where "language" and "reality" meet, in the language games that participate in a form of life. A definition, normally speaking, can only be true within a particular language game that is grounded in human practice. Only our metaphysical cravings for generality, as suggested by the very word "definition", or the word "is", lead us into formulations that are several degrees removed from actual human practices. Philosophy goes astray when it speaks without grounding, without attention to context. And thus Wittgenstein's example offers an elliptical critique of a metaphysical tradition founded on the concept of essence defined as eternal, stable substance fully present to consciousness. Wittgenstein's thinking serves to shift the criteria of correspondence from consciousness to lived and shared human practices.

Wittgenstein continues this assault on the core of the tradition by problematizing the supposedly fluid relation between a word's meaning and the intentional consciousness that uses this word.

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13. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 52–53e.

197. "It's as if we could grasp the whole use of a word in a flash."—And that is just what we say we do. That is to say: we sometimes describe what we do in these words. But there is nothing astonishing, nothing queer, about what happens. It becomes queer when we are led to think the future development must in some way already be present in the act of grasping the use and yet isn't present.—For we say that there isn't any doubt that we understand a word, and on the other hand its meaning lies in its use. There is no doubt that I now want to play chess, but chess is the game it is in virtue of all its rules (and so on). Don't I know, then, which game I want to play until I *have* played it? Or are all the rules contained in my act of intending? [. . .] So is it impossible for me to be certain what I am intending to do? And if that is nonsense—what kind of super-strong connexion exists between the act of intending and thing intended?—Where is the connexion effected between the sense of the expression "Let's play a game of chess" and all the rules of the game?—Well, in the list of rules of the game, in the teaching of it, in the day-to-day practice of playing.[14]

Primarily, this example insists that words are not present to our intentional consciousness in all the multiplicity of their functions—past, present, or future. The meaning of a word reveals itself in its particular function within a life, in a manner that is not always mediated and adjudicated by intentional consciousness. Here again, Wittgenstein draws attention away from consciousness as the guarantor of a stable and present reality, and into the particular forms of life which these words inhabit. And in questioning the adequacy of intentionality as a concept that bridges human beings and the world through consciousness, Wittgenstein drives a stake into the heart of a tradition that Levinas (and others) have made rightfully suspicious of itself. In particular, Husserlian phenomenology, with its founding myth of a Cartesian transcendental ego, stands under direct criticism. Interestingly, as indicated by the quote in #114 from the *Tractatus*, so do Wittgenstein's own early formulations, especially those that helped spawn the logical positivism which Wittgenstein himself thoroughly renounced. One senses both Husserl and the *Tractatus* under assault here. Could it be that they both represent culminating articulations of a metaphysics of presence before the deconstructive disfiguring of this tradition launched by Heidegger, Late Wittgenstein, Levinas, and Derrida?

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14. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* 80e.

Returning to the *Investigations*, I want to suggest that what Wittgenstein means by "forms of life" is roughly analogous to what Levinas means by "proximity." Consider:

> 241. "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?"—It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they *agree* in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.[15]

The phrase *Lebensform*, or form(s) of life, occurs only five times in *PI*, always suggesting the activities of lived behavior that constitutes the final means of understanding one another. Form of life is a "final vocabulary" in Late Wittgenstein, the ground zero towards which all philosophical inquiry must continually strive to return. We are only certain of our agreements and disagreements as we intimately observe the relationship of words to behavior in those around us. In the language of philosophy, one might say that forms of life are the particularities of lived practice that thinking must continually seek to inhabit in the face of the abstractions inherent in the metaphysical structures of our language. Language provides the means for "overcoming," or understanding, what language itself has wrought in its continual pull away from particularity. Metaphysics, and words like "essence," are not mistakes, but rather easily lead into generalized, universalized representations of the world that elide engagement with actual embodied agreements or disagreements.

Here both Levinas and Wittgenstein stand in complete agreement. Both promote a brand of post-Heideggerian ontology that recognizes the fundamentality of our being-in-the-world and being-with-others. Both work to destabilize any language that totalizes the real, showing that language functions more than representationally through a careful analysis of embodied linguistic experience. Both insist on more and more proximity' as the condition of possibility for meaningful engagement with our fellow human beings on the issues that matter most. On all of these important issues, Levinas and Wittgenstein are in total accord.

Where they diverge, of course, is in articulating the ethical meaning of this shared endeavor. For Levinas, the critique of the tradition is carried out

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15. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 88e.

entirely in ethical terms. The presence of the face signifies an irrecusable moral responsibility.

> It is not to be able to escape responsibility, not to have a hiding place of inwardness where one comes back into oneself, to march forward without concern for oneself. There is an increase of exigencies on oneself: the more I face my responsibilities the more I am responsible.[16]

> The encounter with the face—that is, moral consciousness—[. . .].[17]

It is precisely here, where proximity is equated with moral consciousness, that Levinas and Wittgenstein part ways. For Levinas proximity functions in one way, morally, and his work describes *the* way that language functions in and through proximity. In Wittgensteinian parlance, one might say that Levinas is after *the* language game;[18] Levinas plays the *ethical* language game. But, a Wittgensteinian theorist might ask, doesn't language function in other ways? Isn't the attempt to reduce language to ethics just another totalizing schematization, perhaps finally counter productive of its own ethical intentions? Is not the encounter with the face sometimes, necessarily, "other" than moral consciousness, when a face is just a thing that sells me coffee? Sometimes the face is just a thing, and this *must be*, for the sake of ethics. My indifference is more than weakness, more than a lack; it founds not only my survival but also the very possibility of my engagement. Life is more than trauma. Doesn't the equation of *all* proximity with moral consciousness call critical attention away from the *particular* moments of contact where our agreement or disagreement are of heightened concern, and where our best thinking is needed to negotiate the pitfalls that threaten our capacity to live together on this little planet?

Just as Freud suggests that Jesus' love commandment diminishes our ability to love individuals (as love of everyone is the same, both conceptually and psychologically, as love of no one), so Levinas' prescription or description of our infinite ethical obligation diminishes our capacity to meaningfully engage the particular ethical binds revealed in our proximite relationships

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16. Levinas, "Meaning and Sense," *BPW*, 55.

17. Levinas, "Is Ontology Fundamental," *BPW*, 10.

18. This idea was suggested by Jean Greisch in "The Face and Reading: Immediacy and Mediation," trans. Simon Critchley, in ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991), 70.

to other human beings. This is what Wittgenstein offers Levinas ethically. Less abstraction about an infinite ethical demand and more attention to the particular moments where *there is* an ethical demand. And yet, how are we to know where *there is* an ethical demand? For Wittgenstein it would have to be where differences in practice and thus value present themselves. But what Levinas offers Wittgenstein, aside from a traditional ethical vocabulary for a shared critique of the tradition, is more consciousness of where *there are* ethical obligations. Levinas reminds me what I can't help but forget or ignore or repress if I want to make it through my day—that the thing that sells me coffee has a face and suffers, and that there are faces behind that face which have also contributed to this coffee in my hand, and to whom I am also responsible.

To conclude, let me offer another vignette from Wittgenstein, as both a comment and question for the work of Levinas:

> 14. Imagine someone's saying: "All tools serve to modify something. Thus the hammer modifies the position of the nail, the saw the shape of the board, and so on."—And what is modified by the rule[r], the glue-pot, the nails? "Our knowledge of a thing's length, the temperature of the glue, and the solidity of the box."—Would anything be gained by this assimilation of expressions? (Wittgenstein 1953, 7e).

Well, *is* anything gained by an assimilation of Levinas' expression that the presence of the face equals moral consciousness? Is anything lost? Can this be determined outside of the use one makes of these words within a life?