

# THE TRACE AS TAUTEGORICAL: AN ACCOUNT OF THE FACE IN LEVINAS

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*This article explicates the notion of face, which Emmanuel Levinas understands as trace, in terms of the tautegorical. In opposition to the allegorical, the tautegorical is neither representational nor referential in the traditional sense. In contradistinction to the tautological, the tautegorical indicates an a-symmetrical and therefore not to be inverted identity between the so-called origin of the trace and the trace itself. Accordingly, a smile is happiness, but happiness—qua origin of the smile—is not reducible to the smile. Now, if the face of the Other is, as Levinas suggests, the trace of the wholly Other, i.e., God, then Derrida's question arises as to whether God is but an effect of the trace. This essay argues in the negative. Traces condition their origins as after-effects without the origins becoming mere consequences of the posterior; this is the proper way of accounting for Levinas's notion of the "posteriority of the anterior."*

This article puts forward an interpretation of Emmanuel Levinas's notion of "the trace" in terms of the tautegorical.<sup>1</sup> *Prima facie*, the tautegorical appears incompatible with Levinas's notion of alterity insofar as it is understood as an account of the Same.<sup>2</sup> As its etymology suggests, this word may be taken to affirm an identity or, stronger still, a sameness between the signifier and the signified. However, F. W. J. Schelling, from whom the present usage of the term "tautegory" derives, writes that "[m]ythology is not allegorical; it is tautegori-

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<sup>1</sup> For Levinas's earliest thoughts on the trace, see Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, (September 1963), 605–23. The term "trace" stems from the fifth chapter of Plotinus's fifth *Ennead*, where we read that "being is a trace of the One." See Plotinus, *Ennead V* (Loeb Classical Library 444), (tr.) A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 171.

<sup>2</sup> The term "tautegory" stems from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, though I first became aware of it through the late lectures of F.W.J. Schelling. The term occurs once and there, in a footnote, Schelling admits that this term was first used by Coleridge.

cal.”<sup>3</sup> Schelling uses this term in order to interpret the gods of mythology without understanding them as mere allegories representative of a philosophical truth or as personified forces of nature. Indeed, it is in distinction with the term “allegory,” which always signifies by pointing to another (*allos*), that the term “tautegory” is to be understood. Tautegory designates that mode of signification whereby the expression of something is not other than its reality, *i.e.* when something expresses nothing but itself. How does the toddler recognize a gruesome act if she has never before seen something gruesome and can provide no definition of the gruesome? Certainly, the child need not have an understanding of what is occurring before her eyes—if she witnesses a savage beating, for instance—to identify it as gruesome and horrific. The child does not understand this scene as representative of some meaning that was already understood in advance or as exemplary of the gruesomeness and horrific character of violence. The child understands the gruesome character of the event *not* because the act refers to or represents the gruesome, but because it tautegorically *is* gruesome and horrific. To use a mythological example from Schelling, Poseidon neither represents nor allegorically depicts the sea; Poseidon tautegorically *is* the sea, just as, for Levinas, every other *is* (the) wholly other.<sup>4</sup>

As we shall see, the inverse of the above statements does not hold if these statements are read tautegorically. The “is” in tautegorical statements posits a sameness without resemblance and, counter-intuitively enough, a heterogeneity rather than the homogeneity of similarity and *simulacra*. As an example, the batting of eyelashes does not resemble flirtation; it is not similar to flirtation. It looks, smells, tastes, sounds, and feels nothing like flirtation in the way that a picture can be representative of a person because it looks similar to the person; or the way freshly cut grass can be representative of baseball because it smells similar to a baseball field. The batting of eyelashes, however, does not signify by representing—it does not

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<sup>3</sup> F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke* II/1, (ed.) K. F. A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta Verlag, 1856), 196.

<sup>4</sup> One is tempted to use a more radical term than “tautegory,” namely, “literality.” In fact, one could have just as easily entitled this paper, “Levinas on Literality.” If something does not represent, allegorically depict or analogically refer to something other than itself, then it literally *is* the thing it signifies. Poseidon is not a metaphor for the sea, but Poseidon *literally* is the sea. Note, in this context, how Levinas lauds the literal interpretation of texts when he is speaking of Genesis 2:7 and exclaims of a certain reading that “it is also the literal meaning—and, for all that, also the most profound one.” See Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, (ed.) Sean Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), 231.

function as a *simulacrum*. Heterogeneous identification, in distinction with the homogeneous identification of representationalism, does not lead to the reduction of one term to the other in the perfect symmetry of equivalency; it is an asymmetrical (*i.e.* not to be inverted) sameness. In short, tautology designates an asymmetrical identity, a heterogeneous identity. Batting one's eyelashes is flirtation, but flirtation is not necessarily the batting of eyelashes. Jane tautologically, and thus heterogeneously, *is* her body, but the body is not Jane. Levinas's account of the trace, then, corresponds to the idea of the tautological insofar as it repudiates all forms of homogeneity, similarity, allegory, and representation. If, as Levinas suggests, every other *is* (the) wholly other, then every other *is* God; but God cannot be identified with each and every other. Every visible other *qua* face *is* the face of the invisible God, but God is not, in turn, the visible surface of any of those faces. The face *qua* face is invisible, only manifested through the visibility of the trace. Levinas's trace, as tautological, is heterogeneous and asymmetrical, manifesting something of an entirely other order than itself. In this sense, visibility is the epiphany of the invisible, the manifestation of audibility without representation or similarity. Visibility is dissimilar to audibility.

## Face and Totality: Heidegger and Levinas on the End of the World

Levinas writes, "Expression, or the face, overflows images...the face never becomes an image or an intuition."<sup>5</sup> Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak expounds upon this trope of Levinas, explaining, "'The Face' transcends all phenomenality and beingness and is, in this sense, 'invisible,' other than being, 'ab-solved' and 'absolute.'"<sup>6</sup> The face, the condition of visibility, counterintuitive as it may seem, actually transcends phenomenality. One might say that it is the invisibility of the visible. Now, whatever is utterly transcendent, whatever is not at all phenomenal, whatever escapes even the possibility of experience, simply is not. The face, however, is not invisible *simpliciter*; it is the invisibility *of* the visible. It is not something which is simply not, without a relation to what is, but it is, more precisely, "otherwise"

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<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, (tr.) A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 297. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TI.

<sup>6</sup> Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 5.

than Being. Being is, as it were, not the face's *mode* of being. The face is not absolute in the sense that it would be destitute of any relation to being, but it is uncoupled relation or relation unrelated; it has been absolved of any phenomenal relations and, accordingly, of the possibility of functioning as a representative *simulacrum*. As heterogeneously dissimilar to the phenomenal and visible it cannot be its representation, though it may substitute for it.<sup>7</sup>

Another commentator writes, "To the extent that the face is out of world, it appears *in* the world as naked and destitute. Naked—that is, without clothing, covering, or mask—it signifies without attributes, outside any categories, not across its generality, but by itself...."<sup>8</sup> To say that the face is "out of the world" is not to inscribe it in otherworldly and noumenal transcendence. This would render the face *de facto* invisible, not otherwise than Being, but merely apophatic. Rather, the face is out of the world if and only if it *appears in* the world. It is not the locale that makes the face worldly or unworldly but its *modus operandi*. The face appears in such a way that its appearance renders it a disservice. It appears as more than—or rather otherwise than—its appearance, breaking the boundaries of, and absolving itself from, its own visibility; it is infinitizing not in a quantitative, but in a qualitative manner by outstripping the realm of visibility. The face is out of the world because it *appears* as "naked and destitute." It transgresses the world, or infinitizes the finitude of the phenomenal world, by appearing apart from categories, qualities, species, or genera. The face belongs nowhere, under no sign, no hierarchy and without representation. Yet, there is no apophaticism here, but a non-dogmatic cataphaticism. The face is not "otherworldly," but "de-worlding."

Think here about Heidegger's notion of world in *Being and Time* as a "structural factor."<sup>9</sup> For Heidegger, the world is the holistic,

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<sup>7</sup> Levinas poignantly writes, "Substitution is signification." See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: or Beyond Essence*, (tr.) A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009) 13. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as OTB. The use of substitution in the main text is admittedly a bit out of place, but insofar as Levinas finds substitution, *i.e.*, the ego as always already standing in the place of and under the persecution of the Other, to be the condition of communication rather than communication the condition of substitution, the usage of this term in this context is meant only to *connote* any and all signification that occurs prior to the communicability of representative speech acts.

<sup>8</sup> Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 58.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (tr.) J. Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 59.

interrelated complex of tools and implementations.<sup>10</sup> To be “out of the world,” then, is something that occurs through “de-worlding.” Something must *appear* indeed, but out of context and out of joint, incapable of enumeration under any headings or categories. Heidegger often associates this with anxiety in *Being and Time*<sup>11</sup> and, in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, with the state of boredom.<sup>12</sup> In anxiety, one is removed from the possibilities that the world offers and returned to one’s own vertiginous array of possibilities, which are latent within *Da-sein* itself. In the latter case of boredom, Being no longer gives itself as worldly, *i.e.* as a holistic complex, but rather the “world” lies before one as a meaningless and inert lump, *i.e.* as a lump without signification in which every possibility and every vocation falls on deaf ears, a lump with which there is nothing to do and no enjoyment. Boredom, in Heidegger’s philosophy, is a state of disinterestedness, of no longer taking and finding any interest in the world. In this state, one is not confronted with the question of how to implement this or that being. Without care, which is the fundamental comportment of *Da-sein* in Heidegger’s earlier thought<sup>13</sup>, beings appear as brute obscenities without purpose, relation or meaning, now more faceless than ever. Only now, says Heidegger, does the question as to why there are any beings at all rather than nothing authentically impinge itself upon us in an existential manner, rather than a merely theoretical one.

In conjunction with boredom, one could also add fatigue, *i.e.* Sartre’s nausea, and perhaps even the comical. In fatigue or nausea, the world is given as an exhausted heap—that is, as a merely contingent facticity exhausted of all its potentialities. In fatigue, the world becomes obscene, without a reason for being, *i.e.* a complete and utter contingency that, given its apparent meaninglessness, could just as easily not have been. Nausea and disgust ensue from fatigue because everything is “too much.” Not just too much of this or that, but it is with absolutely everything that one could just as easily have done without. With the comical at least the notion of amusement, or rather bemusement, remains, but not enjoyment, not the *jouissance* of

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<sup>10</sup> See *Ibid.*, Division One, Chapter III.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ibid.*, Division One, Chapter VI, § 40.

<sup>12</sup> For Heidegger’s discussion of boredom, see Part One of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, (tr.) W. McNeill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> One could make the argument that, as the fundamental comportment of *Da-sein*, care is superseded in the later works by *Gelassenheit*, which, while not a lack of care, is certainly not a care that inserts itself into the world as a teleologically ordered structure.

absorption in the world, or even Heideggerian care. If the world is comical, it is because we are disinterested or, as Levinas might say, “dis-inter-ested,”<sup>14</sup> as we recognize the absurdity of the interrelated complex called “the world as a whole.” Instead of one feeling disgust, however, one can do nothing but laugh. This is also why modern tragedies (think, for example, of the works of Woody Allen and Larry David) are often also comedies. When one no longer cares enough even to mourn for the loss of the world as a teleologically organized complex, one can either become numb and apathetic, which is but the fatigue of disgust, or one can laugh. In states in which the world becomes obscene, there is technically no experience of a “world” at all because the world is a teleologically organized complex, not the obscenity of contingent parts outside of parts, not the inertness of a lump without significance. In Heidegger, the loss of the world in the technical sense, or rather the world’s disarticulation, occurs when Being loses its significance, becoming an inert and inaudible lump, a faceless lump without voice.<sup>15</sup> For Levinas, however, “de-worlding” occurs not through a loss of significance, but precisely through the signification of the face, through the voice of the Other. It is the face of the Other that wrenches us from our engagement with the world.

It matters not that Levinas begins with our pre-pragmatic saturation in the world prior to the implementation of tools, prior to the world as a teleologically organized whole. In other words, it matters not that Levinas begins with enjoyment prior to the habituation of the home. In a clear effort to distance himself from the account of worldliness provided by Heidegger, Levinas notes, “In enjoyment the things are not absorbed in the technical finality that organizes them into a system” (TI, 130) and, “The suspension or absence of the ultimate finality has a positive face—the disinterested joy of play.” (TI, 134) One is wrenched, or, as it were, dispossessed from the

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<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, (tr.) B. Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 203.

<sup>15</sup> For the Heidegger of *Introduction to Metaphysics*, boredom corresponds to the dis-articulation of the world into a lump, or, stated differently, the world loses its significance because the call, the voice of articulation, falls on deaf, disinterested ears. Only a voice can articulate. In the earlier Heidegger of *Being and Time*, however, it is the absence of the call that allows the world to remain teleologically articulated. The call disjoins, dispossesses or disarticulates one from the teleological complex of tools and the like, *i.e.* worldliness, in order to bring one into a state of anxiety, before an infinity of possibilities that are not articulated within the complex of the world, but in one’s freedom. The call brings one before the fact that possibilities are latent within their freedom and not dispersed amongst the structural character of the world.

world in Heidegger once the world loses its significance, and we our interest in it, in order that one might ask why there is even a world at all rather than nothing whatsoever. In Levinas, however, one is removed from a play that, while enjoyable, is disinterested and insignificant. One is riled from the disinterest of play, albeit not necessarily from the enjoyment of play, through the significance of the face which demands my interest. The critical step, *i.e.* the moment of *crisis*, occurs when the face of the other somehow interrupts the world of enjoyment, our being absorbed and dissipated in disinterested play, in order to call us to attention. The face, which is not a phenomenon, infinitizes itself by breaking the bonds of the world of enjoyment—that is, by wresting us from our saturation/enjoyment in the world, our “bathing in the elements,” “dephasing” or “denucleating” us from our saturation in the elemental. Levinas states, “There is a coring out (*dénucléation*), of the imperfect [enjoyment].” (OTB, 64) The face of the other dephases me; it is an interstice that wedges its way between me and my immediate absorption in the world.<sup>16</sup> By inhabiting me, rather than I it, it displaces or dislocates me from the merely elemental world of play. I am, then, no longer immersed and saturated in the faceless world, in the neuter *il y a*, be the experience one of horror or enjoyment. Instead, I am invoked from afar, from “out of the world.” As saturated within the world as my dwelling, or as elemental, the world is actually not yet signified to me but lived in me. Only first through the invocation from out of the world—which, again, is not the invocation of the beyond or transcendent—does signification occur. The face is not a phenomenon precisely because it is discourse, because it *speaks* to me in proximity and yet from afar, from out of the world. The face is invisible because it is not seen, but *heard*.

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<sup>16</sup> One should note here that Levinas speaks of the face in at least two senses, the proximate and intimate face of femininity and the remote face of masculinity, the latter of which is the face that confronts me with my ethical responsibility by calling my interest away from the world as my proper abode or dwelling. In fact, without the feminine Other as the condition of the world as a dwelling place, the world is not worldly at all, not even as abode, home, or dwelling, but the merely elemental buzzing of the *il y a*. The feminine face separates one from the elemental in order to bring about home, abode and the possibility of possession. I take up the discussion of whether the feminine too might be able to make an ethical demand on the Other in an article forthcoming in *Parrhesia*, titled “The Body as Proffer: An Involuntary ‘Here I Am.’”

## The Face as Tautegorical: Against Representationalism

Let us quickly recap, in a paragraph, the tautegorical nature of the face introduced at the beginning of this article. The face does not signify through categories and attributes. Levinas describes that “a face is not an appearance or sign of some reality.” (OTB, 93) The face is but the thing itself. As one commentator stated it, “Unlike other signs, facial expressions signify only themselves. They do not refer to something else, to states of mind or feeling. Their autosignification is presemiotic and has no cognitive content.”<sup>17</sup> The signification of the face is not a referral to another reality. The face signifies, which is to say that it reveals, nothing other than itself. A grimace, for example, is neither an allegory for pain, nor a representation of pain, nor even an indication of pain by analogy, but it signifies pain by *being* pain. The grimace *is* the manifestation of pain, although pain cannot, in turn, be said to *be* the grimace. Asymmetry reigns here. A better example than a grimace may be a yelp; for the yelp, like the face proper, is audible rather than visible. At any rate, note that while the grimace tautegorically is pain, and while the yelp too tautegorically is pain, the grimace is not a yelp, and a yelp is not a grimace. This identification could only be made if symmetry rather than asymmetry were operative. In any event, the face and its expression—and the face *is* nothing but expression—are only understandable tautegorically and so asymmetrically. Moreover, analogies, representative signifiers, and allegories, relate two distinct entities by indicating a similitude between the two. The two terms must be *simulacra*. For instance, to say that “one’s couch is as red as an apple” is to compare two things on the basis of something, redness, which is likened to both. Tautegory, however, is heterogeneous. A grimace is nothing *like* a pain and it is not *similar* to pain; it *is* pain. Tautegory is indeed autosignification, but it is not isomorphic and homogenous. It indicates nothing other than itself by being unlike itself.

Everything turns upon the nature of the copula. The “is” does not indicate isomorphic identifications, lest the terms be an invertible tautology. Tautegory is not tautology. “The grimace is pain” is not equal to “Pain is a grimace.”<sup>18</sup> The grimace tautegorically *is* the pain

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<sup>17</sup> Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> The account of the tautegorical, as far as I know, has surprisingly not been employed in Christian hermeneutics and apologetics as a way of dealing with John 1:1. “The Word is God” is not a tautology but tautegory, because it cannot be inverted. God is not the Word, *i.e.*, He remains always more than His Word, *i.e.*, effusive, despite the heterogeneous identification of the Word with God.



because the subject does not exist in advance of the predicate; without the predicate, the subject simply is not. Yet, the predicate is not at all similar to the subject—it is not a representative of the subject. Of course, pain could occur through the epiphany of writhing rather than a grimace. This or that predicate is not necessary, but *if* it turns out to be a grimace, then the grimace bears a necessary relation to pain. On the one hand, allegories and analogies are conventional and arbitrary because other similitudes, and so other predicates, could always be employed in an effort to represent the subject under question. On the other hand, tautegory is contingent and heterogeneous, but without rendering the predicate obsolete. The sign *is* its meaning; one can never dispense with the sign or signifier as though its role were arbitrary in the way that one allegory or metaphor can be exchanged for another. The signifier is not an arbitrary investiture that is conventionally appended to its meaning, as one presumably does when one allegorizes, but the signifier *is* its meaning. In this way the signifier, despite its contingency, is irreplaceable. If, under tautegory, the signifier *is* its meaning, then the face of a person *is* their personhood, and the person is nothing without their visible invisibility, *i.e.* their trace or face. Levinas states the matter as follows:

The signification of the face is due to an essential coinciding of the existent and the signifier. Signification is not added to the signifier. Signification is not added to the existent. To signify is not equivalent to presenting oneself as a sign, but to expressing oneself, that is, presenting oneself in person. (TI, 262)

The face tautegorically *is* the origin of the person insofar as it is the trace of an origin that never was in advance of the trace, or, as Derrida might state it, the face as trace “supplements” the origin with itself. Prior to the trace, the origin simply is not; prior to the face as the epiphany of the person, the person simply is not. Contrary to the Cartesians, I am my body; I am not disincarnate.

Levinas writes, “Expression does not manifest the presence of being by referring from the sign to the signified; it presents the signifier. The signifier, he who gives a sign, is not signified.... Hence the signifier must present himself before every sign, by himself—present a face.” (TI, 181–82) The face as the origin—what I call the “trace-origin”—does not refer to the person, but it presents, *i.e.* gives as epiphany, the signifying one. Signifying—eventually, in *OTB*, Say-

ing<sup>19</sup>—does not exist in advance of what it signifies—the Said—only in order to scavenge for *les mots justes*, but the signifier, the voice, is itself the presentation of the signifying/Saying. Tautegory is this auto-presentation of the signifying, Saying signifying itself in the Said. However, the Said does not encapsulate or totalize Saying; the Said can never say Saying, but there is only Saying at all with the Said. Saying infinitizes, proving itself as more than what is Said, but, without the Said, Saying is mute. Saying is not mute, however. We know this because it is Said even though what is Said can never circumscribe Saying. Saying, that is, “the signifier, he who gives a sign, is not signified.” (TI, 182) In other words, Saying must signify itself because no sign, nothing Said, can say it.

The face is audible rather than visual. The face speaks, it signifies itself rather seeking representation; it stands outside all parties, factions and representation. Levinas confirms, “The face of the other in proximity, which is more than representation, is an unrepresentable trace, the way of the infinite.” (OTB, 116) The trace or face is tautegorical because it finds no representation, not even apophatically. This is the trace’s *modus operandi*, its way of “appearing invisible,” and this constitutes its status as “otherwise” than Being. Instead of being the transcendence of infinity, the trace is infinitizing. Levinas does not tire of warning against the hypostatization of the Infinite, proclaiming that “one would be wrong to forget [the trace’s] anarchic insinuation by confusing it with an indication, with the monstration of the signified in the signifier.” (OTB, 121) The trace is insinuated anarchically because it is not the re-presentation of a pre-given transcendence, a pure signified, or the signified prior to its signifier. The signified only finds inscription and only is at all *through* the signifier which tautegorically is that which is to be signified. The “origin” is anarchic, or not really an origin at all but a

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<sup>19</sup> Levinas distinguishes between the Saying, or the “to Say,” and the Said. The Said refers to the content of speech and to language as a system of signifiers. Structuralism, and linguistic analysis in general, is applicable within the domain of the Said. The Saying of what is Said, however, evades such an analysis. To regard the Saying rather than what is Said is to disregard the content or the “themes,” to use Levinas’s language, that are Said. It is to disregard *what* is Said and turn one’s focus toward the fact *that* one speaks, the fact *that* something is said at all. If language could be resolved into the themes and content of what is Said, then what would be left entirely unexplained is that which prompts one to discourse and signification at all. *That* one takes the time to say “Hello” to me says more than what is semantically expressed in that single word. That “more,” which is signified, is but the fact that the other person chose to offer herself, to engage in Saying and so address herself to me at all.

non-origin, because it only “is” *through* its signifying trace. One does not advance from the *priority* of that to be signified to its subsequent reference in a signifier, *i.e. a priori*, but one begins always already too late, always *per posterius* or *through* the “posterior” trace, which is just as old, just as prior, as that of which it would be the trace. Levinas speaks of this as the “posteriority of the anterior” (TI, 54), noting that it is “as though” the cause were older than its effect, the thing older than its trace. He explains, however, that this “as though” is not an illusion but “constitutes a positive event.” (TI, 54) At any rate, as will be explicated more fully, without pointing to the positive presence of something given in advance of the trace, the trace is neither a mere illusion, nor a mere absence that points to nothing at all.

As Colin Davis notes, the so-called origin or, rather, the trace-origin “is glimpsed only in the third person, neither a presence nor an absence, but a trace, infinitely close and absolutely distant. Illeity is alterity at the furthest remove; and to be in the image of God is to stand in the trace of this illeity.”<sup>20</sup> Illeity, as “infinitely close and absolutely distant,” is proximate, or intimate, but also something that speaks from out of the world. Illeity, as “neither presence nor absence,” is neither cataphatic nor apophatic. Illeity is, therefore, not a mediating concept, not a middle term, but that which names the “faceness” of the face, its infinitizing and “invisibilizing” character. Levinas describes it this way: “The nonphenomenality of the other who affects me beyond representation, unbeknownst to me and like a thief, is the Illeity of the third person.”<sup>21</sup> The second person addresses me in intimacy but the third, who is always present in the second before me, speaks from afar. This “alterity at the furthest remove” de-worlds and denucleates me through the intimacy of the second person, the secret immediacy of the I-Thou relation, by speaking from afar, *i.e.* from out of the world, from on High. Unlike Hegel’s *Begriff*, or Heidegger’s *Sein*, this alterity is not a faceless third, but the face of the He, the *Il* of illeity, the face in every face, the invisibility of the visible, the very alterity of the Other, which detotalizes every totality. Levinas declares, “This ‘thirdness’ is different from that of the third man, it is the third party that interrupts the face to face of a welcome of the other man.” (OTB, 150) This thirdness (*le tiers*) is not a mediator, it is not a Platonic universal that lies in common between my neighbour and myself as the *condition sine*

<sup>20</sup> Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 99.

<sup>21</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 201.

*qua non* of relation and discourse. Instead, it is a rupture between I and Thou, a de-worlding breach of intimacy. Thus, the thirdness operative in illeity is not a synthesis of the two in a dialectical relation. It is the third *party*—i.e. another You, another face, another Other—even if this party is only present through the face of the Other before me, the third in the second, alterity in proximity. As such, this third party does not synthesize and mediate discourse; far from making dialogue possible, the third party interrupts any and all dialogue. Now, our task is not to argue for the exaltedness, dignity and even divinity of illeity, but our task is to elucidate the implications of its character as trace-origin. Our task is to elucidate the assertion that the trace tautegorically *is* the origin (but that, in turn, the origin is not nothing but trace). Derrida, for example, has shown that when Levinas talks of “standing in the trace of this illeity” he apparently speaks inexactly.<sup>22</sup> There is not a trace “of” illeity, neither for Levinas nor for Derrida, as if there were first the *Il* and subsequently its trace. Such a conception would make the trace into a mere representation, rather than the epiphany, of the *Il*. To recall, for Levinas, “one would be wrong to forget [the trace’s] anarchic insinuation by confusing it with an indication, with the monstration of the signified in the signifier.” (OTB, 121) There is only the trace as the very originality of the origin, which makes the non-origin into an origin only *post factum*, or *per posterius*. The origin only acquires its originality through its trace, that is, through its signifier, which tautegorically *is* this origin, a trace just as original as that of which it would be trace, a trace-origin. The locution “*per posterius*” is meant to indicate that the posterior trace is the condition of the very anteriority of the “origin,” of that which it traces. Let Levinas again be heard concerning the posteriority of the anterior: “The *After* or the *Effect* conditions the *Before* or the *Cause*” (TI, 54), which, as Drew Dalton rightly notes, means that “this marking [the trace as a non-representative signifier] cannot be conceived as a part of the subject’s biography, as a part of who he or she *is*.”<sup>23</sup> The subject only *is*

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<sup>22</sup> Derrida speaks of illeity as “the contending of a ‘He [*Il*] in the depth of the You [*Tu*]’...the wholly other as the same, the same He, the separated one: *the illeity of the He* (‘He in the depth of the You’) as the third person, *holiness and separation*” See Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, (tr.) P. Brault & M. Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 60. As we will later see, Derrida attempts to push Levinas to a point where one can no longer say that we stand in the trace of illeity, but that illeity and its He/*Il* are but constructions of the trace. We would then stand not “in the trace of illeity” but in the trace of *nothing*!

<sup>23</sup> Drew Dalton, *Longing for the Other: Levinas and Metaphysical Desire* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009), 42.

through the markings of its posterior trace; the origin only is, as it were, *per posterius*.

## The Trace-Origin: Unprethinkable Anteriority

As trace, the face is not the trace of a transcendent origin as Levinas repeatedly affirms, "A face does not function as a sign of a hidden God." (OTB, 94) As Edith Wyschogrod rightly concludes, "If the face is in the trace of that which is beyond, may we not ask whether the trace is not the trace of 'something', perhaps of a God who remains invisible. Levinas rejects any facile imputation of causality to God, so that the trace becomes the sign of a hidden God."<sup>24</sup> There was not first an origin, "something" alone and by itself, that, via an act of magic causality, rendered an effect or trace of itself. Rather, the trace is as old as the origin because it *is* the origin. The origin was never present to itself but is only traced *post factum*. It is not a beginning that ever was, but a Past immemorial, a Past that at any given time always already has been. The Present is, as it were, the trace of the Past, a Past which is only subjected as Past. As such, it is only placed in the subject-position through the trace of the Present, through the present trace, the present signifier, or the predicate. As Levinas notes, "The present is but the trace of an immemorial past." (OTB, 89) Wyschogrod elaborates, "I cannot follow the trace as though it were a path or a way through which one might approach God. Instead I am adjured to turn to the [the face of the] other who stands in the trace of illeity."<sup>25</sup> If the origin were temporally precedent to its trace (*i.e.* its epiphany), it would be thinkable *a priori* (*i.e.* in advance of its epiphany); However, it is only thinkable *per posterius*, only by means of its epiphany. In other words, one can only think of the origin *as* something prior to its epiphany, but one cannot think it *from* its priority. It is only thinkable in and through its epiphany or revelation, but having become thinkable in this way, it can only be thought or posited *as* the absolutely prior, *as* the absolute *prius* itself, which is only thinkable *per posterius*. Levinas affirms *as* much, asserting that "consciousness is seized without any *a priori* (the other is always encountered in an unexpected fashion)."<sup>26</sup> For Levinas, the

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<sup>24</sup> Edith Wyschogrod, "Language and Alterity in the Thought of Levinas," *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, (ed.) S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 197.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, 174.

idea of the Infinite is “a knowledge without a priori. The idea of Infinity *is revealed*, in the strong sense of the term.” (TI, 61–62) The concept of revelation is the concept of that which cannot be thought *a priori* or in advance of its epiphany, *i.e.* its revelatory trace. The origin simply is nought in advance of the trace; it only *is*, tautegorically, in and through its trace. Because it is unknowable in advance, anything revealed can only give itself through itself as autosignification or tautegory, and not allegorically, analogically or representatively. Its presentation is always sudden and startling because it is unforeseeable *a priori*. For this reason, revelation can never be the fulfillment of an anticipation (as opposed to the fulfilled intentionality of Husserl’s protention), but always comes as a rupture, breach, or an interruption in the flow of, and absorption in, things, a de-worlding.<sup>27</sup> This is why Levinas writes that “Signification surprises the very thought that thought it.” (TI, 206)

One should not, therefore, follow Jill Robbins to the letter when she writes that “God is (nothing) but trace. God *is* not, apart from trace. The trace *of* God means the trace that is God.”<sup>28</sup> For Levinas, at least, one cannot say that “God is nothing but trace,” or that God is reducible to, or synonymous with, the trace. What does hold, however, is that the trace is God, which cannot be inverted to mean that God equals the trace and is nothing but the trace. While the trace is God (which constitutes the cataphatic element of Levinas’s thought), God is not the trace (which constitutes its apophatic element). The relation is asymmetrical or heterogeneous—the trace is not a tautology. Robbins, however, is entirely correct in saying that apart from trace God simply is not. The phrase “the trace of God” does not mean that there is first God and then His possession, namely, His trace; rather, it means that there is God only because the trace is there as the very signification/manifestation/epiphany/expression of God, namely, the one who posthumously, or *post factum*, appropriates the anterior of that of which the trace is said to be trace as His own. God can exist *as* the one who precedes the trace as a Past immemorial only insofar as God is not synonymous with or encapsulated by the trace itself. The trace is not the unfolding of a God given in advance. The trace is thus sudden, not the representation of a God given in

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<sup>27</sup> As a perhaps overstated suggestion, it might be argued that every attempt at a radical empiricism entails a theory of revelation as the doctrine that nothing can be known in advance of its actuality. Radical empiricists must be committed to the doctrine that something’s actuality precedes its possibility, or that *actus* precedes *potentia*.

<sup>28</sup> Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 37.

advance of His expression, but the epiphany, the revealing, the (eternal) coming-into-being of the same. Shall one venture the proposition that without God's Word God is not? The face as trace or as "the trace of a withdrawal that orders it as a face" (OTB, 121) means that there is nothing behind the face or, at least, that that which is behind the face only came to be behind-the-scenes, but not in advance of the face. That "behind" the face is not a transcendence existing in advance, but that which only comes to be through its posterior, *i.e. per posterius*, as something irreducible to its trace just as Saying cannot be reduced to theme of what is Said. That of which the trace is trace is not *unthinkable*, but it is *unprethinkable*. However, that does not preclude that it is *post-thinkable*, *i.e.* thinkable only through the trace, namely, *post factum* and *per posterius*. The Past immemorial, the origin that never was, has always already passed away, its reality consisting in its passing by, its end trail, its backside, its posterior, its trace.<sup>29</sup>

Bernard Waldenfels confirms, in complete agreement with the tautegorical thesis, that "thus referring to an immemorial past, the trace of the face marks and even constitutes the other's face."<sup>30</sup> The face of the other is not a sign, representation or analogy indicating that a person is there behind that face and within that body; one rather *is* their face, their expression. Without their face they simply are not, although they are not subsumed in their face, *i.e.* reducible to their appearing, their epiphany, their words or their deeds. Likewise, the Past immemorial never was, never in advance of its trace, never in advance of the Present. It is not a time that passed away, but is always already a time passed by without ever having been at some time as a present moment. The Past only is in and through the Present as the presence of a haunting absence, that which we have just missed. (This is reminiscent of how nobody can remember being born, of how nobody can recall their origin.) This marks the diachronic rather than synchronic or synoptic nature of time. Time can never be gathered into a whole because there is always a remainder, a Past just out of reach, incapable of recollection and recovery, a never presencing remainder, a time displaced and repressed. In

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<sup>29</sup> In this context, one might find it helpful to recall the story of God showing Moses his backside—or posterior—but refusing to let him look upon His face—or anterior. This story can be found in Exodus 33:12–23.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Waldenfels, "Levinas and the Face of the Other," *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, (ed.) S. Critchley & R. Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 77.

short, the origin, so-called, is always lost, dispersed amongst its trace in an irrecuperable manner. Peperzak poignantly states:

Saying and the Said are united in the very act of speaking in spite of their being “diachronically” related to one another. Their combination in one and the same time is possible because their difference does not produce a contradiction. The Saying and the Said are not contradictory, but incommensurable.<sup>31</sup>

They are incommensurable because the Said, in which there is the passing, or trace, of the Other, can never encapsulate the Saying, that of which it is the epiphany. This is why Saying is irreducible to its epiphany, namely, what is Said. The Past immemorial is only given in the Present trace that can never say it without remainder—a trace that can never encapsulate and recollect it. This remainder is what ensures the asymmetrical character of the tautegorical. The face of the Other is God, but God, unable to be assumed without remainder and encapsulated by what the face, as a properly audible trace has Said, remains always not quite yet Said and still “to Say.” Because the Past is without remainder so too is the Future; there is always more to say and to come. Just as the perfect tense, *e.g.* “It has been written”, is expressible by the present tense, “It is written,” in like manner the Past immemorial, as a perfect “has been,” always already “is.” It is not without influence on the Present despite its perpetual absence, its perpetual character of having right at this present moment just passed by. As tautegorical, the trace retains an “at the same time” structure, yet without falling into the simultaneity of the synchronic. The trace *is* the origin, but it is not synonymous with and reducible to its presence because it is not synchronic with it. Note Levinas again: “The trace of a past in a face is not the absence of a yet non-revealed, but the anarchy of what has never been present.” (OTB, 97) The trace operates *per posterius*, the posterior functioning as the condition, albeit not encapsulation, of the prior. Although the prior is unprethinkable, it is not unthinkable; it is post-thinkable, just as the signified is only thinkable *through* the signifier, the origin *through* the trace.

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<sup>31</sup> Peperzak, *Beyond*, 159.



## Otherwise Than Levinas: An Empty Tautegory or a Tautology

This final section introduces a problem posed by Jacques Derrida—as well as Jill Robbins above—which pushes Levinas’s account of the trace to its limit. Concerning the nature of the face in Levinas, Derrida writes:

Within [the face-to-face relation] the face is given simultaneously as expression and as speech. Not only as glance, but as the original unity of glance and speech, eyes and mouth.... It does not incarnate, envelop, or signal anything other than self, soul, subjectivity, etc. Thought is speech, and is therefore immediately face.... The other is not signaled by his face, he is this face.... The other, therefore, is given “in person” and without allegory only in the face.<sup>32</sup>

Without using the word “tautegory,” a more tautegorical account of the face could hardly be given. However, Derrida continues to press the point by writing:

Neither the sign nor the effect exceeds the same. We are “in the Trace of God.” A proposition which risks incompatibility with every allusion to the “very presence of God.” A proposition readily converted into atheism: and if God was the *effect of the trace*?<sup>33</sup>

Recall Robbins’s formulation that “God is (nothing) but trace.” It is this daring proposition that God might be nothing but the effect of the trace, the anterior nothing but the consequence of the posterior, which I would like both to accept and reject, albeit not at one and the same moment, but only diachronically, or skeptically. Levinas writes that skepticism and “its refutation signify a temporality in which the instants refuse memory which recuperates and represents.” (OTB, 167) He goes on to note that skepticism “puts an interval between saying and the said.” (OTB, 168) Skeptical Saying is diachronic rather than synchronic, affirming at one moment only in order to unsay it later. Now, if the term atheism, as employed in the prior quote by Derrida, is meant to suggest that, for Levinas, there is no God and no origin present to itself in a noumenal and transcendent world be-

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, (tr.) A. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 100.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

yond, then his reading is certainly sound. If, however, he thereby makes the trace into the cause or origin as such, *i.e.* the antecedent, and God into the effect or trace, *i.e.* the consequent, then he is remaking as symmetrical that which is asymmetrical. If this is the intent in the above passage, then Derrida is confusing the tautegorical nature of the "trace-origin," the trace which *is* the origin, with the reciprocal and symmetrical formulation "trace=God," which can be also read as "God=trace." On that reading, Derrida misunderstands the transitive nature of the copula. The posteriority of the anterior does not mean "posteriority=anteriority" and the reverse. Only if the proposition concerning the trace of God could be inverted, such that God would be nothing but trace, could this follow, and only then could one synchronically pronounce that the cause is nothing but the effect of the trace without having to recognize an irretrievable, never presencing remainder in the same. That reading, however, far from tautegory and its heterogeneity, is also far from Levinas. It is a position that would view the terms homogeneously, as an invertible tautology: the trace=God, consequent=antecedent. Levinas, however, is less interested in the reciprocal identity of the tautological than he is in the heterogeneous identification of the tautegorical. At any rate, the contention of this article, is that Levinas is best read according to tautegory because his position is as far away from tautology as it is from allegory. Moreover, Derrida's seemingly tautological reading, such that trace=God and reciprocally God=trace, would also transform the Past immemorial, or God as the absolutely anterior, into nothing but a fabrication or construction of the Present. This interpretation would dispense with the notion of diachronic time—with its skeptical Saying that can never be encapsulated by what is Said in the Present—and thereby reopen the door for that beleaguered account of time based in a synoptic present. In other words, Derrida, despite his atheism, would reintroduce a kind of philosophy of presence.

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