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Tartalomjegyzék

KOVÁCS ISTVÁN	
Előszó	7
BORDÁS BERTALAN	
Diáktüntetéők Budapesten és demonstrációk Londonban. A háborúpárti brit sajtónarratíva megjelenése a magyar sajtóban és közvéleményben az 1875–1878-as nagy keleti válság idején	13
CSABAY ISTVÁN	
Miért nem retributivista Cesare Beccaria?	35
DARADICS BOGLÁRKA	
Lukács György drámaelméleti fogalomrendszerének szociológiai aspektusai	61
HORVÁTH MIHÁLY	
Immodesty of the Caress	81
KARÁCSONYI KRISZTINA	
Elkülönülő tárgyjelölés egy magyarországi romani idiolektusban	101
LUKÁCS LAURA KLÁRA	
Tintin a plakátok földjén. Transztextuális kapcsolódások Exem plakátművészete és az Hergé-hagyomány között	113

ORSÓS GYÖRGY	
A náci diktatúra tankönyvi ábrázolásának metamorfózisa	127
RAPOSA VIVIEN KITTI	
A Turul Szövetség revíziós propagandája az Erzsébet Tudományegyetemen a két világháború között	141
Rezümék	163
A Kerényi Károly Szakkollégium tagjai a 2020/2021-es tanévben	171
A Kerényi Károly Szakkollégium mentorai a 2020/2021-es tanévben	172

Immodesty of the Caress¹

Introduction of a Theme

In the second half of the 20th century, a stream of philosophical thought has taken a turn towards redefining the ethical sphere of desire. Although this attempt differs in the spectrum of traditions of thought, the aim seems universal: to break down the archaic conflict of moral philosophy, id est the conflict of ethical sensibility in opposition to human instinct and desire.² The realm of human instinct and desire is ruled by substantial dependence, egocentricity, and the incapability of distancing from oneself, therefore the idea of a desire awakening in and perpetuating the realm of the ethical seems to be an antithesis. This opposition of realms fascinated some of the most brilliant minds of the past century,³ among them the Lithuanian-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. This study aims to shed light upon the question of why a specific genus of desire – the sensual, erotic desire of Eros, the irresistible love one feels for another, so much embedded in personal experience, subjectivity, and culture – is in fact of an irresolvable contradiction to the ethical relation in Lévinasian philosophy. The study also intends to show the uninviting and grim consequences of the

¹ Particular appreciation to László Tarnay, who showed me the thread of Ariadne in the labyrinth of Being.

² At this point, I mean substantial desire, not the metaphysical Desire for the ethical Other.

³ For a thorough summary see: TENGELYI László, „A vágy filozófiai felfedezése”, *Thalassa* 9, no. 2–3. (1998): 3–21.

contradictions, which would inevitably arise if the two notions – Eros and Ethos – were to be interwoven.

Many criticisms – both justifiable and unjustifiable – have been articulated by some of the brightest of scholars and commentators regarding the works of Lévinas, of which I would like to criticize a narrow but nonetheless illogical aspect in order to illustrate the contradictions mentioned above. Most of the criticisms directed at Lévinasian theory have been vocalized by feminist discourse. It is crucial to note that Lévinas can be and should be criticized for many of his errors, among them some of his awkwardly sexist choice of notions, his ignorance regarding the predominant masculine perspective of his „universal ethics,” the regressive and uncomfortable qualities he inconsiderately associates with femininity and et cetera. These are all worrisome issues that should be pointed out and reflected when examining the philosophy of Lévinas. However, in the pages that follow, I intend to focus on a common misinterpretation of some commentaries regarding the interweaving mentioned above. As Claire Elise Katz⁴ points out convincingly, there seems to be a general tendency among the criticisms directed at Lévinas regarding his ideas of eroticism, namely, his exclusion of the erotic dimensions from the ethical ones. Many scholars seem to approve of the radical nature of Lévinasian ethics but contest the conflating love in itself⁵ and metaphysical Desire. Thus, Lévinas’s idea of love and its

⁴ KATZ, Claire Elise, “Levinas between Agape and Eros”, *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy* 11, no. 2. (2007): 333–350.

⁵ The notion: *love in itself* is quintessential here. This concept of Eros is a strictly defined action within the projects of the Self. A love in – and only in – itself. Love, as shown later on, is a mixture of immanence and transcendence. Although it is intersubjectively structured, it nonetheless leads back to the Self in pleasure, sensibility, enjoyment, in the moment of satisfaction and et cetera. For this reason, a notion here is introduced which Lévinas in his later book titled *Otherwise than Being* calls the transcendence of transubstantiation. It is founded here as fecundity. Fecundity restores and perpetuates the transcendental aspect of erotical love. My child, who is both me and not me, the dialectical conjuncture of the escaped Self in exteriority, not encumbered by itself

connotations have been marked as „moral and law-abiding Eros” of „trenchant heterosexuality”;⁶ that is to say, closer to religiosity and „Christian agape”⁷ than love. A voluptuosity that „cannot quite accommodate encounters between bodies”;⁸ which „leaves the flesh and physical pleasure behind”;⁹ a voluptuosity which is „devalued” and is „left out from metaphysical Desire”;¹⁰ a desire

anymore; the I beyond the projects of the I. „The being capable of another fate than its own.” In Lévinasian theory, fecundity – the anticipation of the pure future – is the real dynamism of love, not pleasure in itself. The Caress is directed towards the future, it „leads beyond the present instant and even beyond the person loved.” LÉVINAS, Emmanuel, „Judaism and the Feminine Element”, *Judaism* 18, no. 1. (1969): 30–38. The Caress leads beyond itself to make itself permanent, but voluptuosity on its own cannot transcend itself for love lives in the present. It is urgent, immediate, and demanding but nevertheless seeks to be eternal. Matrimony holds this function, to yond the moment of love, and through fecundity achieving eternity-transcendence – and the escape from the *il ya*. Fecundity transcends Eros, and through the transubstantiation of the Self it becomes ethical. However, the critiques argue for an ethical love in itself, without the transcendence of transubstantiation. And this within the theoretical basis could not be possible, as shown later in the thesis.

6 SANDFORD, Stella, „Writing as a man: Levinas and the phenomenology of Eros”, *Radical Philosophy*, 87, (1998): 6–17, 15.

7 For a detailed discussion regarding this matter, see: DAVENPORT John, „Levinas’s Agapeistic Metaphysics of Morals: Absolute Passivity and the Other as Eschatological Hierophany”, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 26, no. 2. (1998): 331–366.

8 RIVERA, Mayra, „Ethical Desires: Toward a Theology of Relational Transcendence”, in BURRUS, Virginia and KELLER, Catherine, *Toward a Theology of Eros: Transfiguring Passion at the Limits of Discipline*, 255–271 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 260.

9 *Ibid.*, 256.

10 VERMES Katalin, *A test étosza: A test és a másik tapasztalatainak összefüggése Merleau-Ponty és Lévinas filozófiájában*, (Budapest: L’Harmattan, 2006), 126. Translated and highlighted from: „Egyáltalán lehet-e bármit kizárni a Másik feleletigényéből? Lehet-e az erősztt kizárni a Másik végtelensége iránti vágyból? Vagy akár leértékelní az erősztt mint a vágy elemét?” – „After all, could anything be excluded from the response-ability towards the Other? Could Eros be excluded from the Desire for the infinity of the Other? Could Eros – as a component of Desire – thus be degraded?” (my translation).

which „could only be fulfilled in the marriage bed, with the intent of reproduction”.¹¹ It implies an ethics that can only be achieved by the „reduction of the most vital dimension, the touch”,¹² et cetera. Furthermore, the commentators seem to argue for an ethical Eros. (At a later point of the study, I elaborate on the question of why they build their idea on an unsupported and inconsiderate basis.)

To understand why this proposal is based upon an illogical foundation and why the critiques cited above are testimonies of misreading, we must examine the nature of these terms first. Lévinasian terms are strictly defined signifiers with very strict parameters. If we grasp their meanings from a perspective extrinsic compared to the strict parameters of the terms, then we find ourselves confused and frustrated in front of the conclusion that the Beloved is not an ethical Other to the Lover in the act of intimacy. However, by bearing in mind the philosophical intentions of Lévinas and examining his thought within the parameters of his terminology and their conceptual foundations, we may conclude – without getting confused and frustrated – that the Beloved is, indeed, not the ethical Other for the Lover solely in the act of intimacy. In the pages that follow, I intend to draw up the main lines of Lévinas’s idea, then analyze the nature of the terms he constructs step by step. I focus on the ethical and pre-ethical notions and the internal relations between them, and at last I seek to elucidate why the critiques cited above are illogical. First and foremost, it is crucial to acknowledge that erotic love in other works of thought are not always unethical. Lévinas, however seems quite inflexible in this matter and categorically opposes alterity against love. But this opposition is not always a necessity.

¹¹ KATZ, Claire Elise, „Reinhabiting the house of Ruth”, in CHANTER, Tina, *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Lévinas*, 145–171 (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 154.

¹² IRIGARAY, Luce, „Questions to Emmanuel Levinas”, in WHITFORD, Margaret, *The Irigaray Reader*, 178–190, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 179.

Many theorists like, among others, Bataille or Foucault are surely more forgiving with the concept of love.

The Lévinasian Ethos

The concept of Lévinas should be viewed – and one must always bear in mind this intention when examining the philosophical terms he assembles – as a constant endeavor of breaking out from the frame of the self and reaching transcendence-exteriority-infinity. This dimension goes beyond the worship of the Self, the immanence-interiority-subjectivism-psychism, and the egocentricity of what he calls the tradition of Western thought. Lévinas considers Western thought to be the tradition of egocentricity operating with the act of intellectualization, which further restricts the Ego to always return to itself, and never to exceed the bounds of its own limits.

The »act« of representation discovers, properly speaking, nothing before itself. Representation is pure spontaneity, though prior to all activity. Thus the exteriority of the object represented appears to reflection to be a meaning ascribed by the representing subject to an object that is itself reducible to a work of thought.¹³

Lévinas contests the phrases of the Ego, implying projects, finality, goals, directedness, and vigorously attacks Western thought. Lévinas „criticizes the universal system of reason, which encounters itself as its very own emergence, and therefore cannot observe the point of its own beginning, nor its own limits.”¹⁴ „The »I think« is

¹³ LÉVINAS, Emmanuel, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. LINGIS, Alphonso, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 125.

¹⁴ VERMES, *A test étoszsa*, 107. Translated from: „[B]izalmatlan az ész univerzális rendszerével szemben, amely önmagát tekinti önmaga forrásának, s így

the pulsation of rational thought. The identity of the same unaltered and unalterable in its relations with the other is in fact the I of representation. The subject that thinks by representation is a subject that hearkens to its own thought.¹⁵ His notion of the ethical should be viewed in contrast to the activity of the Ego, which is incapable of experiencing anything beyond itself by being restricted to the instruments of thematization, conceptualization, suppression, possession, absorption, intentionality, reduction, et cetera. The realm of the ethical arises in this beyond, beyond the Self.

The locus of this exteriority is the Face of the Other, the par excellence Ethical, the origin of meaning,¹⁶ the beyond of totality, which gazes at the subject and interrogates that from its infinite and incomprehensible distance.

He is not exterior to it as the content thought is exterior to the thought that thinks it; this exteriority is assumed by thought, and in this sense does not overflow the consciousness. Nothing that concerns thought can overflow it; everything is freely assumed. Nothing except the judge judging the very freedom of thought.¹⁷

One cannot intentionalise and represent the Face as it were an object, for the infinity of the Face is constituted by an immeasurable

nem tud rákérdezni sem önnön eredetére, sem önnön hatáiraira.”

¹⁵ LÉVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 126.

¹⁶ Origin of meaning in a sense, that before the Ethical encounter, within the totality of the I, the objects of cognition are identified with meaning. This meaning is categorized – by aspects of intellect, aspects of utility, aspects of the operation or sensibility, et cetera – strictly through interiorization. However, in Lévinasian theory, there is a primordial relation within intersubjectivity, and this primordial relation is the Ethical. The Ethical relation to the Other, as shown later on in the thesis, terminates the totality of the I. Through this leap towards transcendence – unencumbered by the totality of immanence – exteriority gains a new meaning, unrestricted, uncategorized by the limits of subjectivity.

¹⁷ LÉVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 100.

distance between totality and the absolute exterior – infinity itself. This epiphany of the Face transforms the subject's totality into phenomenality. When encountering the radical alterity of the Other – a transcendence of immanence, the totality of the „I” gets accused and judged by the gaze of the Other for its self-sufficiency and its alienation in itself, or in other words, for its egologism. This accusation is what the „I” must respond to, and in this response, can we talk about recurrence; when the subjectivity of sufficiency transforms into a subjectivity of radical responsibility. This form of responsibility can never be disclaimed, it breaks the borders of egocentricity, and „frees the ego caught up in being, ineluctably returning to itself”.¹⁸ But this recurrence is of unbearable pain, guilt and shame. „My arbitrary freedom reads its shame in the eyes that look at me.”¹⁹ The „I” gets ripped out of its self-admiration, forced to gaze upon its atheistic self-worship and the cruel nature of its totality, which is the nature of war and merchantry and which maintains the „world of expropriation, conquering, trade, possession”.²⁰

It is crucial to note that the radical responsibility for the Other is of an asymmetrical nature which thus prohibits the economy of debt or the interchangeability of the phenomenologically separated parties – the I and the Other. This radical asymmetry portrays both the Other and the relation to the Other. „The Other qua Other is situated in a dimension of height and of abasement-glorious abasement; he has the face of the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, and, at the same time, of the master called to invest and justify my freedom.”²¹ Concerning the radicality of this dissymmetry, ethics could never be a matter of exchange or mutuality. The subject is responsible for all, before all – even for its persecutor to a point

¹⁸ LÉVINAS, Emmanuel, *Existence and Existents*, trans. LINGIS, Alphonso, (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 96.

¹⁹ LÉVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 252.

²⁰ VERMES, *A test étosza*, 107. Translated from: „[G]yakorlata a háború és a kereskedelem világa: elsajátítás, hódítás, csere, birtoklás.”

²¹ LÉVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 251.

beyond self-sacrifice. To further grasp the nature of ethics, we must examine what falls outside the realm of the Ethical, what terms presuppose this radical relation. And thus, we arrive at the realm of the pre-ethical; the order of labor and enjoyment. It is crucial to examine the egologism that constitutes enjoyment and – through labor – supports establishing the domicile, for this egoism is also what constitutes love on its own in Lévinasian theory.

The Contentment of Being

One maintains its relationship with the outside world – the elemental other – through embodiment. Man dwells the earth, embodied, living from the elements in a matter of constant bodily connection: his back being warmed by the sun, his feet held up by the ground of the earth. Lévinas claims that our first relation to the non-I is neither a form of mental intellectualization, as Husserlian phenomenology assumes, nor the form of utilization, as Heidegger realizes. It is rather a fundamental form of enjoyment, which nourishes itself with its own activity. „One does not know, one lives sensible qualities: the green of these leaves, the red of this sunset.”²² The primer relation of the subject to the elements – before any kind of intentionality or representation – is the contentment of Being. „I welcome them without thinking them. I enjoy this world of things as pure elements, as qualities without support, without substance.”²³ This relation of enjoyment – as the initial form of separation – maintains my interiority. It is the origin of subjectivity: independence, the sovereignty of enjoyment. To be embodied means to be sovereign, independent, to dwell the earth in happiness, to habit and conquer the elemental and to be enclosed within oneself. It is my joy in the breeze of the wind that fills my lungs, my joy in the shade of the trees

²² Ibid., 135.

²³ Ibid., 137.

that hide my eyes. This highly personal relation of enjoyment to the perceived world cannot belong to anybody else but to the subject.

The ethical Other cannot be present in my enjoyment, for enjoyment itself is constituted strictly within the hermitage of my immanence.

In enjoyment, I am absolutely for myself. Egoist without reference to the Other, I am alone without solitude, innocently egoist and alone. Not against the Others, not »as for me...« – but entirely deaf to the Other, outside of all communication and all refusal to communicate – without ears, like a hungry stomach.²⁴

However, in this naive sensibility, the objects of enjoyment lose their form, seize to be the objects of enjoyment, and return to the elemental. The bread that one eats turns into nourishment, taste, „living from...”, pleasure, and seizes to be the object of its own autonomy. „Sensibility does not aim at an object, however rudimentary. It concerns even the elaborated forms of consciousness, but its proper work consists in enjoyment, through which every object is dissolved into the element in which enjoyment is steeped.”²⁵ The elemental entities are impersonal, unrepresentable, and ungraspable faceless gods, to whom we bow through enjoyment. „Faceless gods, impersonal gods to whom one does not speak, mark the nothingness that bounds the egoism of enjoyment in the midst of its familiarity with the element.”²⁶ I enjoy the ground that holds me up, but of which I cannot see beyond, for its other side is concealed.²⁷ The self-fulfillment in enjoyment,

²⁴ Ibid., 134.

²⁵ Ibid., 137.

²⁶ Ibid., 142.

²⁷ When examining what it means for the Face to be concealed by intimacy in erotic love, we should bear in mind the fact that an object of enjoyment seizes to be the object as the object itself and returns to the faceless elemental.

this worship of faceless gods, does, in fact, consist of a threat: it is twofold by its nature. Enjoyment always brings forth a form of anxiety, namely, the uncertainty of the tomorrow. What would happen, if the sun would cease to shine upon my back, the earth would not hold me up anymore, if the breeze of the wind refused to fill my lungs? And at this point, the second phase of separation is introduced by the terms of labor and economy. „Man has overcome the elements only by surmounting this interiority without issue by the domicile, which confers upon him an extraterritoriality.”²⁸

The Establishment of the Home

By postponing enjoyment, by distancing the immediateness of the corporeity of physical experience, the subject gains consciousness. Conscious of its own mortality, of its own animalistic needs, of the finitude of substance and also conscious of time itself. For through this disincarnation of the body – the postponement of oneself – the reflection to time is maintained.

The distance intercalated between man and the world on which he depends constitutes the essence of need. A being has detached itself from the world from which it still nourishes itself! The part of being that has detached itself from the whole in which it was enrooted disposes of its own being, and its relation with the world is henceforth only need. It frees itself from all the weight of the world, from immediate and incessant contacts; it is at a distance. This distance can be converted into time, and subordinate a world to the liberated but needy being. There is here an ambiguity of which the body is the very articulation.²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., 131.

²⁹ Ibid., 116.

To regain the safety of tomorrow, the I retreats from dwelling in the world into safety, where it can recollect itself. The recollection of the I reclaims the safety of tomorrow by establishing the Home against the elements. Through the economy of being, labor and possession, the utopia of the I is erected. „Recollection and representation are produced concretely as habitation in a dwelling or a Home. But the interiority of the home is made of extraterritoriality in the midst of the elements of enjoyment with which life is nourished.”³⁰

The Home becomes the projected interiority, my totality built up against the harshness of the elements. It is the sanctuary where the subject can be at home with itself, where everything echoes the power and capabilities of the I. In this state, the door to the outside world is barred shut. The Other cannot be present in this state, for in such an utopia, any form of the non-I is incorporated by the Same or, in other words, *all becomes* just a project of the Ego. „Possession grasps being in the object, but it grasps it, that is, forthwith contests it. In placing it in my home as a possession it confers upon it a being of pure appearance, a phenomenal being; the thing that is mine or another’s is not in itself.”³¹ It does not mean to be a form of transcendence but a leap for one towards its own self. It is the regime of property, the forceful hold on matter that can only be maintained by interiorization, consumption, and the possession of the non-I. „The power of the hand that grasps or tears up or crushes or kneads relates the element, not to an infinity by relation to which the thing would be defined, but to an end in the sense of a goal, to the goal of need.”³² Egoism maintained in the second form of separation.

The only way to escape this alienation is to get interrupted by the stranger from the outside. The stranger, who is exterior to my sanctuary of sameness, who will point at my enclosedness and forces me to gaze at myself. But these states of the enclosed Self,

³⁰ Ibid., 150.

³¹ Ibid., 160.

³² Ibid., 162.

these forms of egoism, are necessary to encounter the Other. I must be exposed to the world through enjoyment to be called upon, and must establish the home, where the Other can interrupt me, where I can hospitalize the Other. How could I offer the bread from my mouth to the Other, if there were no bread to offer? How could be I encountered by the Other if my subjectivity is not yet separated from the world? These notions are necessary forms of egoism, they presuppose the ethical, for egoism is the basis of substance.

To be I, atheist, at home with oneself, separated, happy, created – these are synonyms. Egoism, enjoyment, sensibility, and the whole dimension of interiority – the articulations of separation – are necessary for the idea of Infinity, the relation with the Other which opens forth from the separated and finite being.³³

By now, it is clear what the pre-ethical means and how it is opposed to – and yet necessary for – the emergence of the Ethical.

The Equivocality of Love

In the following, we can turn our gaze towards love. Lévinas takes Eros as a pre-ethical phenomenon by its nature, and this is the point where the above listed criticism and Lévinasian theory part company. To illustrate why Eros cannot occur in the realm of the Ethical, we need to understand how Lévinas realizes the nature of Eros.

Various aspects can determine love: it can be realized as an urge of need, a specific form of hunger, a search for similarities, a search for pleasure or lust, a psychological need of self-assurance, dominance, acceptance, et cetera. „Love as a relation with the Other can be reduced to this fundamental immanence, be divested of all

³³ Ibid., 148.

transcendence, seek but a connatural being, a sister soul, present itself as incest.³⁴ Love strives for symmetry, does not preclude mutual relationship or exchange, it can be jealous, demanding, and envious, too. Even if love comes from the deepest of devotions or sacrifice, it still originates in the Self, for it is a feeling, emerging from – and perpetuating – interiority. The infinity of the Ethical cannot emerge from immanence, for it must come from the outside, from what is transcendent, exterior to my totality. „It is not a care for Being, nor a relation with existents, nor even a negation of the world, but its accessibility in enjoyment. Sensibility is the very narrowness of life, the naviete of the unreflected I, beyond instinct, beneath reason.”³⁵

The Ethical is neither an emergence of feeling nor a matter of choice. I cannot decide who I am ethical towards because I am responsible for all before any form of mediation. Moreover, I do not need to love the Other to be ethical because love is not a necessity within the ethical relation, all the more it rather seems to offer resistance to it because it leads back to the Self and this is but the lesser problem. In the bond of love, the Other is not desired as Other per se but as desiring me. It is a closed society of the sentiment and the sensed, desired as desiring. That is why voluptuousity is aimed at voluptuousity³⁶ and not at the Other. If I love the beloved, I also love how (s)he loves me, and thus I love myself. The return is inevitable. Love, this beautiful and catastrophic feeling, so difficult to describe, an euphoria forcing the subject to the edge of divinity and madness – the emotions evoked by the smile, the laughter, the sweet touch of the Beloved – overflow the totality of the subject with triumphant joy. But how could one enjoy the gaze of the Other if that gaze is precisely the termination of enjoyment? Ethics starts where enjoyment ends. It is precisely the point of getting ripped out of enjoyment and the naive sensibility of immanence in which

³⁴ Ibid., 254.

³⁵ Ibid., 138.

³⁶ SANDFORD, „Writing as a man”, 9.

I can no longer live because I must answer with responsibility to the gaze, which accuses me and exposes my guilt.

If the transcendent cuts across sensibility, if it is openness preeminently, if its vision is the vision of the very openness of being, it cuts across the vision of forms and can be stated neither in terms of contemplation nor in terms of practice. It is the face; its revelation is speech. The relation with the Other alone introduces a dimension of transcendence, and leads us to a relation totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term, relative and egoist.³⁷

Lévinas shows how in erotic relations, the Face is concealed by intimacy; it hides behind the arch of a naked shoulder, the curve of a thigh. „The face fades, and in its impersonal and inexpressive neutrality is prolonged, in ambiguity, into animality.”³⁸ Therefore the lovers are beyond the relation of the Face: and so the Other as transcendent is thus violated, the dimension of responsibility is crossed, and the ethical standard is removed.³⁹ The Other slowly turns into an object of enjoyment in the pleasures of the union of bodies. Love becomes ambiguous and equivocal and then the body loses its form in the sensibility of the caress – just as bread loses its form in the pleasure of taste and the satisfaction of flavour. In the end, it returns to the elemental. The caress⁴⁰ consists in seizing

³⁷ LÉVINAS, *Totality and Infinity*, 193.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 263.

³⁹ And thus we are outside the ethical, once again in the dimensions of murder and war. „The principle »you shall not commit murder«, the very signification of the face, seems contrary to the mystery which Eros profanes, and which is announced in the femininity of the tender.” *Ibid.*, 262.

⁴⁰ We must remind ourselves again and again that we are examining Love in itself. The Caress seizes nothing, for its nature is not of the grasp of the hand, but the search for the „future never future enough” *Ibid.*, 254. However, Love on its own cannot slip away to this „not yet”.

upon nothing,⁴¹ for the body denudes itself of its very form⁴² and quits the status of an existent.⁴³ Being incorporated by my totality, The Other thus does not exist anymore.

The caress aims at neither a person nor a thing. It loses itself in a being that dissipates as though into an impersonal dream without will and even without resistance, a passivity, an already animal or infantile anonymity, already entirely at death. The will of the tender is produced in its evanescence as though rooted in an animality ignorant of its death, immersed in the false security of the elemental, in the infantile not knowing what is happening to it.⁴⁴

The fact that one cannot avoid returning to the self in love in itself is but one of the main issues that Lévinas emphasizes which distinguishes it from the ethical relation: the „I” is bound to the sovereignty of enjoyment in the sensibility of touch, pleasure, and the moment of satisfaction. „An enjoyment of the transcendent almost contradictory in its terms.”⁴⁵ Also, the very nature of love makes it ambiguous, because it is a mixture of immanence and transcendence. It is although intersubjectively structured but nonetheless inward relating. A „community of feeling”⁴⁶ sealed away from the outside world, for the lovers close themselves off into their own intimate utopia, their shared interiority of two, their dual egoism,⁴⁷ and forget about the exteriority of the elements. This gesture is very similar to the establishment of the home.

⁴¹ Ibid., 257.

⁴² Ibid., 258.

⁴³ Ibid., 258.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 259.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 255.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 265.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 266.

The Line of Reasoning

Previously, the study has offered a brief summary of the main aspects leading up to the argumentation. Before elaborating on the central idea of the study, the main points of the following key propositions must be recapitulated and stated again; we have seen how the nature of the ethical relation belongs to exteriority, constantly attempting to break out of the totality of the Self, to go beyond the bounds immanence and egologism. This kind of transcendence is localized in the face of the Other and constitutes the act of recurrence, which is the point of being ripped out from our totality, summoning us to answer with a responsibility of radical asymmetry. In this recurrence, we are forced to gaze upon our own atheistic self-worship and the bounds of our discriminatory immanence, which were but prolonged by the egoism of enjoyment and the narcissism of the domicile. As I argued above, love on its own – just like enjoyment – robs the object of desire of its form and is bound to always return to the Self. Love is an inward relation – just like the recollection of the domicile – and strives for symmetry. In this relation, the Face is concealed by intimacy. Bearing in mind these key propositions, we must ask ourselves the following question: What would it mean if we were to interweave the terms of Ethics and Love in itself?

And thus, we arrive at the triad of contradictions gestated in the paradoxical womb of an ethical Eros. An ethical Eros could only be fabricated in two ways; either by forcing the erotic parameters unto the Ethical – (1) by introducing symmetry to the Ethical relation – or inversely; by forcing the Ethical parameters unto the erotic. This could be done either (2a) by introducing asymmetry to the erotic relation or (2b) by uncovering the Face in the act of love. By investigating all possibilities of conversion – and staying within

the parameters of the conceptual composition –,⁴⁸ the illogical, uninviting, and negligent base of this intention will be revealed.

Symmetrical Ethos

(1) The consequences of symmetrical Ethics: If symmetry is introduced to the Ethical relation, Lévinas's project is completely undermined.

It is in another [autrUI] that I always see the widow and the orphan. The other [autrUI] always comes first. This is what I have called in Greek language, the dissymmetry of the interpersonal relationship. If there is not this dissymmetry, then no line of what I have written can hold.⁴⁹

Asymmetry serves the purpose of maintaining radical responsibility before any form of mediation. Symmetricity provokes the economy of debt, and ethics could become a matter of exchange or become conditional.⁵⁰ I am ethical to the Other only if the Other returns this intention. I choose who to be ethical to, I become the judge and the executor; I will determine whether the Other is worthy or not, or I will decide whose Ethical relation is the most profitable. Ethics would turn into the impure act of merchantry, the act of devious calculation, self-interest, and the search for what benefits the Ego the most. It could even become a strategic instrument of power. I am not ethical to the Other, and deprive the Other of my Ethical

⁴⁸ Finding a way out of the infinite regression portrayed in point (2b), and discovering a harmonized composition of ethical love would most definitely be ideal, but I am afraid that by sticking to the parameters of the terms Lévinas assembles, this is impossible.

⁴⁹ LEVINAS, Emmanuel, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. BERGO, Bettina, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 91.

⁵⁰ KATZ, „Levinas between Agape and Eros”, 335.

relation as a gesture of tactical consideration. I am ethical to those who have power over me, but I am not ethical to the weak. With the undelayable responsibility turned into a symmetrical question of choice, we find ourselves once again within the dimensions of war and merchantry.

Furthermore, symmetry erases the phenomenological distinction of I and Other, and the relationship itself becomes impossible. If there is no radical Other of dissymmetry, we could all be the Same, we could be each other.⁵¹ If the two parties are the Same in an interpersonal relationship, then we are once again enclosed in relation with our own Self, with no possibility of reaching beyond the bounds of the Same – the mirror of our own immanence.

Assymetrical Love

(2a) The consequences of an asymmetrical Eros: If the radical dissymmetry that characterizes the Ethical were forced unto Eros, we would find ourselves in such an erotic interrelation that has more resemblance to an asexual object-relation than what we call love. This dissymmetry would call for total self-sacrifice, a total dis-individualizing of the Self within the erotical aspects. A total devotion that would forbid the symmetry of enjoyment and sensibility.⁵² Strictly prohibited and ripped out of enjoyment – which would restore immanence – a love relation of total submission where the I and its entire totality is strictly for – before

⁵¹ Ibid., 343.

⁵² This total devotion of the Self is similar to the concept of substantiation, which Lévinas introduced in his later book. The problem here is caused by the incapability of distancing from the I within the sensibility of the Caress – which, through the pleasure in touch, guides the I back to itself. I cannot substitute myself, and I cannot be the Other – as Lévinas paraphrases Ricoeur – if I am stuck in my immanence of enjoyment.

all and before itself – the Other. Deprived of subjectivity and sensibility, the I is but an object of pleasure at the disposal of an exterior erotical Desire of a transcendental Other.

Uncovering the Face

(2b) The consequences of an unconcealed Face in love: out of all problems arising from mixing these Lévinasian terms, by far this would be the grimmest of all. To make love in itself Ethical, our only option left is to reestablish the ethical standard by uncovering the Face. But by uncovering the Face – which is clouded by voluptuousity – we are, indeed, unleashing hell in the act of love. In the Caress of the Beloved, the „I” returns to its totality through the sweetness of touch, pleasure, satisfaction, finds enjoyment in the Caress and is once again encumbered by itself, stuck within the bounds of his immanence, where the „I” is alone with the pleasures of it’s sensibility. However, if the Face is visible, then the „I” would be accused by the gaze, persecuted for it’s alienation in it’s egoistic enjoyment. The „I” would be then ripped out of it’s immanence in pain and guilt, and the joys of it’s totality would be terminated. The „I” – forced to gaze upon its atheistic self-worship, demanded to answer to the call of radical responsibility in shame – is then nevertheless commanded back from this point of recurrence, ordered to return by the pleasures of sensibility to the intimacy of the erotic relation that surrounds him. Ripped out of and then enslaved again by the joys of the body. But the Face of the Other is still visible, and the „I” is ripped out of itself again, yet cannot entirely escape, for the pleasures of enjoyment still subjugate him in the caress of the Beloved. The „I” is thus trapped forever in the Sisyphean hell between the point of being torn out of totality but damned through enjoyment forever to return to this atheism – recommenced ad infinitum.

Epilogue of a Theme

Finally, we can conclude that the critiques arguing for an ethical Eros overlook the radical and uncorrelated nature of the terms, and any struggle of interweaving would bring upon uninviting and – at the very least – paradoxical consequences. It needs to be understood that the exclusion of Eros is not due to a renouncement of the „impure body,” but rather linked to the ambition of the Lévinasian project, which aims to reach transcendence, beyond the bounds of projects and the Ego’s normative logic of excluding alterity. Love by itself is incapable of reaching this exteriority, for the concept of love on its own cannot reach transcendence. To experience the ruins of the Ego, the „I” must be marked by disinterestedness, but in the act of love, the „I” is clearly not passive. The Ego of enjoyment can never escape its primary and prestigious position. This does not mean that love must be disavowed. It is precisely what presupposes the ultimate ethical relation – the relation to one’s child. However, love on its own, within the conceptual parameters of the terms, is not and could not be defined as ethical.