Reversibility and Irreversibility: Paradox, Language and Intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas

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ABSTRACT: The philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty serves both as a ground and a site of departure for Lévinas' thinking. This essay takes up their relationship, with particular regard to the question of whether Merleau-Ponty's later shift from phenomenology to ontology brings him under Lévinas' critique of ontology as a totalizing philosophy of power that ultimately either denies or negates the radical alterity of the other. Both thinkers are engaged in reconceiving the intersubjective relation, and focus much of their analyses on the problem of language as the means by which this relation is expressed. However, though similar in scope, they arrive at fundamentally different positions regarding the self-other relationship, while jointly affirming the role paradox *plays in the constitution of intersubjectivity. This essay considers not only their differences but their confluences in contributing to this existential question.*

RÉSUMÉ: La philosophie de Maurice Merleau-Ponty sert à la fois de fondement et de point de départ pour la pensée de Lévinas. Le présent article aborde la question de leur relation en cherchant à savoir si le tournant de Merleau-Ponty, qui le mène de la phénoménologie à l'ontologie, place ce dernier sous la critique lévinassienne de l'ontologie comme philosophie totalisante du pouvoir qui, ultimement, nie l'altérité radicale de l'autre. Les deux penseurs sont engagés dans le projet de reconceptualisation de la relation intersubjective et du langage qui exprime cette relation. Bien que similaires dans leur portée, ils aboutissent à des positions fondamentalement différentes relativement à la question du rapport soi-autre, alors qu'ils reconnaissent tous deux le rôle du paradoxe dans la constitution de l'intersubjectivité. Cet article considère non seulement leurs différences, mais leurs convergences dans la contribution de la question existentielle.

Emmanuel Lévinas' interpretation of ethical metaphysics is at the forefront of contemporary philosophical and religious discourse. The philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty serves both as a ground and a site of departure for Lévinas' thinking. This essay takes up their relationship, with particular

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Following the publication of the *Phenomenology of Perception*,[1] Merleau-
Ponty turns toward the question of language, which assumes an increasingly
dominant role in his philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's development of a language
theory based on a "gestural meaning, which is immanent in speech"[2] focuses
on the relation between speaking and the perceptual constitution of the lived-
world (*Lebenswelt*). This is prompted by his encounter with Saussure's
structural account of linguistics;[3] but Merleau-Ponty soon expands his
analysis beyond the primary role afforded to speaking by Saussure. Retaining
the Saussurian emphasis on the "sign," he breaks with the then prevailing
linguistic concern of locating or constructing a universal grammatical and
syntactical structure, and emphasizes instead the phonemic processes of
language. Here he not only distances himself from logical positivism, e.g.,
Carnap, but from Husserlian transcendental phenomenology as well. Merleau-
Ponty's emphasis on phonemes, on natural signs, underscores his position
that, while able to constitute referential meaning through various
combinations, words, or signs, are never completely swallowed up in a purely
conceptual framework.

Merleau-Ponty's later work on language can be traced back to his 1949-50
lecture course at the Sorbonne titled "Consciousness and the Acquisition of
Language."[4] He opens the course by stating his preference for a
phenomenological approach to the study of language. He rejects both the
reflexive approach characteristic of Cartesianism, which views language as
arising "from the order of things and not from the order of the subject,"[5]
thereby bringing it into proximity with positivistic science, and the inductive
approach, which is merely "the simple process of recording natural
correlations."[6] Again, it is Saussure's great contribution to contemporary
linguistic theory, namely, that language is essentially diacritical, that provides
the foundation for Merleau-Ponty's own analysis.

> For Saussure, the individual is neither the *subject* nor the
> *object* of history but both simultaneously. Thus language is
> not a transcendent reality with respect to all speaking

> subjects; nor is it a phantasm formed by the individual. It
> is a manifestation of human intersubjectivity. Saussure
> elucidates the enigmatic relationship linking the individual
> to history by his analysis of language...[7]

On Merleau-Ponty's assessment, it is phenomenology alone which grasps the
intersubjective constitution of language, and thus gives "an internal meaning
(*un sens intérieur*) to the facts themselves."[8] In his still later writing, the
connection between speech and the affective, perceptual, nonverbal ground
of the *body* results in an enigmatic paradox that is irreducible to a totalizing
theory of signification, although Merleau-Ponty is aware that "of utmost
importance will be the rigor with which one embraces the totality as well as
the details of certain facts."[9]

However, by the time that he is writing his posthumously published *The
Visible and the Invisible*,[10] Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on language and being
are undergoing a radical *fundamental* shift, beyond the purely
phenomenological analyses of intentionality and eidetic intuition present in
Husserl. Heidegger's influence is clearly pronounced now, and Merleau-
Ponty's philosophy takes an ontological turn whereby Being is thought in
terms of a "universal dimensionality."[11] The totality, or Being, Merleau-Ponty
now terms the "flesh," which is "the formative medium of the object and the
subject,"[12] an *elemental* field of an "intercorporeity,"[13] a "new reversibility."[14]
The concept of "chiasm" or intertwining, and the reversibility implied in such
a concept, is the ontological clue to understanding the relation between
subjectivity and alterity; moreover, "[t]here is here no problem of the *alter
ego* because it is not *I* sees, not *he* who sees, because an anonymous visibility
inhabits both of us..."[15] The problem of perception that characterizes his early
writing is now both radicalized — and problematized — in the flesh of the
visible "coiling over"[16] upon itself, in a "hyperdialectical"[17] reversibility of
subject and object, vision and visibility, producing "in the silent labor of
desire... the paradox of expression."[18] Being as totality is reconceived here,
unifying the visible flesh and the invisible vision of visibility itself.

It is at this point that the philosophies of Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas are
in proximity to each other. There is a strong correspondence between them
regarding the relation between intersubjectivity and language, particularly
with regard to the notion of paradox. Lévinas' conception of intersubjectivity
is contingent on the claim that there is a fundamental *irreversibility* in the
ethical (metaphysical) relationship.[19] But what does this mean? Is this
"irreversibility" merely the privative, or denial, of Merleau-Ponty's concept
of "reversibility," leading to a significantly different interpretation of
intersubjectivity? And if not, then are the two concepts mutually informative,

and will a dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas yield new evidences for grasping intersubjectivity?

Early in *Totality and Infinity* Lévinas proffers what might well be construed as a preemptive response to Merleau-Ponty's unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*. He introduces the concept of irreversibility but then leaves it unengaged as a theme, though it clearly conditions the rest of the work:

> The reversibility of a relation where the terms are indifferently read from left to right and right to left would couple them *one* to the *other*; they would complete one another in a system *visible from the outside* [emphasis mine]. The intended transcendence would thus be reabsorbed into the unity of the system, destroying the radical alterity of the other. Irreversibility does not only mean that the same goes unto the other differently than the other unto the same. That eventuality does not enter into account: the separation between the same and the other means precisely that it is impossible to place oneself outside the correlation between the same and the other so as to record the correspondence or non-correspondence of this going with this return. Otherwise the same and the other would be reunited under one gaze, and the absolute distance that separates them filled in.[20]

Clearly, the irreversibility invoked by Lévinas precludes the possibility of comprehending the whole, the "unity of the system," conceptually; but does it adequately address the fundamentally perceptual apprehension of universality that Merleau-Ponty desires of ontology? Is reversibility, in the sense employed by Merleau-Ponty, synonymous in meaning with either reciprocity or symmetry, or both? It would seem that Lévinasian irreversibility implies an essential disjunction of the terms subject-object, self-other; and that Merleau-Pontean reversibility denotes a conjoining of the said terms. There is certainly the element of movement in both their considerations of the subject-object and self-other relations. In Lévinas, it is a movement of the one towards the other, in response to the other, and the nonreciprocal obligation of the one to respond is what constitutes the meaning of ethics. But for Merleau-Ponty, the movement between the terms seems to imply a certain reciprocity, though not necessarily a symmetry.

Both Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas are attempting to move away from the positivity of idealism and transcendental forms of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty seeks to accomplish this through his theory of the *incarnational*

constitution of language, whereby the totality, or universal dimension of Being, is grasped and expressed by the invisibility of vision laying hold of the visible flesh of the world. For Lévinas, the difference between the visible (same) and the invisible (other) signifies the very distance or separation that allows language to occur. This is expressed repeatedly by Lévinas in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*[21] as the difference between the ethical saying (*le dire*) and the ontological said (*le dit*). The *asymmetry* of the metaphysical (ethical) relation is further denoted in the temporal distinction between diachrony and synchrony, an irretrievable anarchic past which "signals a lapse of time that does not return, a diachrony refractory to all synchronization, a transcending dichotomy."[22]

Lévinas agrees with Merleau-Ponty, whom he says shows "among others, but better than others," that disincarnate thought constituting the world of speech is a "myth,"[23] that the principal modality of existence in the world is that of embodiment; but they differ on several crucial points: Whereas Merleau-Ponty maintains that "the other is never present face to face,"[24] Lévinas holds that "meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language."[25] In addition, Lévinas is insistent that meaning or signification arises within the irreversible relation between the same and the other anterior to the concrete lived experience. The presentation of meaning in the face constitutes the primordial essence of language, not the corporeal relation that discloses it intersubjectively and encapsulates it within a thought. Only the unique idea of infinity can express this primordial ethical signification to consciousness, not the totality or relationship expressed in the notion of the chiasm. However, despite their differences, both are in agreement that being cannot be approached directly (*intentione recta*) but only *laterally*, through immersion in the world, even though, Merleau-Ponty states, this is to "have not yet really posited other people. I must go beyond, truly penetrate their field, if I want to fully affirm the existence of others."[26] Both philosophers understand the phenomenon of intersubjectivity in paradoxical terms. What is at stake is not the determination of the meaning of the paradox (by definition a perhaps impossible task), but the way or ways in which the paradox is laid out concretely, that is, expressed in language.

According to Merleau-Ponty, to be in the world is to already be imbued with meaning, with an "incarnate logic," and in this sense he appears to be very close to Hegel; but this is a "logic in contingency,"[27] a language of which there are two types: institutional language and creative language, that is, language that creates itself in its expressive acts. The language (*le langage parlé*) of institutions (e.g., cultural, political, economic, ecclesiastical) is the "sedimented" language of the prejudiced reader. Truth is but "another name

for sedimentation."[28] Speech (*la parole*) takes sedimented language and through a transformative operation creates *new* significations.

The paradox of language is that it exists only through speaking individuals or subjects and yet is not something produced by them. Like language, the speech-act is "that paradoxical operation through which, by using words of a given sense, and already available meanings, we try to join up with an intention which necessarily outstrips, modifies, and itself, in the last analysis, determines the meanings of the words which translate it."[29] Language is "completely accidental and completely rational,"[30] says Merleau-Ponty; it "leads us to the things themselves to the precise extent that it *is* signification before *having* a signification."[31]

Moving away from an algorithmic conception of universal signs, the project of much positivist analytic philosophy, a language that "manipulates," Merleau-Ponty seeks to ground language neither in a reflective *cogito*, the constituting consciousness of *Geist*, nor in a transcendental ego, but rather, in the perceptual contact with the world. The key to this is found in the notion of chiasm which is not only a "co-functioning"[32] intersubjective exchange but an exchange between the self and the world unified in the commonality of a primordial flesh.

The emphasis on the corporeal, perceptual constitution of subjectivity and intersubjectivity moves Merleau-Ponty into close proximity with Lévinas insofar as the linguistic phenomenon is rooted or grounded in the concrete bodily relation, as interfaciality. The speaking subject (*le sujet parlant*) embodies language, enters into language, through the historical event of speech. Language is more than mere mental or verbal signs. It is movement or expression which, simultaneously, "is never absolutely expression [since] what is expressed is never completely expressed."[33] Were language otherwise, it would turn itself into that which can be fully comprehended, that is, a concept, a sedimented truth. Expression is necessarily tied to the body, either as speech or as physical gesture; it presents itself to perception. Lévinas understands the infinity produced in the relationship with alterity, the point of ethical signification, as first revealed or expressed in the face; but as well, part of the question is to determine what is *not* expressed in expression, as Merleau-Ponty attempts to do in *The Visible and the Invisible*. For Lévinas, this would be correlative with the absolutely heteronomous past of the other (*l'autre*).

For one who strives for originality, who is not content merely to repeat what has already been done, new significations must be created. In a passage that resonates deeply with Nietzsche,[34] Merleau-Ponty says that such an individual "wants to fulfill language and destroy it at the same time, to fulfill it *by destroying it* or to destroy it *by fulfilling it*."[35] Again, the paradox of language. Meaning is not inherent in the verbal chain itself; it is the "total

movement of speech."[36] Meaning is dynamic. Lévinas forcefully expresses this as well: "Language is a battering-ram [*perce-muraille*]."[37] Meaning is always *hyperstatic* and never able to be fully grasped.

Language does not conform to a prereflective objective text; it is understood only through the interaction of signs which, if taken singly, signify nothing. Meaning, says Merleau-Ponty, is to be found within the whole, not in parts of the whole.[38] Language only becomes meaningful in the immanence of the gesture, in speech.

Now the reason language presents itself so well, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that it is "much more like a sort of being" and, as such, does not exist solely for itself.[39] Language thus has an *ontological* bearing. The power of language exists totally in the present, though in the "milieu of the exterior holy."[40] Without the Other (*l'autrui*) that one confronts in the world, there would be no communicative aspect to language; one would be as God, in dialogue, actually monologue, with oneself in the silence of memory. Perhaps the interrelation between a subjectivity and the world it inhabits is better understood as "an inextricable tangle."[41] Language is something that is learned; it is not innate. One is born into language. Contrary to the reflexive approach, language, for both Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas, is not a natural but a social phenomenon. Synchronically viewed, language is the fundamental aspect of the intersubjective phenomenon; it is the essence of inter-subjectivity; it belongs to everyone and to no one.

Language is not something transcendent; it is the very *act* of transcendence that expresses itself incarnately bringing, maintains Merleau-Ponty, "rationality. . . down to earth," to the perceived world.[42] But this "original incarnation of thought," says Lévinas, "which cannot be expressed in terms of objectification. . . is prior, in Merleau-Ponty's view, to the taking up of any theoretical or practical position. An *Urdoxa*: a synthesis prior to all syntheses."[43] Language is not a one-way operation, a matter of the pure "I know" which never leaves the realm of cognition. Neither is language identical with the mere "I can" of the motor subject. Lévinas cautions that

> to take incarnation as a primary fact of language, without
> indicating the ontological structure it accomplishes, would
> be to assimilate language to activity, to that prolongation of
> thought in corporeality, the *I think* in the *I can*, which has
> indeed served as a prototype for the lived body (*corps
> propre*) or incarnate thought, which dominates one part of
> contemporary philosophy.[44]

One exists not only as a biological organism but as a speaking subject, and only as such is capable of an active transcendence of the world. The

transcendence that language is capable of through the speech-act is the way that the speaking subject mediates the lived experience. Language is transcendence precisely because it alone is capable of bridging the *distance* that exists between the self and the Other (*l'autrui*) that is perceived. Both Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas are in agreement here. Where they part is on the issues of whether the "bridge" between the self and the Other (*l'autrui*) is reciprocally traversable, and whether the gap or separation that is spanned is thereby closed or maintained.

In the philosophy of Lévinas, the absolute separation between the self and Other (*autrui*) is ethically maintained in the face to face relation, which is the essence of speech, of discourse. The self does not invent language; it finds itself already situated within language, taking language as its own in response to the Other (*l'autrui*). Language involves interlocutors; mere thought (*dianoia*) does not constitute the essence of language. Language institutes the intersubjective relationship, though such a relation is prior to any affirmative or negative proposition that can be said about it. The ethical self is desirous of the Other (*l'autrui*), not for the sake of possession or dominance, but to formulate a relation, i.e., discourse. If negative or affirmative propositions about the absolutely other (*autre*) were situated *before* the institution of language, the Other (*l'autrui*) would already be reduced to a preconceived category, that is, brought down to the level of the same, thereby constituting a violent mode of relating to alterity.

Lévinas repeatedly acknowledges the importance of Merleau-Ponty's "fundamental historicity," which he likens to "the work of justice, an entry of the diachrony of proximity, of the signifyingness of saying into the synchrony of the said,"[45] and situates much of his own thinking in relation to it. But despite this seeming congruence, Lévinas locates the phenomenon of ethical *substitution* as the precise point where they differ: "I am reduced to myself in responsibility, outside of the fundamental historicity Merleau-Ponty speaks of. Reason is the one-for-the-other!"[46] Lévinas' interpretation rests on the radical separation of subjectivity and alterity, and with it thought and sensibility, and linguistic expression and bodily action. The relation between the invisible trace of meaning and the corporeality in which it fundamentally resides and reveals itself is "the irreducible paradox of intelligibility: the other in the same, the trope of this for-the-other in its antecedent reflexion."[47]

The paradox of language is pronounced in the enigmatic diachronic difference between the saying and the said, the terms Lévinas employs to indicate how the ethical signifies within the ontological order of language. Saying refers to subjectivity's "exposure" to the Other (*l'autrui*) where the demand of responsibility and obligation is impressed upon the self. This "preoriginal saying"[48] is expressed as the anarchic trace of the Infinite within the face, whereas the said is the thematized result of the saying. The said is

language which makes propositional statements or declarations about the truth and falsity of an event or thing. To exist is to necessarily enter into the domain of the said via a reduction of the said to the saying outside the logos. But because the *logos* is *ambiguous*, the verb "to be" fixes itself synchronically and thereby assumes historical identification, that is, situates itself as a noun. Synchrony is the artificial synthetic sense of time that allows memory to recuperate the past and predict, or at least project into the future. Diachrony, on the other hand, bears close resemblance to Bergson's notion of duration (*la durée*); it is nonsimultaneous temporality that refuses the effort of consciousness to totalize the succession of instants. The absolutely heteronomous past of the ethical saying, anarchy, is the insertion of the primordial diachrony into the synchronic order of the ontological said. This results in an *interruption* of essence or being preventing the closure of the said.[49]

Lévinas refers to the verb *to be* as a "synchronizable diachrony."[50] Here he is both close to and far way from Merleau-Ponty's "fundamental historicity" which represents an "impossible synchronization of the unassemblable, which the diachrony of proximity has already escaped."[51] This is the paradox and the enigma of the ethical relationship that testifies to the radical exteriority associated with the absolutely other prior to the incarnational constitution of the world of meaning for subjectivity. The ethical saying, though antecedent to ontology, is diachronically present in the corporeal proximity of the face to face relationship. This is precisely where Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological analysis of the synchronicity of language yields fruit for Lévinas.

The presence of the saying in the said, the other in the same — the paradox of intelligibility — is none other than a radical recasting of the traditional metaphysical problem of the infinite in the finite. Lévinas repudiates the notion that there is a knowable ground to adjudicate the truth of this dilemma: "The ethical is the field outlined by the paradox of an Infinite in relationship with the finite without being belied in this relationship."[52] For Lévinas, the ethical signifyingness of the saying only takes on meaning in its entering into the ontological order of the said.[53] A betrayal (*trahison*) of the Infinite is thus necessary for the revelation of the ethical imperative expressed in the face. Saying is this incessant command of obligation conveyed (*traduit*) as the betrayal of the said.[54] This is the enigmatic paradox. But the crucial difference here is that conceptuality, the order of the said, cannot function as the ground for grasping the ethical responsibility that is justice. The ethical signification of the saying is expressed in the alternation or "spiralling movement [*un movement en vrille*]" between the saying and the said.[55] The saying cannot stand apart from the said absolutely; its ground is the very ontological order that Lévinas calls into question as a "play of the same."

Nevertheless, antecedent to speech, to words in the order of the said, the saying signifies in the distinct relationship of proximity.

The problem facing the philosopher is the maintenance of the integrity of the saying and the otherwise than being that it signifies after its invariable and necessary collapse into the said. "How is the saying, in its primordial enigma, said?"[56] This is not a mere matter of hermeneutics: "saying is not a game [*le dire n'est pas un jeu*]."[57] Lévinas' answer, which governs the entirety of his work, is responsibility. And if it is true that "all speaking is an enigma,"[58] then so is the force or power of ethics which is, paradoxically, the very renunciation of power, of "my ability for power [*mon pouvoir de pouvoir*]."[59] It is the passivity of the exposure that discloses the uniqueness of subjectivity as "one-in-responsibility."[60] Speech, the saying in the said, is "the passivity in passivity... to which the ego is reduced in proximity."[61]

At this point one might be prone to construe Lévinas' notion of passivity as a refusal to participate in an *active* way with the world and the Other (*l'autrui*), but this is not the case: passivity does not denote withdrawal or complacency on the part of subjectivity; it is not the retreat into liturgy or a sequestered life as a means of reconnecting with the Absolute. Passivity is exposure to the point of being commanded by the Other (*l'autrui*) to take up not only self-responsibility for one's own freedom, but sacrifice to the point of substitution of one-for-the-other. The paradox of the saying in the said is that even though it appears to be activity, i.e., responsibility, saying is actually a prolongation of this radical passivity.[62] Saying is not a *Sollen* imposed on a subject. The responsibility impressed by the saying is a *reversal* of the interest of the same,[63] the *dis*-inter-est converted by philosophy through an abuse of language into the "pretensions" of a "new said."[64]

Both Merleau-Ponty and Lévinas seek to decenter the *cogito* and overcome or transcend the epistemological dualism of subject-object and the internal-external bifurcation, and with a new epistemology, one ever aware of its paradoxical ground. Though his early efforts are essentially concerned with the role of the subject, Merleau-Ponty's later writing moves towards a notion of the chiasmatic or intertwining relationship between the self and other. Branching off Heidegger, he teaches that to be in the world implies a primordial chiasm of the world and self. Lévinas notes Merleau-Ponty's "not surprising" later evolution towards Heidegger's thought as well; both share the contemporary inclination towards the dismantling of traditional subject-object structures. Still, Lévinas harbors a profound suspicion that "perhaps at the source of all these philosophies, we find the Hegelian vision of a subjectivity that comprehends itself as an inevitable moment of the becoming by which being leaves its darkness the vision of a subject aroused by the logic of being."[65] Nevertheless, Merleau-Ponty's incorporation of Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world is developed to explicate the intertwining, not

so much of the ontological difference, but rather, of the intimate relation between perception and the world, through the locus of the body. The chiasm is an ambiguous concept; and "this initial *paradox* cannot but produce others."[66]

In order for there to be a genuine encounter with the Other (*l'autrui*), consciousness, or language, has to be primarily conceived as perceptual consciousness, not as the constituting consciousness of a pure being-for-itself. "Language does not take place *in front of* a correlation from which the I would derive its identity and the Other his alterity. . . Speech is not instituted in a homogeneous or abstract medium, but in a world where it is necessary to aid and to give."[67] The other is not present as pure mind; the other person, claims Merleau-Ponty, is present as a phenomenal body with a "sort of locality." Perceptual consciousness pushes the traditional epistemological antinomies aside and opens up the *space* for the lived face to face relation.

The other person is a subjectivity, a haunting, wandering near double of the self insofar as both the other and the self inhabit bodies, says Merleau-Ponty:

> Myself and the other are like two *nearly* concentric circles which can be distinguished only by a slight and mysterious slippage. This alliance is perhaps what will enable us to understand the relation to the other that is inconceivable if I try to approach him directly, like a sheer cliff.[68]

It is important to note that for Merleau-Ponty the self and the other are not identical but similar. This seems to indicate that reversibility is not another term for ontological unity in the sense that Lévinas criticizes. Being is indeed synonymous with its thought and therefore self-identical; but it is also differential flux. Thus is it possible to speak of the *logos* of the world and of the anonymous one that speaks. There is neither an epistemological nor an ontological center; the subject is an object and the object a subject, but they are not the *same*. Only thereby are understanding and meaning possible. The self and the other are inextricably intertwined in a chiasmatic relationship and share a common *generality*. Inspired by the words and work of the artist Paul Klee, Merleau-Ponty's reflections on language may best be summed up as follows: "To the extent that what I say has meaning, I am a different 'other' for myself when I am speaking; and to the extent that I understand, I no longer know who is speaking and who is listening."[69]

For Lévinas, however, the Other (*l'autrui*) is not just another self, an alter-ego, though the self and the Other (*l'autrui*) are both entities in the world, bound together through the mutually shared linguistic experience. Language is the "bridge" between them and in this sense language serves as a mediator

of sorts, though not in the absolute manner in which Hegel construes mediation.

The intersubjective reciprocity requisite for the working of social and political relations is not synonymous with metaphysical symmetry. The asymmetry of intersubjectivity, according to Lévinas, is bound with the irreversibility of that relation. But the chiasmatic subject-object, self-other irreversibility of that relation. But the chiasmatic subject-object, self-other relation is a reciprocal and reversible event for Merleau-Ponty.[70] "The relation is a reciprocal and reversible event for Merleau-Ponty.[70] "The mystery of the other is nothing but the mystery of myself."[71] Lévinas, too, refers to the relationship with alterity as a "relationship with a Mystery,"[72] but the essence of the mystery is that it is a relationship, a discourse, between *unequals* — even with divinity: "Discourse is discourse with God and not with equals, according to the distinction established by Plato in the *Phaedrus*. Metaphysics is the essence of this language with God; it leads above being."[73] This is the point where Lévinas moves decidedly away from Merleau-Ponty. On Lévinas' interpretation, the "mystery" of intersubjectivity is not found within subjectivity, but within the Other (*l'autrui*). The irreversibility of the intersubjective relation grounds ethics and transcends the chiasm between subjectivity and the world. Language is founded upon neither a mediated dialectic nor a chiasmatic reversibility, but on the irreversible *trans*historical going forth of the one to the Other (*l'autrui*), responding to the hyperpassive call of the other (*l'autre*): "here I am [*me voici*]."[74]

Notes

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

2 Ibid., p. 179.

3 See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, 3rd. ed (Paris: Payot, 1969); trans. W. Basken, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, trans. H. Silverman   (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

5 Ibid., p. 4.

6 Ibid., p. 7.

7 Ibid., p. 97.

8 Ibid., p. 10.

9 Ibid.

10 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

11 Ibid., p. 265.

12 Ibid., p. 147.

13 Ibid., pp. 141f.

14 Ibid., p. 144.

15 Ibid., p. 142.

16 Ibid., p. 136.

17 Ibid., p. 94.

18 Ibid., p. 144.

19 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*. Le livre de poche (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), pp. 24f; trans. A. Lingis, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 36f.

20 Ibid., p. 24; pp. 35-36.

21 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. Le livre de poche (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974), p. 63; trans. A. Lingis, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 36.

22 Ibid., p. 23; p. 9.

23 Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, p. 224; *Totality and Infinity*, p. 205.

24 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, trans. J. O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 133.

25 Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, p. 227; *Totality and Infinity*, p. 206.

26 Merleau-Ponty comments on the distinction between "lateral" and "lacunary" perception as it pertains to Husserl's question posed in the Fifth Meditation (Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. D.

Cairns [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960]) regarding the constitution of the other in *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, p. 42. Cf. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1972), p. 36; trans. A. Lingis, "Meaning and Sense," in: *Collected Philosophical Papers* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), p. 88.

27 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. R. Cleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 88.

28 Ibid., p. 96.

29 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 389.

30 Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p. 35.

31 Ibid., p. 14.

32 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 215.

33 Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p. 37.

34 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 122: "We can destroy only as creators! — But let us not forget this either: it is enough to create new names and estimations and probabilities in order to create in the long run new 'things.'"

35 Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p. 99.

36 Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, pp. 42-43.

37 Emmanuel Lévinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1949; 1988), p. 236; trans. A. Lingis, "Language and Proximity," in: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 125.

38 Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p. 28.

39 Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p. 43.

40 Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p. 38.

41 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 454.

42 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. and ed. J. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 13.

43 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Hors Sujet* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1987), p. 147; trans. M. B. Smith, *Outside the Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 97. Also, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 63; *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 36.

44 Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, p. 224; *Totality and Infinity*, p. 205.

45 See Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 250; *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 160. Also see pp. 76, 113; 45, 70; and *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, p. 32; *Collected Philosophical Papers*, pp. 84-85.

46 Ibid., p. 167; p. 259.

47 Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 113; *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 70.

48 Ibid., pp. 17ff; pp. 5ff.

49 Ibid., pp. 262-66; pp. 169-71.

50 Ibid., p. 73; p. 42.

51 Ibid., p. 76; p. 45.

52 Ibid., p. 232; p. 148.

53 Ibid., p. 76; p. 44.

54 Ibid., pp. 17-18; p. 6. Also see Emmanuel Lévinas, *Éthique et infini* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard et Radio-France, 1982), pp. 92-93; trans. R. Cohen, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 88.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., p. 23; p. 10.

57 Ibid., p. 17; p. 5.

58 Lévinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, p. 212; "Phenomenon and Enigma," in: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 69.

59 Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, p. 215; *Totality and Infinity*, p. 198.

60 Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 94; *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 56.

61 Ibid., p. 148; p. 92.

62 Ibid., p. 239; p. 148.

63 Ibid., p. 26; p. 12.

64 Ibid., p. 200; p. 126.

65 Lévinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, p. 29; *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 82.

66 Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, p. 163.

67 Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, 238; *Totality and Infinity*, p. 216.

68 Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p. 134.

69 Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, p. 94.

70 See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 142-45, pp. 263-64.

71 Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, p. 135.

72 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Le temps et l'autre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979), p. 63; trans. R. Cohen, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 75.

73 Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, pp. 330-31; *Totality and Infinity*, p. 297.

74 Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être*, pp. 180, 222, 226-28; *Otherwise Than Being*, pp. 114, 142, 145-46. Also see Genesis 22:1 and Isaiah 6:8.