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The article investigates the fundamental structure of the relation between the Other and the same throughout Levinas’s work. It claims that a significant shift can be seen in it: whereas *Totality and Infinity* deems an asymmetrical distance or difference to be of primal importance, Levinas’s much later *Otherwise than Being* moves away from this focus by unfolding the encompassing ambivalence of distance and proximity as a philosophical first. The most important concept that demonstrates this shift is Levinas’s notion of substitution. I address this shift by opposing substitution to conventional interpretations of Levinas, discussing several relevant literary sources. The polemical formulation of this contrast is intended to show how Levinas’s conceptual transformation can be understood in a fundamental manner. Finally, the result of this radical shift shall be characterized as the ambivalent structure of substitution. With this characterization, I try to demonstrate a fundamental insight in the contemporary debate on Levinas.

I hereby declare and assure that I, Roel Veraart, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works – including electronic media – have been identified and the sources clearly stated. Place: The Hague Date: 29 Jul. 2017.

Levinas's Substitution – Otherwise than Otherness

By Roel Veraart

Abstract. This essay investigates the fundamental structure of the relation between the Other and the same throughout Levinas's work. It claims that a significant shift can be seen in it: whereas *Totality and Infinity* deems an asymmetrical distance or difference to be of primal importance, Levinas's much later *Otherwise than Being* moves away from this focus by unfolding the encompassing ambivalence of distance and proximity as a philosophical first. The most important concept that demonstrates this shift is Levinas's notion of substitution. I address this shift by opposing substitution to conventional interpretations of Levinas, discussing several relevant literary sources. The polemical formulation of this contrast is intended to show how Levinas's conceptual transformation can be understood in a fundamental manner. Finally, the result of this radical shift shall be characterized as the ambivalent structure of substitution. With this characterization, I try to demonstrate a fundamental insight in the contemporary debate on Levinas.

Introduction

Even today, Levinas seems to be known only as *the philosopher of the Other*. In most literature discussing his thought, the notion of the Other is directly put forward as Levinas's main concept, one that fundamentally determines his philosophy and most thoughts sprouting from it. The Other (another human being) is, then, described as higher than the self, located in an asymmetrical distance, commanding each individual to escape their confines of identity and ethically put the Other first. However, this interpretation might not be adequate for Levinas's later writings. The present paper argues that Levinas's second major work, *Otherwise than Being*, signifies a fundamental transformation in his conceptuality. The paper aims to discuss this shift as a movement from otherness to substitution. The existence of such a fundamental shift seems to remain barely acknowledged in contemporary scholarship on Levinas and might help to solve a fundamental problematic in it.

In order to show the precise difference between otherness and substitution, the paper will firstly display the conventional manner in which Levinas is understood. Once it is demonstrated how Levinas is usually read as primarily thinking otherness, as characterized by *distinction*, *asymmetry* and *ethics*, the difference with his later concept of substitution can be discussed. Accordingly, the second part of this essay consists in determining the precise contrast between otherness and substitution to define the nature of the latter. Thirdly, the paper will discuss an exemplary piece of literature in contemporary debate (a text by Rudi Visker) to show *that* and *how* the conventional interpretation still remains dominant in the current debate on Levinas's philosophy. This discussion is aimed to polemically *test* the alternative of substitution and its merits, viability, and consistency. Finally, I will conclude the paper by proposing an encompassing answer to the problem of the relation between the same and the Other in the form of the ambivalent structure of substitution.

1. Otherness in the Conventional Sense

The conventional reception of Levinas is primarily characterized by its emphasis on a structure of *asymmetrical, ethical distinction*. When one hears 'Levinas', the first conceptual association is likely to be "the Other" – Levinas's most famous philosophical notion. This "Other" pertains

to the utterly concrete encounter of one human (“the same” or “the Self”)¹ with another (the Other), culminating in “the epiphany of the Face”²: lively, concrete eye-contact with another human being, “face to face”.³ It is, indeed, of foremost importance to commence every introduction to Levinas’s thought by emphasizing this concept of the Other and their Face, which indubitably forms his most original contribution to philosophy. Therefore, it is neither a mistake nor a coincidence that most works introducing Levinas’s thought begin by describing the *absolute distance* presented by the Face of the Other: the impossibility to be understood or interpreted from within by the same.

Michael Morgan, for example, starts his *Discovering Levinas* by describing how the Other, from their insurmountable difference, involuntarily forces their absolute exteriority upon the same, necessarily and irreversibly affecting all personal existence.⁴ According to Levinas, then, one cannot but be fundamentally interrupted by an Other approaching oneself. Morgan describes how the Other breaks through all selfhood, through all individual identity (“interiority”), through the being-at-peace-with-oneself, or even “through the transcendental unity of apperception”⁵ (contra Kant). This drastic interruption constitutes a fundamental aspect of human life in general, which is accordingly understood to be inherently social, and primarily aimed at Others, whether one wants, acknowledges or intends the interruption or not. Throughout his thorough introduction, Morgan justly remains loyal to such an interpretation, radically opposing Levinas’s conceptuality to a plentitude of philosophies that overlook the significance of the Other.⁶

Similarly, Benjamin Hutchens repeatedly stresses the ever-present confrontation with the enigmatic, unreachable distance of the Other when introducing Levinas in his *Levinas – a Guide for the Perplexed*.⁷ He explains how the Other is always in a sense *higher* than the Self or the same; that the he/she stands ‘above’ the ‘I’, in an unreachable exteriority that “commands”⁸ and “obliges”⁹ the same, disturbing all tranquility. In Levinas’s view, humans are always inevitably *responsible*, unable to turn away from the call from above. This, in turn, means that even before one is born into existence, one is already *ethical*: first and foremost. “Ethical”, here, does not signify any explicit theoretical morality, but rather the very fact that one, being human, is primarily a *social* being, that is, interrupted by the distant call from absolutely singular Others. Hutchens also explains how Levinassian ethics, departing from the unbridgeable distinction between the same and the Other, presupposes the character of this relation to be fundamentally *asymmetrical*: “the other approaches [the same] as a destitute superior, as someone possessing ‘majesty’ and foreign intimacy.”¹⁰

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1996), 33.

² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 55.

³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 79.

⁴ Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61–84.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 148 & 152.

⁶ Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, 228–289.

⁷ Benjamin Hutchens, *Levinas – A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum Books, 2004), 14–36.

⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21, 47, etc.

⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 201, 207, 230.

¹⁰ Hutchens, *Levinas*, 20.

Thus, Levinas's conception of the Other is conventionally taken to primarily express a distinction, radically revaluating the confines of identity, human life, and sociality. The necessity to attest this "asymmetrical"¹¹ dichotomy when interpreting Levinas can, thirdly, be seen in Robert Manning's *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger*.¹² Manning too describes how Levinas's absolute distinction aims to reject every possible *unity* of same and Other. If a permanent "respect"¹³ to what is Other than and outside of oneself is not maintained, violence is deemed a direct, inevitable consequence. Manning emphasizes how such an absorption of the Other in the same has, according to Levinas, already taken place in the form of ontology: the philosophy that reduces every enigma of being to intelligible, graspable knowledge. According to Levinas, this rationalistic usurpation constitutes the most consistent error of Western philosophy (as ontology and, more specifically, contemporary phenomenology) and is to be avoided at all costs. Hence, Levinas is primarily taken to formulate a philosophy that is aimed to be fundamentally different from the entirety of Western (philosophical) thought: the replacement of *Ontology* as first philosophy by *Ethics*.¹⁴

These – rudimentary displayed – interpretations are all correct. In order to understand Levinas's thought, one must indeed begin with the absolute distinction between same and Other. Moreover, this reading is, without doubt, thoroughly founded in Levinas's own work. For example, the opening of *Totality and Infinity* (henceforth TI) stresses the invaluable importance of "metaphysical Desire"¹⁵ to show how the same is always expectant of the Other yet never fully able to grasp or appropriate his/her insatiable longing. Indeed, throughout Levinas's first major work, radical distance appears to form the primal conceptuality.¹⁶ Here, the Other is always higher than the same, always superior, above, infinite.¹⁷ The structure of the relation between same and Other is thus, in the conventional understanding, fundamentally characterized as: 1) *dichotomous*, 2) *asymmetrical* and 3) *ethical*.¹⁸

2. From Distinct Otherness to Ambivalent Substitution

The conventional understanding of a primal distinction between same and Other is justly founded in the majority of Levinas's writings. However – and this 'however' shall form the crux of the current essay – it might not be wholly adequate for Levinas's later philosophy. The characterization of radical distance cannot, in itself, suffice for Levinas's complex philosophy in general. Already very early in TI Levinas asks himself: "But how can the same, produced as egoism, enter into relationship with an Other without immediately divesting it of its alterity?"

¹¹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 53, 215, etc.

¹² Robert Manning, *Interpreting Otherwise than Heidegger* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1993), 88–135.

¹³ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 29, 43, etc.

¹⁴ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42.

¹⁵ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33.

¹⁶ The only possible exception thereto would, in my opinion, be the analysis of Eros in the end of *Totality and Infinity*.

¹⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 63, 83, etc.

¹⁸ This conventional interpretation is not false. Roger Burggraeve, in his "Twisting Ways: Emmanuel Levinas on How to not Talk about God," in *Debating Levinas's Legacy*, ed. Andris Breitling, Chris Bremmers, and Arthur Cools, *Studies in Contemporary Phenomenology*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 97–127, demonstrates the viable merits of Levinas' early logic of primal distinction by applying it to theological problems, gaining valuable insights and results, relevant in contemporary debate.

What is the nature of this relationship?"¹⁹ The absolute distinction between Other and same is, indeed, *endangered* by such interaction. If the Other and the same are fundamentally distinct, how can there exist any form of engagement between them that does not directly imply a violent reduction? How can the Other enter a *relation* without immediately being compromised? Such unity and entanglement seem more complex than one-sided, ethical asymmetry.

A multitude of Levinas-interpretation struggles with the discrepancies deriving from this impasse, which remains an active question for Levinas himself as well. To mention a brief example, Renée van Riessen, in her "Identity: Gaining It by Losing It?",²⁰ discusses the Identity of the same. She writes: "An essential question in Levinas is how a subject can be thought that really communicates with the other. [This real communication] implies danger, insecurity, the possibility of seeing the life of the subject as an adventure that involves uncertainty."²¹ Unfolding this problematic, Van Riessen shows how the same can never be completely trapped in its egoic enclosures, fully *distinct* from the Other.²² Rather, she speaks of "a split in the identity in which the subject appears vulnerable and passive."²³ Such a split identity presupposes a *connection* with the Other; a certain relational *unity*. This kind of entanglement is what complicates the exact relation of same and Other in Levinas, understood in the conventional sense of primary distinction. Van Riessen explicitly opposes such an understanding of pure distinction by ultimately writing: "[Levinas's] emphasis on the asymmetry of the intersubjective relation calls for a correction."²⁴

That such a "correction" is necessary is more often proclaimed in discussions on Levinas.²⁵ However, as these corrections are highly diverse and specific, no unambiguous answer to this fundamental problematic has yet been unfolded with reference to Levinas's primary conceptuality (i.e. the same-Other-commerce) *in general*. The aim of the current paper is, hence, to suggest a foundation for such a general interpretation of transformation. This will require opposing the conventional understanding of Levinas with his later, more developed and advanced philosophy in *Otherwise than Being* (henceforth: OB).

The envisioned shift in Levinas's fundamental conceptuality can be displayed most effectively by comparing the titles of Levinas's two *magna opera*. Whereas *Totality and Infinity* expresses the oppositional distinction between interiority/totality/sameness and exteriority/infinity/otherness, *Otherwise than Being* should be understood fundamentally different. For this "Otherwise" no longer merely constitutes a contrast to the philosophy of

¹⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 38.

²⁰ Renée Van Riessen, "Identity: Gaining it by losing it? The notion of *kenosis*," in *Debating Levinas's Legacy*, ed. Andris Breitling, Chris Bremmers, and Arthur Cools, *Studies in Contemporary Phenomenology*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 164–174.

²¹ Van Riessen, "Identity," 172, 173.

²² Van Riessen discusses these problematics more elaborately in her dissertation: *Erotiek en Dood: met het oog op transcendentie in de filosofie van Levinas* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1991), 11–78.

²³ Van Riessen, "Identity," 168.

²⁴ Van Riessen, "Identity," 173.

²⁵ For example: Thomas Trezise, preparing research for his next book on Levinas in his lecture "On Persons and Community in Levinas" (2017), discusses the difficulty of making a transition to praxis and politics from Levinas's philosophy. In his regard, Levinas's focus on the two-folded, asymmetrical structure in the same-Other-engagement ("I and You, first and second") does not leave enough space to ascend to a practical, general level ("the Third") in which the world consists of communities.

Being (ontology). The “Otherwise” is, rather, always and only otherwise *than-being*: attached to this Being, always in back-and-forth with it. No longer is the Other (or otherness) solely located in an asymmetrical height, principally *outside* of the same. In Levinas’s later work, there is talk of “*otherness in the same*”²⁶ as well. Thus, a discussion about Being is inherently involved in the general problematic, making ontology the necessary counterpart for a philosophy of alterity. In OB, ‘the Other’ is no longer Levinas’s fundamental philosophical notion. Rather, the *relation* – or better: the back-and-forth, the traffic, commerce, or tension – *as substitution* becomes primordial.

When understood correctly,²⁷ “The substitution”, the very core of OB,²⁸ can be seen to effectuate this shift in primary conceptuality through an exchange of Levinas’s primary terms: the same and the Other reciprocally *trade places*. The identity of the same becomes a place for the Other, gets “turned upside down”²⁹. With the presence of “*otherness in the same*”,³⁰ the absolute distinction between same and Other is broken. The same, inherently torn apart (“*arrachement*”)³¹ between itself and otherness, is inverted until the very point of existing “*for-the-other*”³². Thus, the same, negatively affected by the interrupting Other, is, in simultaneous substitution, also positively aware of the infringing alterity. This does not mean the same now understands or grasps the Other’s interiority. Rather, it means that the engagement between same and Other becomes such that the unreachable, infinitely enigmatic presence of the Other is not only perceived of as a mere *absent obstacle* but *also* as a *present phenomenon* (e.g. phenomena like “*sensibility*” or “*proximity*”): that noticeably disturbs all being-at-home-with-oneself. The same is for-the-Other, the Other is in the same; alterity proves to be *constitutive for the very identity of the same* and can no longer be merely distinct from it.

In fact, even before TI, Levinas speaks of a “higher in the lesser”³³, expressing how the same is intrinsically haunted by something from the outside that both surpasses it and enters it, relates, presupposing a certain relation. Levinas’s more developed thought in OB, then, unfolds the most radical consequence of this problematic by stating the Other “exists in our own skin”³⁴ *as well*. Levinas does remain loyal to the distance of the Other, but embeds the incomprehensible “*enigma*”³⁵ of eye-contact in the encompassing, broken structure of substitution. The shocking experience of the face-à-face in TI thus becomes innate to everyday ambivalent vitality itself: the disturbance was always already constitutively there, one was never actually at peace. The same is, in OB, already *in asymmetry with itself*, always infracted

²⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 67: “The one-for-another [as] alterity in the same” (also see 114).

²⁷ Most helpful to me was the Dutch translation, provided with elaborate commentary from Theo de Boer (Dutch pioneer in the Levinas-reception): Emmanuel Levinas, *De Plaatsvervanging*, trans. Theo de Boer (Amsterdam: Ambo/Anthos Uitgevers, 1977).

²⁸ *Otherwise than being* is divided into six chapters. Chapter four, “The substitution”, into six parts. The fourth part therein is called “The substitution” as well. This structure, the analogous location, indicates substitution to be the core of the book.

²⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 115: “In this substitution, in which identity is inverted”.

³⁰ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 67.

³¹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 49, 144.

³² Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 69–80.

³³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Het menselijk Gelaat*, trans. Adriaan Peperzak (Amsterdam: Ambo, 2003), 144.

See also: Levinas’s analysis of the *ideatum* in *Totality and Infinity*, 49-52.

³⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 115: “having-the-other-under-one’s-skin”.

³⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 10, 93, 154, etc.

by the mere existence of other humans, whether they are around or not. Each singular individual is permanently existentially “torn apart”³⁶, and can, indeed, only *exist as themselves because they are torn apart between others*. The same must always deal with enigmatic pluralities inside itself that ungraspably affect the reality of life. Distinction and asymmetry, however fundamental and constitutive, are now *also* in commerce with the *also* presupposed unity of identity and relation.

In substitution, sameness presupposes otherness, and vice versa. Otherness might, indeed, remain a fully ungraspable “enigma”³⁷ for the same, but on the level of fundamental conceptuality in Levinas’s work, same and Other have become *equally important*. Having-an-identity implies being-together-with-others. Hence, the “command of the Other”³⁸ no longer merely stems from a transcendent distance, but is now innate to (human) life as such. This *life*, in consequence, is *ambivalent*. Torn between existing-as-a-unity and being-infringed-by-secluded-alterity, the fundamental structure at stake is in a certain contradiction with itself. The constitutive terms – the unity of the same and the plurality of the Other – seem to eliminate each other, resulting in a constant tension, excluding any rigid, final structure. Same and Other cannot be *together*, yet *always already are*. Therefore, an ambivalent (non-)structure must form the fundamental conceptuality for the later Levinas; human life is *distinct-yet-unified: simultaneously yet non-synchronously One, yet two, yet one, yet... and so on ad infinitum*.

Arthur Cools, in his paper “Levinas’s Defense of Intellectualism: An Undecidable Ambiguity”³⁹ formulates a similar interpretation, albeit in a different context. Cools states that: “an ambiguity - ‘an ambiguity of sense and non-sense’ - persists in [Levinas] writings”.⁴⁰ Cools calls this ambiguity “fundamental”⁴¹ and “unsurmountable”⁴² and, by quoting Levinas stating a similar view, does not seek to overcome such an ambiguity, but rather to accept and investigate ambiguities in general in a constructive manner.⁴³

Cools goes on to demonstrate the possibility of a constructive approach to ambiguities in Levinas by discussing Levinas’s hyperbolically concrete vocabulary in OB. Cools writes: “Proximity is, as Levinas calls it himself, an ‘exorbitance’, an ‘obsession’, and in order to grasp the significance of sensibility he is not afraid to use words such as ‘exposure to wounds and outrages,’ ‘persecution,’ ‘trauma,’ ‘psychosis’.”⁴⁴ These words are used by the later Levinas to formulate the (non-)experience of substitution within the conceptual framework of fundamental ambivalence. Levinas also speaks of “vulnerability”, “recurrence”, “anarchy”, “diachrony”, and more.⁴⁵ Now, all these terms are structurally related to the core-notion of OB: *substitution*. For each word in this radical jargon can be seen to somehow express the tension

³⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 49, 139, 149.

³⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, pp.10, 93, 154, etc.

³⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21, 47, etc.

³⁹ Arthur Cools, “Levinas’s Defense of Intellectualism: An Undecidable Ambiguity?” in *Debating Levinas’s Legacy*, ed. Andris Breitling, Chris Bremmers, and Arthur Cools, *Studies in Contemporary Phenomenology*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 3–16.

⁴⁰ Cools, “Ambiguity,” 7, quoting Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 163.

⁴¹ Cools, “Ambiguity,” 3.

⁴² Cools, “Ambiguity,” 4.

⁴³ As he writes in his conclusion: “The philosophy of Levinas shows that we do not need to be afraid of ambiguities when defending an intellectualism of reason”. Cools, “Ambiguity,” 14.

⁴⁴ Cools, “Ambiguity,” 9, quoting Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*.

⁴⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, respectively 63–77, 88–121, 101–128, 109–113.

that lies at the heart of these honest, human (non-)experiences. “Obsession”, for instance, signifies an exaggerated attention for something that one does not coincide with; being “vulnerable”, to mention a second example, expresses an infringement in unified identity, not strong enough to exist in itself. In this manner, the ambivalence of substitution is the core-structure that expresses the primary *tension* between same and Other, at stake in each of the words above. Thus, substitution forms the encompassing notion that carries the shift from TI to OB in a synthetic manner; substitution is not a special occurrence that happens at a certain time, but rather permanently the reality of human existence, as a *condition* for such being-there.

Cools also seeks to refer to the *physical* – rather than formal or logical – elements primarily at stake in the Levinassian ambiguities: “What runs the risk of being lost in the reduction of all ambiguity to a double bind is the experience of the body, the meaning that arises from the ambiguity of the body because of its vulnerability”.⁴⁶ Ambiguities in Levinas’s philosophy are, hence, not logical contradictions – merely present in a Derridean dimension of language or inscription – but stem, first and foremost, from the ambivalence that is human life itself in the most concrete sense imaginable. Discussing this bodily vulnerability, Cools notes paradoxical structures like the following in Levinas’s later locution of the same-Other-traffic: “Hence, a new ambiguity: proximity, as the original condition of language, constitutes, on the one hand, the possibility of a ‘true’ relationship to the other, but is also and at the same time the moment of exposure and vulnerability.”⁴⁷ Levinas’s major concepts prove to repeatedly testify to a certain friction, infinitely altering, never rigid or final. Neither a mere *asymmetrical distance*, nor a synthetic *relational unity* can thus be deemed fundamental. Rather, they are *both* primordially at play.

With the shift from TI to OB, the primary characteristics of the conventional interpretation of Levinas no longer seem fully adequate. Firstly, the same and the Other always exist together: not at all in (synchronous) harmony, but certainly inseparably connected. The absolute distinction is always in ambivalent traffic with a unity of equal relevance. Secondly, the enigma of the Other might still surpass the comprehension of the same, but this asymmetrical character can only appear within an identity that is already existentially bifurcated. Asymmetry and equality can only *together* constitute the fundamental ambivalence, i.e. in an endless *back-and-forth*: this *structure* is primary. It shall be made explicit below the implications this holds for Levinas’s later ethics. Specifically, I suggest that Levinas’s ethics, methodologically, require the necessary counterpart of ontology, which must always be thought together-with-yet-distinct-from ethics to arrive at the encompassing, ambivalent methodology following from substitution.

3. The Limits of the Conventional Interpretation

The same-Other problematic is, even today, always at play in analyses of Levinas.⁴⁸ However, an abstract display of the altered fundamental structure of Levinas’s primary conceptuality –

⁴⁶ Cools, “Ambiguity,” 15.

⁴⁷ Cools, “Ambiguity,” 10.

⁴⁸ The current article mentioned a multitude of examples demonstrating this above: Morgan, Hutchens, Manning, Burggraave, Van Riessen, Trezise and Cools – though discussing diverse subjects – all adhered to the inherent problematic of same and Other in reading Levinas. Moreover, it will extensively be shown below how Rudi Visker does so as well.

as presented above in contrast with the traditional interpretation – does not, in itself, suffice to constitute a viable alternative to reading Levinas in general. The applicability, consistency and general merits of substitution must be concretely demonstrated.

To do so it must, however, be made clear beforehand *that* and *how* the conventional Levinas-interpretation is indeed at play in contemporary Levinas-reception. By way of example, I will engage with some of Rudi Visker's work, which challenges Levinas's notions in a thorough, radical manner, questioning his main notions, indicating impasses, and criticizing all inconsistencies and overlooked aspects of his philosophy. Moreover, Visker provides an alternative to *oppose* Levinas's ethics. His article thus touches upon the very limits of Levinas's primary conceptuality, providing the ideal outset to demonstrate how the conventional reading of Levinas can, subtly, remain present, even in recent and advanced receptions of Levinas. Visker's work is thus taken as a representative example for contemporary Levinas-lecture, because its extreme position shows the limits of Levinas's conceptuality. In this section it is shown that Visker implicitly reacts to the conventional understanding of Levinas. In the following section I argue that the alternative of substitution might make matters more insightful and adequate.

To begin, it must be made clear that Visker (like the aforementioned literature) indeed addresses the fundamental problematic currently at stake: the nature of the traffic between the same and the Other. Showing Visker's engagement in these themes will, moreover, provide the general outset and context of his writings to be investigated. His recent "The Inhuman Core of Human Dignity – Levinas and Beyond"⁴⁹ fulfills this introductory role, because it carries out the same trajectory as Visker's earlier article in a more compact manner. Directly at the start of this essay, Visker attests that "The other's appeal somehow seems to have the power to detach me from my being (...)"⁵⁰ Thus, the insurmountable distance between the same and the Other, here as well, immediately implies that the same is torn open towards the other and can therefore no longer exist as mere sameness; in a way, *the difference breaks through the distance*, paradoxically enough. Visker states this explicitly: "Rather than remaining for-itself, the egoic subject turns into a for-the-other."⁵¹ Such a transformation presupposes a connection between the same and the Other – not only (absolute and asymmetrical) distinction, demonstrating Visker's engagement in the problematic.

Visker even expresses a certain discontent with Levinas's answers to this problematic, and formulates the following discrepancy: "either I am in nature, bound and tied to my own being, or I am human which means I am tied (*noué*) and vowed to (*voué*) the other before I am tied and vowed to myself."⁵² Visker seeks to "escape this consequence",⁵³ and deems Levinas's discrepant and dual logic of Other-and-same overly narrow and radical. He states that: "[there must be a] third position".⁵⁴ By suggesting an *alternative* (his notion of "dignity") to Levinas's discrepant conceptuality, Visker turns his focus towards the natural counterpart of Levinas's

⁴⁹ Rudi Visker, "The Inhuman Core of Human Dignity: Levinas and Beyond" in *Debating Levinas's Legacy*, ed. Andris Breitling, Chris Bremmers, and Arthur Cools, *Studies in Contemporary Phenomenology*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 28-46.

⁵⁰ Visker, "Dignity," 29.

⁵¹ Visker, "Dignity," 34.

⁵² Visker, "Dignity," 41.

⁵³ Visker, "Dignity," 42.

⁵⁴ Visker, "Dignity," 41.

philosophy: *ontology*. He writes: “we need not only to oppose [Levinas’s] ethicization of the human rights of the other, by moving before ethics to ontology, but also go beyond it, towards politics.”⁵⁵ Proposing a shift to ontology and politics *before* ethics means rejecting Levinas’s fundamental claims.

Visker’s earlier, yet more thorough “Is Ethics Fundamental? Questioning Levinas on irresponsibility”⁵⁶ deals with the same issues and elaborates Visker’s suggested alternative of Dignity. The main problem this earlier paper addresses is the fundamental status of *ethics* in Levinas’s philosophy. Visker argues Levinas’s ethics prioritize the Other over the same, in such a way that “a dimension of selfhood [is] absorbed into intersubjectivity”.⁵⁷ Visker deems this consequence unnecessary and overly radical and, hence, aims to correct it by posing a more nuanced alternative. Doing so, he discusses Levinas’s conception of responsibility, stating that its structure dominates the fundamental level of Levinas’s philosophy by making the same principally *bound* to its ability-to-respond. According to Visker, for Levinas it is never possible to escape this attachment to the Other. Visker therefore deems alterity to be Levinas’s fundamental notion. This primordial call of the Other is, accordingly, directly connected to ethics, understood as the obligation of the same to answer to *the Good*: a principally higher power, commanding from an asymmetric distance.

From this brief summary, the principal characteristics of the conventional Levinas-interpretation (dichotomy, asymmetry, and ethics) can be immediately recognized. It is, indeed, precisely this understanding that Visker opposes in his argument. By opposing it, he nevertheless assumes it as a faithful display of Levinas’s work. In Visker’s suggested alternative (“dignity”), Visker’s presupposition of the conventional interpretation is verified *via negativa*. For Visker’s alternative posits: “in the human being, something like an ‘unrest’ that is different from the absence of rest – an ‘unrest’ that keeps our speech on the move, without ever being moved by it, an unmovedness that is at heart of human misery but also, as we shall see, of human dignity.”⁵⁸ This unrest, or dignity, is thus formulated *in contrast* to the disturbance of all egoic tranquility by Levinas’s Other. Visker explicitly seeks: “a different relation with the alterity of the Other than the one implied by Levinas’s philosophy”.⁵⁹ For Visker, it is impossible to be entitled to this unrest/dignity in the same in Levinas’s philosophy; the Other is taken to absorb and reduce this possibility by obliging the same to be responsible, leaving him/her (the same) unentitled to certain impossibilities for him/herself: personal obstacles, fully enclosed from the pressing Other.

As Visker unfolds his alternative – “dignity” – it remains visible how this alternative is unambiguously opposed to the conventional Levinas-understanding. For example, Visker wonders: “Could there, then, be between me and the Other a silence that is not the reverse side of my refusal to leave myself [?]”.⁶⁰ This “silence”, the aforementioned unrest/dignity, is contrasted with “the reverse side of my refusal to leave myself”, pertaining to Levinas’s notion

⁵⁵ Visker, “Dignity,” 45.

⁵⁶ Rudi Visker, “Is Ethics Fundamental? Questioning Levinas on Responsibility,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 36 (2003): 263–302.

⁵⁷ Visker, “Is Ethics Fundamental,” 263.

⁵⁸ Visker, “Is Ethics Fundamental,” 286.

⁵⁹ Visker, “Is Ethics Fundamental,” 288.

⁶⁰ Visker, “Is Ethics Fundamental,” 284.

of *responsibility*. This notion is, in consequence, understood as Levinas's dominant, ethical structure, always primordially existing and excluding any chance for a silence/dignity that would be truly proper to the same. Visker subverts the primary dominance of the Other by opposing it with his own kind of irresponsibility: "There would be between us an irresponsibility that is not the absence of an ethical responsibility (...) For this something is not *the Good*."⁶¹ "The Good" here pertains to the fundamental, ethical structures in Levinas's primary conceptuality, which accordingly is to be understood in terms of the Other, who demands the Good from an asymmetrical distance. Visker writes: "The Good, as it were, has exploded, and all that is left of it is a plurality of inscriptions that complicate the relations between us and forces us to come to terms with the whole problem of human rootedness".⁶²

The "something" or "silence", then, Visker wants to propose, can, after his negatively contrasting analysis, be positively posed as dignity, appreciation, rootedness, and a notion of the same as entitled to its own enigmas. Not directly qualified as "irresponsible" when unable to answer to the Other, but rather as *a dignified human being* in doing so, justly caught up in the structures of identity, not absorbed by an ethical, distinct, higher call from the Other. The properties of the same that Visker wants to defend in response to Levinas (or at least, in response to the conventional interpretation of Levinas), are named "rootedness", and consist in the factual properties of different (sets of) individuals: their color of skin, sexuality, etc. These *ontological* facts, Visker argues, are neglected in Levinas's philosophy, which can only address an individual *as a singularity pure sang* – that is, independent from such general (ontological) determinations. Therefore, Visker goes on to argue for a re-appreciation of these general "forms",⁶³ refusing to characterize them as *opposed* or *secondary* to ethics. Hence, Visker adheres to the necessity of recognizing characteristics like gender, ethnicity, and culture, and attests such ontological-political properties to be of equally fundamental value as Levinas's radical ethics, which he deems to be solely focused on the extremity of the pure Other.

Visker goes on to draw a distinction between Levinas's philosophy as radical ethics – "Help"⁶⁴ – and his own, more nuanced version of dealing with alterity, which does not oppose ontology, but embraces it and puts it to use: "Appreciation".⁶⁵ He writes: "All the examples Levinas gives seem to resort to the category of 'help' (the orphan, the homeless, the hungry, the naked), and his conceptualization of the Other, based on these examples, seems to leave no room for all the lack of clarity involved in the problem of appreciation and recognition."⁶⁶ Levinas would thus merely be able to signify the pristine Good of the utmost singular Other, appearing from a distinct, unreachable, higher dimension, imposing a primordial and inherent moralization upon all human life. The negative consequence of such pure ethics would be, according to Visker, as follows: "From all of this follows the central move by which the 'allergy' to otherness becomes described as my unwillingness to respond to the Other, and this

⁶¹ Visker, "Is Ethics Fundamental," 285.

⁶² Visker, "Is Ethics Fundamental," 285.

⁶³ Visker, "Is Ethics Fundamental," 280.

⁶⁴ Visker, "Is Ethics Fundamental," 286.

⁶⁵ Visker, "Is Ethics Fundamental," 286.

⁶⁶ Visker, "Is Ethics Fundamental," 289.

unwillingness is interpreted, in its turn, as a lack of response which resists my deepest essence – namely, to be tied and vowed to the Other before I am tied or vowed to myself.”⁶⁷

A main concept Visker uses to effectuate this correction of Levinas’s philosophy, is the notion of privation. He argues that Levinas uses this philosophical figure to depart from ontology, but, ambiguously enough, reintroduces it in his own ethics; “by making irresponsibility the absence of a responsibility that is always already pre-given.”⁶⁸ Visker deems this inescapable ethical structure an overly radical consequence of Levinas’s ethics, and seeks to oppose it with a milder version that does *not* exclude all sameness by qualifying it as secondary to ethics. Posing this alternative (dignity), he writes: “Not reducible to qualities nor detachable from them, the Other is, like me, a ‘Mensch nicht ohne Eigenschaften’ (person ‘not without’ qualities), plagued by lacking the full story about what, at the same time, supplies him with an irreducible dignity. This ‘not without’ escapes any privative approach. It is not ‘nothing’ (not even the Heideggerian ‘Nothing’), nor something (some thing). It seems *to fall between the folds of an ontological or ethical difference*, and yet it seems at the heart of what constitutes for us humans our singularity.”⁶⁹

Visker agrees to the inscription of the Good, proposed by Levinas. However, he does not deem otherness to be the *ultimate* “[i]nscription which does away with – effaces – all other inscriptions”.⁷⁰ The crux of his argument is displayed in the following citation, opposing Levinas’s radical stance with Visker’s more nuanced version: “Allegedly, this Inscription of the Good has always already attached us to the Other and given that attachment a greater weight than any other bond we could have. The response we have already given to the Other’s appeal before we could decide to give it, has already driven us outward – and I would add, has already thus allowed us to ignore what in us does not answer to us and *a fortiori* what in us does not answer to the Other.”⁷¹ Visker’s aim was to make visible why and how a departure from Levinas’s extreme otherness could be deemed necessary and valuable. He chooses not to ignore the structures in the same that prevent him/her to responding to the (fundamental) Other, but to acknowledge them as invaluable for the contemporary ethical debate.

4. Demonstration of the Viability of Ambivalent substitution

Having determined that Visker opposes the conventional Levinas-interpretation, the extremes of this traditional understanding have become clear. Visker, is, indeed, right in answering his main question (“Is Ethics Fundamental?”) with “No”. Ethics, conceived of in the conventional manner – i.e. interpreting Levinas to be solely focused on expressing the *ethical, distinct, asymmetrical Other* – is an overly narrow and radical solution to the problem of same and Other. However, as much as one can agree with Visker’s objection to the conventionally understood Levinasian ethics, one need not agree with Visker’s conclusion. Though the departure from mere otherness is necessary, departing from Levinas altogether would be a step in the wrong direction. Indeed, I will argue that the problems with Levinas’s approach, demonstrated by Visker’s radical analysis, can be solved by calling on Levinas’s later solution of substitution.

⁶⁷ Visker, “Is Ethics Fundamental,” 290.

⁶⁸ Visker, “Is Ethics Fundamental,” 268.

⁶⁹ Visker, “Is Ethics Fundamental,” 292. Italics added.

⁷⁰ Visker, “Is Ethics Fundamental,” 294.

⁷¹ Visker, “Is Ethics Fundamental,” 294.

This final part of the essay demonstrates the merits, consistency, and viability of substitution, primarily characterized by an ambivalent structure.

The conventional understanding of Levinas, now verified to be present even in contemporary debate, seems to overlook that Levinas fundamentally *changed* his philosophy in OB. Levinas's strict notion of fundamental otherness has been criticized often and thoroughly enough – starting with Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics"⁷² – to motivate Levinas to correct himself in his later work. Otherwise, would he have bothered to write an entire second magnum opus? A radical shift in primary conceptuality has been effected with the publication of OB. Levinas's later philosophy no longer values an ethics of pure otherness above all else, but has developed, in addition, a strict attention for *ontology, unity and equality*; as opposed to ethics, distinction and asymmetry, respectively.

With substitution, Levinas eliminates the absolute superiority of the Other: this Other is exchanged with the same, leaving them to be confused in themselves, inherently carrying the enigma of otherness as a plurality of obscure, bifurcating structures. The Other is no longer exclusively opposed to the same, since subjectivity itself becomes lacerated in ambivalent relation to everything external and Other. Indeed, Levinas, in OB, repeatedly witnesses to the necessity of a polemic with a philosophy of the same; this dialogue with ontology even becomes *constitutive for humanity and reality in general*. Substitution means being in an eternal back-and-forth with difference, diversity and otherness, but this traffic can only ever begin from the same, which is no longer purely distinct from the Other, but already in a broken relation. Levinas now knows one cannot, methodologically, depart from invisible, enigmatic otherness: the structures of the same (inseparable from otherness) form a presupposed condition to discuss the enigmatic Other. Levinas's never-ending conversation with ontology is a direct effectuation of such methodological attention.

Visker – and with him, many others – is right in rejecting a philosophy of otherness, only interested in eliminating and transcending ontology and all thought regarding the same. But the solution he formulates to bring about a necessary nuance *already lies in Levinas's OB*. Substitution is, indeed, capable of answering to the proposed problematics. The replacement of ontology with ethics as a *prima philosophia* might very well have formed the necessary departure for the young Levinas, but his later philosophy is more sophisticated, nuanced and attentive for its opposition.

Neither ontology, nor ethics need to be rejected its fundamental position⁷³ in later Levinas. For there, they can be thought *together, as the tensed unity of two distinct dimensions*. Precisely such an ambivalent suggestion can be found in Levinas's substitution, which exchanges the same with the Other and thus, ontology with ethics: in such a way that they become reciprocal to one another. They imply and need each other, but cannot be merged in a perfect synthesis, yet do operate in an extensive, equally fundamental *connection*. This kind of contradictory methodological mixture can consistently be seen to lie at the very heart of

⁷² Jacques Derrida, "Metaphysics and Violence," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1978), .

⁷³ Visser, "Is Ethics Fundamental," 264: "I develop this criticism by analyzing what I call a non-privative notion of irresponsibility whose roots are neither ethical nor ontological". And 292: "This [dignity/the silence of the same] seems to fall between the folds of an ontological or ethical difference, and yet it seems at the heart of what constitutes for us humans our singularity."

Levinas's OB. For instance, he states: "Ethical language, which phenomenology resorts to in order to mark its own interruption (...) is the very meaning of approach, which contrasts with knowing. No language other than ethics could be equal to the paradox which phenomenological description enters."⁷⁴ In OB, Levinas sees the need to unfold an ambivalent writing himself ("ethical language/phenomenological description"), as his otherness is now thought in permanent polemic with ontology and phenomenology: conditions for his own philosophy, fundamentally.

The root of the widespread oversight of Levinas's methodological transformation, is that Levinas is, up until today, *still interpreted as the philosopher of the Other*. This interpretation remains dominant in most literature – Arthur Cools's work standing as one of the few exceptions to this prominence. Levinas, in OB, does *not* oppose all philosophy of sameness or ontology. He, rather, *embeds* them in an encompassing fundamental conceptuality. Thus, when Visker – exemplary of this general tendency – seeks to express a "silence" in the same that is not to be violated by a superior otherness, he is a step behind to Levinas's later conceptuality, which contains terms like "insomnia", "pain", "anarchy", "persecution", "diachrony",⁷⁵ etc., to formulate a struggle *already inherent* to the existence of the same. The interruption of the Other can, in OB, only appear in a subject (the same) which is not able to appropriate the infringement. This disturbance can, indeed, only be thought departing from the same – and Levinas knows this. He repeatedly admits to be himself unable to escape his subjectivity, being trapped in the paradox that makes one human: having to live with something that one cannot coincide with, not even understand: that is the wrenching conflict making us human in later Levinas, that is the ambivalent structure which culminates in substitution. To adequately philosophize upon such a structure means admitting to one's *own* ambivalence (Levinas's new notion of "Subjectivity")⁷⁶ first and foremost, for otherwise, Levinas's methodology would be *cut loose* from the discussed content.

With the addition of the same to Levinas's fundamental conceptuality (which is now *traffic* of both same and Other), ontology is acknowledged as necessary counterpart to ethics. Levinas no longer seeks to reject or overcome all philosophy of identity, but merely *contributes* to that very debate by adding alterity to the stage. Therefore, Visker's suggestion of recognizing ontological properties in ethics is, in fact, highly *acceptable* for the later Levinas, for whom ambivalence is the final answer.

In OB, time is ambivalent: a "past never present"⁷⁷, contradictorily affecting – constituting, even – each moment, is the substitution of an Other time with presence: "diachrony" (a concrete example is the progression of history: each new development implies a reduction of something old – ambivalence). Identity is ambivalent: humans can only exist as themselves because they are torn apart between others, and vice versa. Life is ambivalent: each birth (abolishment of inanimation) witnesses both to an elimination and a confirmation of

⁷⁴ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 193.

⁷⁵ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, respectively 64–68, 50–56, 88–121, 109–113, 37–57.

⁷⁶ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 124: "The responsibility for another, an unlimited responsibility which the strict book-keeping of the free and non-free does not measure, requires subjectivity as an irreplaceable hostage." The word "subjectivity" gains, in OB, the new meaning of being-torn-apart as the same, constituting only an *ambivalent* foundation to approach the Other.

⁷⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 38, 88, 125. Also see: Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* 25 (1963): 605–623.

unity and distinction – two different parents, one new singular child (or more, it does not matter). Philosophy is ambivalent: text and writer, over-and-about, polemics, writing down what one cannot fully comprehend oneself, yet doing so in a systematical manner.⁷⁸ Everywhere the (non-)structure appears: *distinct-yet-unified, simultaneously yet non-synchronously One, yet two yet one yet... and so on ad infinitum.*

The ambivalent structure is, thus, very well applicable in politics, (think of freedom versus equality, individual versus group, etc.) ethics, (health and sickness, love and violence, etc.) and science (the paradoxical situation of psychology: researching human obscurity in a clear and empirical way).⁷⁹ Hence, before Levinas is rejected as being narrowly focused on the mere otherness of the Other, one might need to consider ambivalent substitution as Levinas's novel Otherwise than Otherness. With substitution, Levinas provides a fundamental conceptuality that considers the same as well as the Other and, furthermore, acknowledges the inherent traffic with all things other and enigmatic to create a powerful, encompassing philosophy of honest vitality, humanity and life.

One last example might clarify how this works concretely. When Visker discusses racism, he writes: "Such a person does not want to be reduced to his/her ('different') skin-color, etc., *but also refuses to be detached from it*"⁸⁰. Such contradictory impossibilities are precisely the neglected honesty Levinas seeks to revive in OB, by placing the same next to the Other in his new fundamental concept, substitution. OB's Levinas would, in fact, *agree* to such a contradictory structure at the heart of what makes us human: existentially lacerated subjectivity is never purely naked, but always already inscribed with the constitutive interruption of the Other in endless traffic with ontological, general structures like rootedness. *Both* the enigma's proper to the same *and* the enigma of otherness as such are required to constitute the ambivalent method which, paradoxically, combines ethics with ontology. In order to discuss racism, then, one would *both* have to acknowledge his/her skin-color, cultural roots, etc. *and* transcend these specific differences in effectuating a respect for the irreducible Other. That such an attitude seems complex or double is only adequate with Levinas's ambivalent understanding of humanity, always torn between ontological certainty and ethical enigma.

Conclusion

The conventional Levinas-interpretation is in need of a thorough correction. Pure otherness is, indeed, the necessary concept to introduce Levinas's thought. But otherness as such is not enough to qualify Levinas's later philosophy, which implies a fundamental change of conceptuality. With the exchange of the Other and the same – substitution – Levinas embarks on a new methodology, which can consistently be shown to think ambivalence as the ultimate structure of human life.

⁷⁸ I would attest philosophy is the ambivalence between art (obscure inspiration) and science (objective research): always caught in the middle between those two, therefore unable to defend an *unambiguous* place of its own.

⁷⁹ There is not enough room in the current context to fully unfold my understanding of Ambivalence in Levinas. I did, however, do so in my Research Paper, which can be supplied for those interested. Especially 37–49 and the conclusion address the problematics at stake much more thoroughly.

⁸⁰ Visker, "Is Ethics Fundamental," 291.

Many contemporary interpretations of Levinas could gain a lot from this insight, which is aimed to make *specific* corrections and alterations to Levinas's understanding of the Other unnecessary. When the same and the Other constitute ambivalence together – yet as *also* remaining principally distinct, consistently contradictory – there is no need to fear the destructive impact of the epiphany of the Face any longer. That experience might form the inspirational foundation for Levinas's early work, but does not remain the fundamental concept throughout his work in general. In OB, the same is split from the outset, testifying to an inherent structure that is already ambivalent. The step towards the Other follows from the exact same ambivalence, for the structure of individual humans already contains a relation towards invisible enigma's such as otherness.

That a structure of fundamental ambivalence can, indeed, be put to concrete and viable use in philosophy, is proven by the work of Derrida and Agamben, in which contemporary interpreters are more eager to recognize a fundamentally plural and contradictive structure. The philosophy of the later Levinas should be understood in the same dimension: it thinks ethics and ontology *together*, yet not as a perfect synthesis, but precisely from the tension between them. They belong together, yet *cannot*. That is exactly what happens in substitution, in which the same is connected to the Other – in a certain unity (substituted individual, humanity in general) – but also fully distinct from alterity, unable to understand the pluralities *also* at stake. Likely far more valuable than Levinas's original, one-sided perception of otherness, Levinas's later notion of substitution suggests an answer to age-old philosophical problems of unity and plurality and would certainly help clarifying a multitude of problems present in today's reception of Levinas.

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PhD-Proposal R. Veraart

1. Project title

'The Ambivalent Structure of Substitution in the Later Levinas'

2. Summary

The proposed project seeks to develop a contribution to contemporary fundamental philosophy by engaging in one of the oldest and most consistent questions: the problem of unity (belonging-together, oneness, relation, etc.) and distinction (opposition, dichotomy, distance, etc.). It aims to extract the formal structure from Levinas's late notion 'Substitution' to demonstrate how this conceptuality constitutes a sophisticated answer within the millennia-old philosophical polemic. Levinas's fundamental concept is conventionally taken to be 'the Other', a concept which expresses an absolute distance between 'the Self' and others. In his later work, however, Self (sameness, identity, form, singularity, etc.) and Other (otherness, difference, enigma, plurality, etc.) are characterized by Levinas as at once distinct and inherently connected: both unity and distinction become a philosophical first. The resulting core-notion of this philosophical transformation is called substitution and is marked by a fundamentally ambivalent structure. The unity at stake in Levinas's ambivalence primarily pertains to the philosophical history of ontology and phenomenology⁸¹ and explicating this ambivalence therefore requires an analysis of related contemporary philosophy. Specifically, precisely these connections are consistently present in the philosophies of Giorgio Agamben and Jacques Derrida, which effectuate highly similar structural ambivalences and, moreover, prove their applicability in concrete theoretical situations. Indicating these conjunctions will elaborate Levinas's paradoxical structure as one that can both non-reductively respond to an age-old yet ever-present philosophical problematic and contribute to fields like political theory, ethics, or theory of science.

3. Principal applicant

Yet to be determined.

4. Co-applicant

Yet to be determined.

5. PhD candidate

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6. Curriculum Vitae Candidate

See following page.

⁸¹ Ontology is the philosophy of Being and often seeks for an encompassing 'ground' or underlying structure that would fundamentally *unify* all entities. Phenomenology is the philosophical method that aims to *combine* 'human' and 'world' in *one* investigating presence.

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Grade List (ReMa)

Code	Title	EC's	Grade
FTR-FIRM-RE-01	Research Essay	10	8.5
FTR-FIMA016	Continentale filosofie 1	10	9
FTR-FIRM-HIS-01	History of Philosophy 1	10	7.5
FTR-FIRM-MS-02	Philosophical Res: Method and Skills 2	10	8
FTR-FIRM-CS-MET	Capita Selecta Metaphysics	10	8.5
FTR-FIMA017	Continentale filosofie 2	10	7
FTR-FIRM-PE-03	Philosophical Ethics (1 st sem)	10	7.5
FTR-FIRM-MS-01	Philosophical Res: Method and Skills 1	10	7.5
FTR-FIRM-HIS-03	History of Philosophy 1 (1 st sem)	10	7.5

7. Period of funding

4 years, 1.0 fte. (promovendus), September 2017 – August 2021

8. Description of the proposed research

Research questions

The project's main question is 'how do unity and distinction characterize (human) life fundamentally?'. In the context of critically investigating Levinas's – currently still implicit – answer thereto and accordingly constructing the consequences to contribute to today's philosophical debate, the specified primary questions are:

- How can the ambivalent structure of substitution be extracted from Levinas's later philosophy to function as an answer to the traditional problematic of unity and distinction?
- How is the structure of substitution related to similar concepts in the work of Agamben and Derrida, and how does this relation help to show the concrete applicability of ambivalent philosophical structures?

Research aim

The proposed project aims to contribute to a fundamental problematic in contemporary philosophical thought, and in philosophy as a whole: the problem of singularity and plurality (or: unity and distinction; identity and difference; sameness and otherness). Firstly, it will derive an advanced response to this problem from the later philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas's answer manifests an *ambivalent structure*, overcoming the need to choose between either unity or distinction as a final, rigid solution to the nature of (human) existence. Secondly, the suggestion of fundamental ambivalence will be related to traditional and contemporary thought by critically analyzing it and demonstrating its viability and uses. The final structure seeks to constitute a novel approach to the methodology and understanding of reality at stake in current continental philosophy: a perspective which both considers present problematics and aims to be concretely applicable in fields such as political theory. Inspired by comparable efforts in Agamben and Derrida, the project aims to constitute a philosophically viable and concretely useable theory, derived from the later work of Levinas.

Research description

1. Situating the Project – Philosophical Outset and Motivation

In the contemporary conception and introduction of Levinas's thought the character of *radical distinction* in his philosophy is strictly emphasized. Indeed, in *Totality and Infinity* Levinas seeks to oppose the unifying character of all traditional – specifically Western or 'Greek' – philosophy. The radical distinction Levinas uses to effectuate this contrast is intended to be more fundamental than any dichotomy ever introduced in Western philosophy, such as the substance dualism seen in Descartes's work (Descartes, 1996). Levinas constructs his novel and absolute understanding of distinction, by which he means unified identity as being-oneself. Radically opposed thereto, Levinas places 'the Other', expressing something absolutely external to all 'sameness'. Thus, 'the Same' entails every possible modus of identity, appropriation, and presence, whereas 'the Other' is placed beyond (*au-delà de*) the 'Totality' of the Same: this Other conveys the personal, human encounter

of the Face. This utterly concrete confrontation of the face-to-face signifies the unbridgeable gap (*écart*) between 'me' (the Same or Self) and 'you' (the Other). Precisely this radical *distinction* is taken by Levinas to constitute a vast dimension of fundamental consequences (Hutchens, 2004; Morgan, 2007; Manning, 1993).

Scholars today continue to take up Levinas's absolute distance to create new insights in various fields, such as theology, thus demonstrating Levinas's oppositional strength (Burggraeve, 2015). However, the strict and absolute distinction is mostly deemed highly problematic by others, as they find that Levinas's work *also* expresses the need for a certain fundamental *relation* between Other and Same (Severson, 2013). This discrepancy between *absolute distance* and *unified engagement* caused some to investigate 'smaller' structures deriving from this problematic, e.g. sexuality, identity, or death (van Riessen 1991, 2015). The ambiguity of the precise structure of Levinas's Same-Other-commerce is also often criticized or modified to enable sophisticated discussions of societal themes such as racism (Visker, 2003, 2015). At times, one even finds the attempt to embed Levinas's conceptuality in a structural and fundamental ambiguity, supplying insights for a novel rationality in general (Cools, 2015).

The proposed research engages in this polemic in such a way that the Same-Other-difficulty that is repeatedly present in most contemporary interpretations of Levinas, is approached with a fundamental answer, able to embed the encompassing problematics in a single structure. This structure will be based on Levinas's late notion of substitution, and shall be worked out as a radical transformation of Levinas's fundamental conceptuality, which thus will come to be the structural back-and-forth of Same (unity) and Other (distinction).

To effectuate this fundamental interpretation, the proposed project shall return to one of the oldest philosophical-historical themes in order to show how it is consistently at stake in Levinas's transformation: the problem of unity and distinction. For even in empirical disciplines such as chemistry and physics, the final question seems to be: 'one or two?' Is all existence unified, or principally split, plural? Similar problems were addressed in ancient Greece, where contemporary Western philosophy finds its roots. Heraclitus, for instance, stated: 'all entities move and nothing remains still', expressing a *tension* inherent to all life (Mansfeld, 2006). Later, Plato and Aristotle claimed that 'wonder' (θαυμάζειν, *thaumazein*) consistently lies at the root of all philosophizing: an existential bifurcation, interrupting any peace of mind (Fowler, 1921; Tredennick, 1989). Thus, both ontology and personal pathos significantly characterize the origin of reflection on nature and being-human (Heidegger, 1927). The questions deriving therefrom always pertain to unity and distinction on a fundamental level (Kant, 1787; Husserl, 1970), and remain relevant today (Oudemans, 2008; Visser, 1998).

2. The Proposed Project – First Task: Extracting the Formal Structure of Substitution

The main thematic of unity and distinction must firstly be approached via a significant shift found in Levinas's work: the transformation from 'absolute Otherness' (pure distinction) to ambivalent substitution. Levinas's sophisticated formula of substitution renders possible a nuanced and mature answer within a millennia-old polemic of fundamental philosophy. The proposed project seeks to demonstrate this potential by deriving the formal structure of substitution from Levinas's work, investigating its implications, and putting it to use in relation to contemporary positions.

'Substitution' is the most important concept of Levinas's second magnum opus (Levinas, 1974; De Boer, 1977). It signifies an exchange of places in which the Same, subjectivity, becomes 'for-the-other', breaking open its unified identity. The relation to the Other is thus inverted, with the absolute distance between same and other becoming inherent to the very identity of the Same (*altruisme dans la Meme*). The Same is now inherently split in sociality, presupposing a unity between 'me' and the Other. The Other, accordingly, lives in the Same, interrupting any rigid form or structure: I am for-you, you are in me. In this substitution, unity (Same) and distinction (Other) become fully interchangeable; the Same carries otherness, the Other carries the Same. Therefore, this ultimate reversal requires *both* an insurmountable distinction *and* a perfect unity *together* to constitute the whole of vitality itself. Yet, the (absolute) difference does not disappear: the Other, inherently connected to the Same, is still a completely distinct person. In consequence, individuals are now always already composed – in themselves – of sameness *and* otherness, unity *and* distinction. The terms no longer have a specific place: both Same and Other are always *torn apart* (*arrachement*) in an endless back-and-forth, or a 'traffic'. The only structure able to capture this 'connected-yet-dichotomous' movement, is a full-out ambivalence. Substitution is ambivalent. Thus, with substitution, Levinas's most fundamental notion transforms; from mere otherness to the encompassing *ambivalence of sameness and otherness*.

The proposed project will seek to explicate the formal structure of ambivalence, demonstrating not only how it answers to the traditional philosophical question of unity and distinction, but also that it is applicable in concrete situations of human life. Throughout the whole of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas develops a novel philosophical jargon, using hyper-empirical notions like 'vulnerability', 'sensitivity', 'proximity', 'recurrence', 'persecution', 'anarchy', 'diachrony', etc. (Levinas, 1974). Such language expresses the honest reality of everyday. For example, that we never exist alone and that the mere presence of others always interrupts our thoughts. Other concrete examples are: breathing as not-dying, growing further in time; eating as consuming something external, embedding it in our selves; sexuality and love as going-towards another, yet never fully 'arriving'; birth as two radically distinct entities creating a perfect unity, which is still distinct, yet unified, yet distinct, and so on ad infinitum – the formal ambivalent structure lies underneath all of Levinas's hyperbolically concrete analyses.

3. The Proposed Project – Second Task: Demonstrating the Implications of Ambivalence

The second major task of the proposed project consists in showing the applicability of ambivalent philosophy. Having understood how human life is inherently and eternally ambivalent, several methodological consequences can be drawn. The 'Otherwise' in *Otherwise than Being* is no longer solely external to ontology – the investigation of beings – but rather always in reciprocal traffic with it: 'Otherwise' is always only otherwise-*than-Being*. Levinas's ethics of the Other have become inseparable from their necessary, polemic counterpart. The same back-and-forth is established by Levinas with the philosophical method 'phenomenology', which departs from the unity of individuals and their environment (Den Hartog, 2008). Thus, the later Levinas effectuates both an encompassing notion of unity – as sameness, ontology, phenomenology, and identity – *and* a radical conception of distance – alterity, the Other, 'non-phenomenology', and riddle – *at the same time*.⁸² This structure

⁸² Yet "diachronical", but such technicalities go beyond the limits of the current presentation.

is infinitely ambivalent in the fullest sense, for it both thinks a radical dichotomy (the well-known notion of Other) and locates this distance in an endless engagement with a philosophy of unity found in (ontology and phenomenology: *Erlebnis/epochē/ontology/Being*, etc.). This addition constitutes the strength of the late Levinas: the combination of his own, early concept of the distant Other, *combined* with versions of ontology and phenomenology.

Levinas's advanced methodology is highly relevant to many current theoretical problematics in contemporary philosophy. Firstly, a significant similarity with the ambivalence of substitution can be found in the writings of Giorgio Agamben. In Agamben, 'the unexperienced' (anti-phenomenology; alterity) and 'the experienced' (the Same; ontology) together constitute the structure of viable philosophical methodology (Agamben, 2009). Most of Agamben's primary work witnesses to this contradictory relation of distinction (singularity of the Paradigm) and unity (generalities derived from singular examples), proving the applicability of a paradoxical structure. His Auschwitz-analysis, for example, demonstrates the fruitful and viable merits of a fundamental methodological *and* ontological ambivalence, e.g. via the double relation of 'true witnesses' and survivors (Agamben, 1999). A task of the proposed project is therefore to argue that Agamben's methodological structure is the same as the formal structure of Levinas's substitution, that is, ambivalent.

That it is possible to indicate such a fundamental comparison in contemporary philosophy, becomes visible from the already established – thus less original, yet therefore more explicit and exemplary – polemic between Levinas and Derrida. Indeed, Derrida belonged to the first of Levinas's critical interpreters, indicating a discrepancy in his primary conceptuality, which can be understood as a significant factor motivating the shift in Levinas's thought (Severson, 2013). Derrida's criticism of Levinas's notion of the Other demonstrates that Levinas's Otherness is not 'more primordial' than the philosophy it opposes, ontology and phenomenology (Derrida, 1996). In contrast, Derrida's method of deconstruction and 'différance' demonstrates the necessity of thinking unity and distinction in such a way that they are intrinsically related yet also principally different. This method of the 'double bind' – highly similar in structure to Levinas's ambivalence – proved its worth and applicability in the field of politics. (Derrida, 2002).

The proposed project shall study the well-documented polemic between Derrida and Levinas (Chritchley, 1992), in order to both acquire a more exact insight in the fundamental structure of Derrida's thought and clarify the similarities with Levinas' ambivalent substitution (Chritchley, 1999). Having established the similarities between Levinas's acceptance of ambivalence and that of Agamben and Derrida, both Agamben's and Derrida's contributions to political philosophy can be used to demonstrate similar possibilities for Levinas's notion of substitution. The comparison with structural tendencies in Derrida and Agamben will therefore challenge those who have argued that Levinas's thought lacks the potential to be politically applied in a viable manner (Visker, 2003). This polemic will help determining the limits of the revised lecture of Levinas, i.e. whether the novel ambivalence can meaningfully discuss themes such as racism, sexism, etc.

Methodology

An analysis of philosophical method will be a crucial part of the investigation. The research itself, however, will only argue for the use of Levinas's novel method, not use it itself. Four instruments are set out to discuss the ambivalent (methodological) structure at stake:

- Explicating a historical framework to formulate the problematic at stake, requiring a reading of Heidegger, Husserl and possibly others (e.g. Descartes) to obtain an overview of the traditional situation. This will determine the general theme of research.
- Analyzing Levinas's primary works in a systematic interpretation, combined with thorough consideration of secondary literature regarding the thematic, in order to develop the notion of substitution as a core concept in Levinas's later work and one that has the requisite structure of ambiguity. This part shall constitute the theoretical core of the research.
- Comparing the resulting ambivalent structure of substitution in Levinas to the methodological ambivalence in works of current philosophy (Agamben, Derrida) These hermeneutics will verify the viability of the novel theory: ambivalent philosophy.
- Demonstrating the connections and applications of the results of the fundamental research on a more concrete level (e.g., ethics, political philosophy, theory of science), which can be determined *ad hoc*, depending on relevant social or theoretical necessity.

Scientific relevance

The proposed project aims to be thoroughly dedicated to the aforementioned possibility of concrete theoretical applicability, following from the intended unfoldment of a universal ambivalent structure, and deems this focus of vital importance for the project itself. Moreover, the already existing contemporary philosophical methodology of Derrida and Agamben proves such scientific participation possible by having established clear engagement with fields such as anthropology, psychology, and political theory, demonstrating the fruitful merits of 'ambivalent thought'. In addition, the research aims to contribute to current continental philosophy by clarifying a fundamental tendency in diverse primary sources.

Societal relevance

As Levinas's thought was hugely influenced by the event of World War II, his themes are inherently ethical/social (Morgan, 2007). The ambivalent structure of Levinas's substitution is no different from this inseparable urge to societal contribution. The fundamental insight that everything visible has its obscure counterpart (even pertaining to philosophy itself, which is still dominantly 'western') can be put to use at will in societal themes, which are the germ for its appearance in Levinas. The proposed project seeks to indicate the general societal applicability of Levinas' revised philosophy and deems concrete engagement with a specific social phenomenon invaluable to test and measure the viability of the novel theory. Levinas is often criticized for his overly radical stance in ethics (Visker, 2015; Trezise, 2017). Therefore, a fundamental compromise regarding Levinas's absolute, ethical character – the transformation from the pure Other to the reciprocal commerce between same *and* Other as substitution – might discover novel approaches to make Levinas politically meaningful again. Besides the connections with Derrida and Agamben supporting this possibility, much has been written on Levinas and society to prove this procedure feasible (Caygill, 2002).

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9. Word count

2489 words

10. Summary in key words

Levinas; Ambivalence; Substitution; Fundamental; Human Life; Sociality; Ethics; Phenomenology; Ontology.

11. Institutional embedding and supervision

Yet to be determined.

12. Work programme

Year 1 – Development of Substitution-thesis

- Study the most relevant interpretations of Levinas and writings on the historical sources at stake, i.e. those pertaining to the problem of unity and distinction and being applicable in Levinas's problematic.
- Reading and categorizing the most important texts and structures in a systematical manner, developing the outset in which the final work becomes most urgent.
- Teaching bachelor-students basic courses on phenomenology and Levinas, developing a more adequate manner of speaking and writing in an active academical context.
- Result: Preliminary sketch of the first chapters and an overview of the complete project.

Year 2 – Relate Substitution-thesis to Contemporary Debate on Levinas

- Further studying of the relevant material, finalizing the substitution-thesis to be formulated.
- Attending (international) lectures on Levinas, preparing lectures to be held in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany or in America (wherever there is opportunity).
- Continuing giving courses, possibly repeating and improving those held in the first year.
- Result: Finalizing first chapters, possibly in the form of one or more publishable papers.

Year 3 – Relate Substitution-thesis to Contemporary Philosophy

- Continuing to write different chapters or papers, now relating the substitution-thesis increasingly explicitly to Derrida and Agamben.
- Departing from the progress until here, searching in existing literature and theory for possible lacunae, impasses and criticisms in the thesis and considering those to improve it.
- Possibly resuming to teach and/or lecture.
- Result: Written chapters should at this point be able to clearly demonstrate the concrete applicability of the ambivalent structure in diverse fields of theory.

Year 4 – Finishing the Research

- Finalizing the theoretical work through the considered criticisms.
- Writing and submitting a definitive article, summarizing the work of the project.
- Finishing the dissertation.
- Presenting the results of the study in a lecture (preferably internationally).
- Result: completion of the project.

13. Research budget

To be specified.

14. Summary for non-specialists

Sinds het begin van de filosofie stelt men zich herhaaldelijk de volgende vraag: 'is alle bestaan op fundamentele wijze *verbonden* (bijvoorbeeld doordat alles 'is', of doordat God de eenduidige oorzaak van alle bestaan zou vormen), of juist *onderscheiden* (bijvoorbeeld doordat losse individuen fundamenteel eigen, strikt singuliere entiteiten zouden zijn, of door verschillen tussen species, genus, etc.)?' Deze vraag ligt ten grondslag aan veel filosofische systemen en blijft tot op heden relevant. Die actualiteit is te danken aan de onlosmakelijke ethische implicaties van elke beantwoording.

De latere filosofie van Emmanuel Levinas levert een recent, nog onvoldoende belicht antwoord binnen die traditie. In zijn tweede hoofdwerk – *Anders dan Zijn* – ontwikkelt hij namelijk zowel een vernieuwende opvatting van differentie, als van verbinding. Minstens zo belangrijk is daarbij de manier waarop hij die oer-begrippen samen denkt. Onderscheidenheid of verschil denkt Levinas als 'de Ander'. De concrete confrontatie van oogcontact met een Ander duidt voor Levinas de peilloze diepte van een onoverbrugbare afstand tussen 'mijzelf' en die Ander daar 'buiten mij'. Die absolute Ander valt buiten elke synthese, is extern aan alle verbinding. Maar toch, contradictoir genoeg, merkt Levinas dat deze radicale dichotomie consistent gedacht moet worden *in verkeer met* een filosofie van verbinding ('ontologie' en 'fenomenologie') 'Anders' en 'Zijn' vormen zo samen de gespannen verhouding van *Anders dan Zijn*.

Doel van het voorgestelde onderzoek betreft de nauwkeurige uitwerking van deze verhouding tussen onderscheid en verbinding, die volstrekt ambivalent is en moet zijn, en culmineert in Levinas' latere kernbegrip 'substitutie'. Die structuur lijkt wellicht abstract of 'los-zwevend', maar is op ieder moment en door iedereen uiterst concreet voel- en merkbaar, en toetst zich ook aan die eis. Het onderzoek naar deze geavanceerde structuur zal bovendien moeten verlopen in strenge relatie tot het hedendaagse filosofische debat. Dat komt omdat de precieze figuur van ambivalentie nog grotendeels impliciet blijft bij Levinas, maar wel reeds op zeer vergelijkbare wijze werd gedacht bij filosofen als Jacques Derrida en Giorgio Agamben. De relatie tot deze gevestigde systemen moet bij voorbaat garanderen hoe een fundamentele ambivalentie 1) een overwogen antwoord betekent op een eeuwenoude, inherent menselijke polemiek, en 2) concreet en praktisch toepasbaar kan zijn. De consistente verbinding tussen fundamentele filosofie en concrete problematiek in politiek, ethiek en wetenschapstheorie zal daarmee telkens onderwerp zijn van het onderzoek.