Agreement and Disagreements: Thomas Reid and Emmanuel Lévinas

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The prospect of meetings provokes a variety of responses: dread, despondency, lethargy, scepticism, cynicism, and, occasionally, hope and the prospect of progress. Much of the natural aversion, it seems to me, centres on the inherent capacity of meetings to engender disagreement. Disagreement, however, so often ignores yet still rests upon a more fundamental agreement among participants, an agreement which very often only comes to the fore, discretely, when the air of the meeting clears and the assembly adjourns for lunch. By reflecting upon Emmanuel Lévinas and Thomas Reid, this paper argues that more attention, and attentiveness, needs to be given to the proto-agreement upon which any subsequent (dis)agreement rests.

Lévinas opens *Totality and Infinity* by simply stating in the *Preface* that '[e]veryone will readily agree... (*on conviendra aisément...*)'[1] and then proceeds to argue the priority of ethics, with its thought of the infinite, over knowledge understood as a counterpart to ontology's reductive comprehension of the other to the same. The problem, however, is that not everyone does readily agree with Lévinas, as is evident in Derrida's criticism of the rationality of Lévinas' position. In *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida draws attention to 'the theoretical incoherence of the notions of pure infinity and absolute otherness, or exteriority.' Like a 'square circle,' the concepts of an 'absolutely other' or an 'otherwise than being' are empty intuitions and are meaningless.[2] Lévinas' relation with absolute alterity is a thought which one cannot think, a logical contradiction inviting a sceptical response.

Yet, seemingly incoherent and contradictory though the concepts employed by Lévinas may be, and the capacity for disagreement which they may provoke, nonetheless Lévinas argues for a fundamental agreement, a proto-agreement without which no disagreement is possible. Although what he writes may invite scepticism, nonetheless, like philosophy's failure to definitively overcome the perennial return of scepticism, Lévinas' assertions escape ultimate refutation; although logically and philosophically they would be seemingly refutable, nonetheless, argues Lévinas, they have their origin in a prevenient and

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clandestine agreement which precedes them and which persists in the face of the logic of contradiction. Maurice Blanchot compares the reaction provoked by scepticism and that provoked by Lévinas:

> Lévinas wrote... that scepticism was invincible. While easily refuted, the refutation leaves scepticism intact. Is it really contradicted when it openly uses reason that destroys it? Contradiction is also the essence of scepticism.... The invincible scepticism that Lévinas admits shows that his own philosophy, his metaphysics... affirms nothing that is not overseen by an indefatigable adversary, one to whom he does not concede but who obliges him to go further, not beyond reason into the faculty of the irrational or towards a mystical effusion, but rather towards another reason, towards the other as reason or demand. All this appears in each of his books. Doubtless, he follows the same path; but in each case, the unexpected emerges to render the path so new or so ancient that, following it along, we are stuck as by a blow to the heart—the heart of reason—that makes us say within ourselves, "But I've also thought that; I must think it."[3]

In other words, Lévinas' thought recognises that there is an inherent rationality in reality, but the reality so indicated is not the reality which has become the victim of a philosophical entrapment by thought, and in which the ethical is simply an adjunct or derivative; the reality which Lévinas recognises as rational is, first and foremost, an ethical reality, and this provides the wider framework in which philosophical thinking becomes operative; it is a framework, however, which calls all other frameworks into question. For Lévinas, reason's 'essential interest' lies beyond the speculative or the epistemological in the ethical, and to *experience* the ethical is to recognise the inherent rationality of human reality, and that, consequently, there are reasons 'that "reason" does not know, and which have not begun in philosophy.'[4]

The problem of scepticism is a problem of disagreement. Questioning begins in agreement, and so is already a response. I ask a question of another with whom I already share some commerce or form of life. Disagreement is a divergence, or a distancing, though never an absolute detachment, from that proto-agreement which unites interlocutors in the first place. Hence the sense which can be given to the words 'agreeing to disagree' or 'agreeing to differ.' The difference which emerges in argument has already taken origin in a coming together (*convenire*), which continues to be maintained despite the separation which disagreement engenders. In this context, one would want to argue that, at root, scepticism is a response to a philosophy, as a system of ideas, which has been cut from its moorings in Common Sense. As Thomas Reid says, 'Philosophy... has no other root but the principles of Common Sense; it grows out of them, and draws

nourishment from them.'[5] Again,

> It is a bold philosophy that rejects without ceremony, principles which irresistibly govern the belief and conduct of all mankind in the common concerns of life; and to which the philosopher must himself yield, after he imagines he hath confuted them. Such principles are older, and of more authority, than Philosophy: she rests upon them as her basis, not they upon her. If she could overturn them, she must be buried in their ruins.[6]

Now, this tendency towards agreement which Lévinas indicates in affirming that '[e]veryone will readily agree' is exploited by Charles Reed[7] who sees it as a marker for Lévinas' entire project: the ultimacy and irreducibility of the face-to-face encounter with another person (*autrui*) which cannot be adequately articulated as a theme or a knowledge; the priority of saying (*le Dire*) over what is said (*le Dit*), the elevation of justice over freedom, the stress on ethics as first philosophy—all of these derive from the original and originary experience of finding oneself always and already in a situation of intersubjectivity, of agreement, of having already come together. All else follows, or falls away, from this original encounter, which, for Lévinas, is an original ethical encounter. Reed points out that the emphasis which Lévinas gives to the superlative, 'that it is of the *highest* importance' is neither an assertion of logical or ontological priority nor the affirmation of a first principle upon which *firma* a system of thought might be founded. Rather, the question 'of the highest importance' functions an-archically; it is prior to thought and existence. For Lévinas, height qualifies, not primarily relations within geometric space, but the experience of the utter alterity of the other in his verticality. The horizontal relationships which the egocentricity of Cartesian and Kantian philosophy engenders, situating what is other within a horizon centred on the self, gives way in Lévinas to the verticality of a heterocentric thought, which is pre-original or pre-archic. Such a view of height entails a reversal. The relation between the higher and the lower does not first proceed from experience and then find metaphysical application. Rather, it is the approach of the other from on high which gives significance to any spatial image of height and depth. According to Lévinas, height has a metaphysical status; it cannot be reduced to any experience of the body's own verticality. It is because I am ordered towards the other in his dimension of the height that I am enabled to position myself bodily in a space where one can distinguish between the low and the high. Position, first and foremost, indicates my relation to another person, whose transcendence with respect to me is essentially a transascendence.[8]

Now, the importance of height of the other is that it positions the other out with any thematisation of the world, and gives the possibility of

shattering our contrived agreements and disagreements by referring us back to the more original proto-agreement of the face-to-face encounter from which philosophy draws its nourishment. Charles Reed notes that, insofar as 'everyone agrees that it is important to *know*.... knowledge is under the sway of opinion, and,' continues Reed, 'we suspect that Lévinas has no intention of replacing our ready agreement with a certain knowledge. The agreement remains prior to knowledge; it is never superceded.'[9] In other words, the *ego cogito* is not the indubitable foundation of knowledge, but finds itself already and always within a relationship, an agreement, which transcends the ego.

Thomas Reid's Criticism of Descartes:

In language reminiscent of Kant's opening remarks in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Reid bemoans 'the very low state' of 'our philosophy concerning the mind and its faculties,' which, unlike the sciences, has not yet had the good fortune to find universally applicable principles which would apply to the mind, 'the phaenomena of human thoughts, opinions and perceptions,' but, is surrounded by 'darkness and perplexity,' and, were it not for the stubbornness of common sense, 'it is also odds but we end up in absolute scepticism.'[10] Reid lays the blame for this scepticism squarely at the door of 'the ideal system' of Descartes which 'hath the same original defect; that this scepticism is inlaid in it, and reared along with it.''[11] 'I observe, That modern scepticism is the natural issue of the new system; and that, although it did not bring forth this monster until the year 1739, it may be said to have carried it in its womb from the beginning.'' By embarking upon 'these profound disquisitions into the first principles of human nature' a person is 'naturally and necessarily' plunged into 'this abyss of scepticism'[13] which, 'with regard to the mind and its operations, derives not only its spirit from Des Cartes, but its fundamental principles...'[14] Reid locates the general spirit and tendency of Descartes' new method in its attempt to build a new system upon new foundations 'with a resolution to admit nothing but what was absolutely certain and evident.'[15] Consequently, Descartes was naturally led 'to attend more to the operations of the mind by accurate reflection... than any philosopher had done before him.'[16] The operations of his own mind—thought, doubt, deliberation—were the first of all truths, 'the first firm ground upon which he set foot, after being tossed in the ocean of scepticism.'[17] However, this attention to the operations of the mind led, says Reid, to a spiritualisation of the body and its qualities and a devaluation of sense objects which were to be deduced by strict argumentation from consciousness. 'As the attributes of the thinking substance are things of which we are conscious, we may have a more certain and immediate knowledge of them by reflection, than we can

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have of external objects by our senses.' The existence of the body is no longer to be taken as a first principle, and nothing is to be admitted in respect of it other than what can be deduced, 'by just reasoning,' from sensations which are no longer to be taken as secondary qualities corresponding to bodily qualities, but as pertaining to the mind. Sound, taste, smell, colour are sensations, not to be associated as 'the vulgar' do, with the body, but are to be taken as 'mere sensations of the mind.'[19]

Now, the problem with the 'new system' which issues from Descartes and ends up in scepticism is that, whereas '[t]he old system admitted all the principles of common sense as first principles, and without requiring any proof of them' and was therefore 'built upon a broad foundation and had no tendency to scepticism,' the 'new system admits only one of the principles of common sense as a first principle; and pretends, by strict argumentation, to deduce all the rest from it. That our thoughts, our sensations, and every thing of which we are conscious, hath a real existence, is admitted in this system as a first principle; but everything else must be made evident by the light of reason. Reason must rear the whole fabric of knowledge upon this single principle of consciousness,'[20] namely, the 'one axiom, expressed in one word, *cogito*.'[21] Thus, scepticism if the natural issue of this system, with regard to everything except the existence of our ideas.

Common Sense:

Now, according to Reid, the cure for scepticism is common sense. Philosophy, constructing itself on the basis of a narrow rationality, invites scepticism, and does so precisely on account of its forgetfulness of the rationality inherent in the virtue of Common Sense. With regard to the methodic doubt of Descartes and the placing in question of the propositions, 'I think; I am conscious; Everything that thinks, exists; I exist,' Reid ventures to ask, 'would not every sober man form the same opinion of the man who seriously doubted any one of them? And if he was his friend, would he not hope for his cure from physic and good regimen, rather than from metaphysic and logic?'[22] He continues, 'Poor untaught mortals believe undoubtedly that there is a sun, moon and stars; an earth which we inhabit; country, friends, and relations, which we enjoy, land houses and movables, which we possess. But philosophers, pitying the credulity of the vulgar, resolve to have no faith but what is founded upon reason.'[23]

Now, it seems that Reid's insistence on Common Sense, too readily dismissed by the 'new method of philosophy,' can be recuperated into Lévinas' avowal of the sincerity of intentions and the salvific (and philosophical) significance of secularity. 'Life is a sincerity,'[24] writes Lévinas, and this sincerity characterises our relationship with the world

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and our ethical interaction with people, 'with whom,' as Reid might put it, 'we can transact business, or call to account for their conduct.'[25] 'The world,' writes Lévinas, ' ... is what we inhabit, where we take walks, lunch and dine, visit, go to school, argue, carry out experiments and investigations, write and read books,...'[26] The structure of sincerity accords with the directness of its intentions. For example, desire sincerely intends its object, with no further intentions behind it 'which would be like thoughts;' there is complete correspondence between the desire and its satisfaction, without the interposition of other concerns. So, too with the sincerity and immediacy of enjoyment in which 'the act nourishes itself with its own activity' and 'the contents of life are its *direct* objects.'[27] 'To be in the world is... to go sincerely to the desirable and take it for what it is. It is the very possibility of desire and sincerity.'[28] With regard to the ethical encounter with the other person, the primordial sincerity of the relation reveals itself, before anything is uttered or thematised, in the standing before the other in order to speak or to say (*le Dire*). 'It is by saying that sincerity—exposedness without reserve—is first possible. Saying makes signs to the other, but in this sign signifies the giving of the sign itself. Saying opens me to the Other before saying what is said, before the said uttered in this sincerity forms a screen between me and the other. This saying without a said is thus like silence.'[29] The proto-experience of the other is an experience of sincerity, 'the one-for-the-other' which, as 'the formal structure of signification, signifyingness or the rationality of signification... does not begin by being exposed in a theme, but is my openness to the other, my sincerity or my *veracity*.'[30] In standing before the other person in order to speak, to say, I expose myself to the other person, I am rendered vulnerable. Such a coming together in a face-to-face encounter is pre-reflexive, sincere.[31] Before I have time to think, I am there. Before the subject-object, signifier-signified, saying-said correlation has emerged, I am first there before the other person in the sincerity and veracity of a saying, which, only afterwards, becomes defaced and distorted.[32]

With regard to the salvific significance of secularity, or the inherent meaning within everyday living, Lévinas points out that '[e]veryday life is a preoccupation with salvation,'[33] and, as such, its natural concerns are far from frivolous. 'However much the entirety of preoccupations that fill our days and tear us away from solitude to throw us into contact with our peers are called "fall," "everyday life," "animality," "degradation," or "base materialism," these pre-occupations are in any case no way frivolous. One can think that authentic time is originally an ecstasis, yet one still buys a watch....'[34] That everyday time is significant would seem to be common sense, for no matter how much one may reflect philosophically on the nature of time, its reality, relativity and unreality, nonetheless, one still buys a watch to regulate one's days and relations.

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Now, these, as Lévinas says, 'may seem like facile objections to the seriousness of philosophical thought, 'recalling the ones certain realists address to idealists when they reproach them for eating and breathing in an illusory world.'[35] However, it is simply a recognition, prior to the interpretation of human experience, prior to reason understood as *discursus mentalis*, that '[t]here is something other than naïvety in the flat denial the masses oppose to the elites when they are worried more about bread than about existence.'[36] It is to assume, as Reid does, the rationality of common sense as the 'natural' base which provides the ground and evidence for philosophical discourse, and it is seen in the scepticism with which a philosophy of common sense approaches idealistic and sceptical philosophies. D C Holy comments that Reid 'must assume that a philosophy of sorts is contained in the ordinary transactions of life, in the things we ordinarily, unreflectively, do and say. This philosophy is expressed in propositions of which we should not be aware except for philosophical, pronouncements to the contrary and which is implied, because assumed in our everyday behaviour.'[37] In other words, one must be sceptical with regard to sceptical and idealist philosophies on account of their disagreement or being at odds with the common sense agreements which regulate life and relations within the everyday world.

The Cogito and the Thought of the infinite:

Now, Reid saw in the new method of Cartesianism the root of philosophical scepticism. The origin of this scepticism is the attempt at a system removed from originary agreement, and the inherent capacity of idealist thinking towards divergence and disagreement. Lévinas', however, is not so sceptical about the Cartesian project, seeing in the thought of the Infinite which Descartes exploits in his epistemology the indication of a more originary agreement. The Cogito is not the absolute foundation. It goes hand in hand with the affirmation of divine veracity, and the idea of the infinite. While Descartes sought the indubitable certitude of the *cogito* as the foundation of his system, nonetheless, what sustained and supported that foundation was the superlative, the idea of the Infinite whose origin could not be the finite *cogito*. Already, solitary thinking finds itself to be in possession of an idea emanating not from its own solitude, but from a relationship with what is other than the self. To his own question of whether the idea of the infinite is 'discovered by a reasoning or an intuition that can posit in themes,' Lévinas answers that '[t]he infinite cannot be thematised, and the distinction between reasoning and intuition does not apply to the access to infinity.'[38]

Infinity, however, is not to be equated solely with the thought of the divine, unless in the sense of the divinisation of every other person on

account of their excess with regard to thematising thought. The point is that philosophical thought can never take its origin from a point outwith the intersubjective agreement which, almost ineffably, regulates human encounter, and which is exposed more when thought attempts to refute common sense. Disagreement arises when the Common Sense situation of our originary Agreements is usurped by the attempt of thought to impose upon our intersubjective world a guiding theme or idea which would act as guide and light for life. Hence, the scepticism which Common Sense would offer in the face of idealism. Hence the disagreement which so often lies at the heart of meetings. Hence the speedy return of agreement when all that has been said has finally been said and one makes one's way to table, for 'eating, by contrast, is peaceful and simple; it fully realises its sincere intention: "The man who is eating is the most just of men."'[39]

Lévinas opened *Totality and Infinity* by asking whether or not we have been duped by morality. C W Reed concludes that 'we have been duped by morality to the extent that we expect some new knowledge to alter the agreements under which we live' and this dupery is even more structurally explicit when 'we place the ego at the centre of the moral universe, thus excluding the others whom morality supposedly involves,'[40] that is, when 'we place the ego above and before the other person.'[41] However, says Reed, 'Lévinas does not believe that any knowledge will alter our agreement as to what is of the highest importance. And so... we have not been duped by morality...; morality, by preserving the position of the other person above the ego, preserves the absolute transcendence that invests experience with meaning.'[42] It is here that the rejoinder to Derrida's criticism is to be located. Derrida is justified in drawing attention to the theoretical incoherence of the notions of pure infinity and absolute otherness, or exteriority, 'but by a justification that is inferior to the justification of the ethical,'[43] for just as life is not confined to the theoretical, so neither is language; methodologically, 'the only way to reflect the right relation between morality and theory consistently is to derive the theoretical from the ethical. Only thus can theory be shown to be a mode of that which exceeds it: that is, only thus can the claim that justice is prior to truth be philosophically justified.'[44] Theory and morality can only have an agreeable, consistent, co-existence if theory pays due regard to the manner in which people 'transact business' with one another on the basis of the originary inter-subjective agreements warranted by Common Sense. As Lévinas writes, '[t]he ethical relation... accomplishes the very intention that animates the movement unto truth.'[45] Again, '[t]he face opens the primordial discourse... that obliges entering into discourse, the commencement of discourse rationalism prays for, a "force" that convinces even "the people who do not wish to listen" and thus founds

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the true universality of reason.'[46] And finally, '[t]he face is the evidence that makes evidence possible—like the divine veracity that sustains Cartesian rationalism.'[47]

1 E Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), p.21.
The opening sentence in full is: 'Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality.' ('On conviendra aisément qu'il importe au plus haut point de savoir si l'on n'est pas le dupe de la morale.' *Totalité et Infini*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff; 1974), p. ix).

2 Cf. J Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Lévinas, in Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) p.126.

3 M Blanchot, *Our Clandestine Companion*, in Richard Cohen (ed.) *Face to Face with Emmanuel Lévinas*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p.42.

4 E Lévinas, *God and Philosophy*, in *Philosophy Today*, 22, Summer 1978 p.143 (Originally in *Le Nouveau Commerce, Cahier 30–1, Printemps 1975, pp.97–128*).

5 Thomas Reid, *Inquiry* I, in *Thomas Reid's Inquiry and Essays* R E Beanblossom & K Lehrer (eds.), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), p.7

6 ibid., p.9.

7 C W Reed, *Lévinas' Question* in *Face to Face with Lévinas*, pp.73–82

8 Lévinas, in *La Signification et Le Sens*, stressing the anteriority of meaning in respect of the cultural situation in which people find themselves, writes that

> 'before Culture and Aesthetics, signification is found in Ethics, the presupposition of all Culture and all signification. Morality does not belong to Culture: it allows it to be judged, and discovers the dimension of height. Height orders being.
>
> Height introduces meaning (*sens*) into being. It is already lived throughout human bodily experience. It leads human societies to erect altars. It is not on account of their bodies that human beings have an experience of the vertical which places the human under the sign of height. It is because being orders itself towards height that the human body is placed in a space where the high and the low are distinguished and discovers the sky which, for Tolstoy's Prince Andrew—without any word of the text evoking colours—is utter height.'(E Lévinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, (Paris: Fata Morgana, p.58)

9 C W Reed, op.cit., p.77

10 Thomas Reid, op. cit., p.3

11 ibid., pp.10–11

12 ibid., p.112. 1739—the appearance of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*.

13 ibid., p.10

14 ibid., p.108

15 ibid., p.109

16 ibid., p, .109

17. ibid., p.109

18 ibid., p.110

19 ibid., p.111

20 ibid., p.112

21 ibid., p.112

22 ibid., pp.4–5

23 ibid., p.5 Reason is to be understood here as *discursus mentalis*.

24 E Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, (The Hague: Martinus, Nijhoff, 1978), p.44.

25 Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, (London: Charles Griffin and Company, 1865) VI, ii, p.296.
T J Sutton argues the close connection between common sense and ethics,

or 'transacting business', which is evident, he says, in Reid's warning against the hypotheses of philosophers which 'lead to conclusions which contradict the principles on which all men of common sense must act in common life.' (T J Sutton, *The Scottish Kant: A Reassessment of Reid's Epistemology*, in M Dalgarno & E Matthews (eds.), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), p.169, quoting *Intellectual Powers of Man*, II, xii.

26 E Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, p.44.
27 E Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.111.
28 E Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, p.44.
29 E Lévinas, *God and Philosophy*, p.141
30 ibid., p.145, n.24.
31 Cf. E Lévinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, p.54.
32 Cf. E Lévinas, E Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Alphonso Lingis (tr.), (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p.148 (Original published as *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, (The Hague: M Nijhoff, 1974).
33 E Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, R Cohen (tr.), (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p.58 (Originally, *Le temps et l'autre*, in J Wahl, *Le Choix, Le Monde, L'Existence*, Grenoble-Paris, 1947).
34 ibid., p. 59
35 ibid., p.60
36 ibid.

By stressing the salvific significance of secularity, Lévinas opposes both Heidegger's understanding of *in-der-Welt-Sein*, and Husserl's refusal of the natural attitude. Heidegger had interpreted the subject's being-in-the-world as *proximally and for the most part*—in its average *everydayness* (*in seiner durchschnittlichen Alltäglichkeit* (*Being and Time*, p.37–38). "Everydayness" is that way of existing in which *Dasein* maintains itself "every day" (BT, 422), a 'definite "how" of existence' (BT, 422) which permeates *Dasein 'as a rule'* for life, even though, existentially, it may have been "surmounted". Lévinas' objection is that the ontic familiarity of "average everydayness" is not a way of Being which *Dasein* must surmount in order to possess as its own (*eigen*) its existence as authentic (*eigentilich*); rather, the seemingly facile moments of everyday living 'in and out of time'—the very buying of a watch—are the salvific moments of being-in-the-world.

37 Dennis Charles Holy, T*he Defence of Common Sense in Reid and Moore*, in M Dalgarno & E Matthews (eds.), *The Philosophy of Thomas Reid*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), pp.145–146
Reid himself writes, 'I have only this further to observe, that the province of common sense is more extensive in refutation than in confirmation.' (*Intellectual Powers*, VI, ii, p.301).
38 E Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.211.
39 E Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, p.44.
40 C W Reed, op. cit., p.78.
41 ibid., p.79.
42 ibid., p.79.
43 Steven Smith, *Reason as One for Another*, in *Face to Face with Lévinas*, p.63.
44 ibid., p.62.
45 E Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.47.
46 ibid., p.201.
47 ibid., p.204.