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Philosophy Social Criticism 2007; 33; 223

DOI: 10.1177/0191453707074141

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The ethical residue of language in Levinas and early Wittgenstein

Abstract Using the later Levinas as a point of departure, this article tries to provide an account of the ethics of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Although there has not been written much on this topic, there seems to be an increasing awareness among philosophers that there are interesting points of convergence between Levinas and the early Wittgenstein. In contrast to most (if not all) other accounts of the relation, however, this article argues that the truly significant convergence emerges only when one abandons the received interpretation of the early Wittgenstein, and instead opts for something more akin to the 'new Wittgenstein' interpretation introduced by Cora Diamond and James Conant, among others. On the received interpretation, Wittgenstein places ethics in a realm of ineffable being and truth, and thus remains within what Levinas calls ontology. But on Conant's and Diamond's reading of Wittgenstein, there really are no profound ethical truths that we cannot state, but only 'show'; all the sentences of the *Tractatus* that appear to claim otherwise are ultimately completely nonsensical. This article argues that the *Tractatus* has an 'ethical point' in a quite Levinasian sense, precisely because of the way it unveils its sentences as utterly nonsensical; for this can be seen as a Wittgensteinian attempt to 'unsay' the 'said', in order to let the 'saying' itself be heard.

Key words ethics · Emmanuel Levinas · nonsense · the Other · said · saying · Ludwig Wittgenstein

A growing number of philosophers are currently realizing that there are some interesting parallels between Levinas and the early Wittgenstein.¹ The story these perceptive philosophers tell is roughly the following: Levinas and Wittgenstein agree that ethics is not really a theme that we can write books about; an ethical doctrine, appearing on printed pages,

PHILOSOPHY & SOCIAL CRITICISM • vol 33 no 2 • pp. 223–249

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and David Rasmussen

www.sagepublications.com DOI: 10.1177/0191453707074141

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will miss what is truly ethical. Ethics transcends the world, transcends all that can be stated in propositions. Ethical discourse is therefore, strictly speaking, nonsense, but the most important nonsense we can possibly imagine. Whereas Levinas contrasts the ethical *saying* with the (ontological) *said*, the *Tractatus* contrasts that which can be *said* with that which can be *shown*, or which shows itself, assigning ethics to the latter category. So while Levinas and Wittgenstein agree that ethics cannot be stated, they differ in their views on how ethics transcends the thematic content of what we say. Levinas thinks it consists in the very *saying* of what we say; Wittgenstein thinks it is something 'mystical' that might be *shown* in and through what we can and do say.

There is much that is correct and of value in this picture. First of all, the general suggestion that a reading of the early Wittgenstein's remarks on ethics might illuminate Levinas' ethical writings and vice versa is very valuable. Second, there is hardly any doubt that the point about Wittgenstein's and Levinas' suspicion of all theorizing about ethics, where ethics is treated as just another philosophical theme, is correct. That ethics somehow transcends the world, understood as an object of science, is, I take it, something Levinas and Wittgenstein would agree on as well; and they would both hold that ethics therefore in some sense transcends the realm of propositions and statements. But the rest of the picture is a bit too simple, I think. The contrast between saying-said and said-shown, and the supposed agreement that ethical discourse is 'strictly speaking' nonsense, but nevertheless important nonsense, are thus problematic elements. Not so much because of the way they portray Levinas,² but because of the position they attribute to Wittgenstein. The use made of the said-shown distinction and the notion of 'strictly speaking' nonsense (that is nevertheless serious and important) seem to rely on an interpretation of Wittgenstein that has recently been challenged by philosophers such as James Conant and Cora Diamond.

I will not claim that Conant and Diamond provide the 'correct' interpretation of the early Wittgenstein. My point is rather this: if one follows Conant's and Diamond's so-called 'austere nonsense' view just part of the way, then one will have to develop a different account of the early Wittgenstein, and that means also a somewhat different, and much more interesting, account of the parallels between Levinas and Wittgenstein. On such a reading, the *Tractatus* does not emphasize 'showing' in contrast to the Levinasian 'saying'; the whole point of the *Tractatus* is rather, in a Levinasian idiom, to unsay its own said. Thus, if we pay attention to parts of the recent discussion of the *Tractatus*, we can formulate a striking vision of what 'ethics as first philosophy' might look like, one that is surprisingly close to some of Levinas' concerns. This is what I want to argue in the present article.

There are a number of steps that we must take to reach that conclusion, however. First, we must see what it is that leads Levinas, in his writings after *Totality and Infinity*, to emphasize the contrast between saying and the said; and we must grasp the function of the notion of 'unsaying'. Second, the received interpretation of the *Tractatus* must be outlined, and it must be shown how Conant's and Diamond's 'new' interpretation differs from it. Finally, then, the significance of this 'new Wittgenstein' to the Levinasian project of ethics as first philosophy can be outlined.

1 Unsaying the said: from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*

The notion of 'unsaying the said' is already present in Levinas' first *magnum opus*, *Totality and Infinity* (1961). In this work, however, the idea is only mentioned *en passant*, and does not seem to be of any fundamental methodological significance to the work.³ This has clearly changed by the time Levinas publishes his second major philosophical work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). In the latter work, juxtapositions of saying and said, and reflections on the necessity of unsaying the said, recur incessantly, and the issue seems to be of the greatest importance to the very project of ethics as first philosophy. It is safe to say that this change is, at least in part, due to the impact Jacques Derrida's essay 'Violence and Metaphysics' made on Levinas' thinking. Derrida made Levinas aware of the profound difficulties inherent in the latter's ethical project – difficulties broadly concerning philosophical language.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas launches a fundamental critique of western philosophy. Western philosophy, according to Levinas, 'has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being' (TI, p. 43).⁴ This term has had many different names throughout the history of modern philosophy; for example, 'sensible qualities' (Berkeley), 'concept' (German Idealism), 'horizon' (Husserl), or 'being' (Heidegger). Common to all cases is the structure that Levinas finds most forcefully articulated in book VI of Plato's *Republic*. Just as sight, as Socrates explains to Glaucon and Adimantus, cannot establish contact with anything except through the element of *light*, so everything 'other', in the philosophical tradition of the West, is always approached through some impersonal, universal third term that is not identical with the other, but makes possible the comprehension of the other. According to Levinas, the result of such an approach is the domestication and appropriation of alterity: the other is never encountered as an irreducible individual

other, but always as, for example, a *Mitdasein*, another specimen of *Dasein*, and thus it is pulled into the sphere of the well known and unsurprising – what Levinas calls ‘the same’. The same, however, does not exhaust being. Indeed it leaves out ‘the ultimate event of being itself’, for that ‘event’ is precisely exteriority or radical alterity (cf. TI, pp. 28, 290).

The radically or absolute other, Levinas says, is the Other (*Autrui*) (TI, p. 39), i.e. the other person. Insofar as the other that ontology pulls into the same is the Other, the result is violence: the other person – fully illuminated by the concept she or he is placed under – is domesticated, suppressed, and possessed, denied her or his alterity, subjected to domination and tyranny (cf. TI, pp. 42–8). In opposition to this approach, Levinas urges us to rethink the possible relations to the other person. It is possible, he thinks, to conceive of a relation with the Other that does not rest on violent comprehension – a relation that obtains without the help of mediating third terms. The aim of *Totality and Infinity* is precisely to describe such a relation.

To put it briefly, Levinas sees this ‘non-allergic’ relation to the Other realized in what he calls ‘discourse’. Whatever the thematic content of my speech,⁵ even if the Other is precisely the thematic object of my discourse, something very peculiar happens in this situation:

To the one the other can indeed present himself as a theme, but his presence is not reabsorbed in his status as a theme. The word that bears on the Other as a theme seems to contain the Other. But already it is said to the Other who, as interlocutor, has quit the theme that encompassed him, and upsurges inevitably behind the said. (TI, p. 195; cf. CPP, p. 41)

As soon as I thematize the Other, as soon as I utter my analysis of her or him in words, I have already also said those words *to* the Other. This means that, no matter how complete my analysis, the Other emerges outside the analysis, unencompassed by it, as the one to whom I am talking. The Other is the interlocutor who appears ‘behind the said’, behind the comprehended and grasped content, as soon as this content is uttered. In fact silence, too, in virtue of the way it ‘weighs down’ on us, testifies to the Other’s presence as interlocutor.

Discourse, then, confronts me with, or brings me ‘face to face’ with, another whose presence is essentially non-mediated. The notion of ‘face’ is one that becomes crucial in Levinas’ attempt to articulate the encounter with the Other in discourse. Encountering the Other as interlocutor, he repeatedly stresses, means encountering the *face* (TI, p. 50); and to encounter a face is fundamentally different from encountering an object of any kind.⁶ The Other’s face does not manifest itself by its qualities – form, color, smoothness, etc. – but breaks through them, expressing itself:

The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure

of its *ideatum* – the adequate idea. It does not manifest itself by these qualities, but *kath' auto*. It *expresses itself*. (TI, p. 51)⁷

Levinas describes this 'face to face' encounter with the Other as an 'ethical' encounter (TI, p. 73).⁸ Even if one only turns to the Other in order to announce her death sentence, she is still respected in her radical alterity because, *as the one to whom one speaks*, she is not grasped and thematized (TI, p. 69). Conversely, one's actions can be to another's advantage and still be disrespectful. As long as I only act 'on' the Other, without talking to him, I do not really relate to him as a person; I treat him more or less like a veterinarian would treat an injured animal. I precisely relate to another as an Other when I do not merely act upon her or look at him, but speak to her or him.

Discourse effects a corresponding 'ethical' transformation on the side of the subject speaking. As Levinas will argue in detail when his focus later shifts from the Other as she 'appears' in the ethical relation to the 'subject' as claimed by the Other, speaking to another means exposure to the Other. This is because, whatever the communicated content, speaking communicates, first of all, my giving signs to the Other, my 'disclosure' to the Other. To speak is to run a 'fine risk', as Levinas puts it, to run the risk of being met with silence or reproach. It is to turn one's face toward the Other, exposing it to her insults and rage, and at the same time *announcing* this very act of turning one's face, that is, exposing one's exposure (OB, pp. 49, 120; CPP, p. 170). According to Levinas, this way of presenting the relation to the Other implies a radical break with the tradition of western philosophy. It means dethroning ontology, the project of comprehending being, and putting ethics in its place as *prote philosophia* (TI, pp. 304, 48).

In his influential essay 'Violence and Metaphysics', Derrida famously questions whether Levinas is able to make such a radical break with ontology after all. According to Derrida, there are serious tensions in Levinas' project. On the one hand, Levinas thus emphasizes the necessity of a disruption of the inherently violent western ontological tradition.⁹ On the other hand, he himself employs the language of ontology – even to the point where the Other is described as the ultimate event of being. Derrida suggests that this only goes to show that the language of ontology – the Greek language – has an 'unlimited power of envelopment, by which he who attempts to repel it would always already be *overtaken*'.¹⁰ This language is no 'neutral territory' that allows us to do what we want (VM, pp. 152–3), and in particular it does not permit the kind of pure, non-violent, thinking of the Other that Levinas apparently hopes to accomplish. Since we do not have another language at our disposal such a pure 'heterological' thinking can only be a dream that 'must vanish *at daybreak*, as soon as language awakens' (VM, p. 151). Derrida's point

is of course not that we should give up talking, or give up writing philosophy: the violence of silence, he acknowledges, is the worst kind of violence (VM, pp. 117, 130). His point is rather that, as soon as we speak and write, we have thematized the Other, conceptualized and thus comprehended the Other. That is, we have inevitably committed some kind of 'violence'. Our fight against violence can then only take the form of a certain counter-violence (VM, p. 117). There can be no *pure* philosophy of the radically Other.¹¹

Several of the changes that Levinas' vocabulary and perspective undergo in *Otherwise than Being* may have been prompted by Derrida's essay. Levinas now focuses on the subject as awakened by the Other, rather than on the Other herself or himself; he now avoids dichotomies such as same–other, and prefers to speak of that which is completely 'otherwise' than being, including all its distinctions and dichotomies; and he now seems to attach great methodological significance to the distinction between saying (*le dire*) and the said (*le dit*). At least the last-mentioned change is undoubtedly occasioned by 'Violence and Metaphysics': it constitutes a direct response to Derrida's point about the inevitability of thematization and comprehension.

Levinas' response to Derrida is roughly the following. He grants that by writing books *about* the Other, *about* the ethical relation, he makes this relation (and the related beings) into philosophical themes, that is, into something *said*. The ethical relation to the Other is presented in propositions; it is analyzed and presented thematically to us, and thus reduced to comprehended being (cf. OB, p. 155). But this betrayal is simply the price we have to pay if we are to speak (or write) at all, Levinas observes. And he explicitly acknowledges that this state of affairs presents his account with a methodological problem (cf. OB, pp. 6–7).¹² For Levinas emphasizes, on the one hand, that there can be no said without a saying that already places one before an Other who is not encompassed by the thematic content of the said, while, on the other hand, admitting that this saying tends to become completely absorbed in the said. In connection with the first claim, he is able to draw on analyses already developed in *Totality and Infinity*:

And I still interrupt the ultimate discourse in which all the discourses are stated, in saying it to one that listens to it, and who is situated outside the said that the discourse says, outside all it includes. That is true of the discussion I am elaborating at this very moment. This reference to an interlocutor permanently breaks through the text that the discourse claims to weave in thematizing and enveloping all things. In totalizing being, discourse qua discourse thus belies the very claim to totalize. (OB, p. 170, cf. p. 18)

In other words, here the analysis of discourse elaborated in the first major work is applied to Levinas' own discourse, the sentences making up

Otherwise than Being. Whatever the thematic content of these sentences, they also enact a saying that already confronts an Other, outside every theme. Even if *Otherwise than Being* must conform to 'the necessities of thematization' (OB, p. 19), and will 'give an ontological said' (OB, p. 44), it can thus never be completely reduced to that said.

Yet Levinas admits that the saying enters continually into a conjunction with the said, lending itself to it, or even letting itself be reduced to it. Saying is destined to become absorbed and 'inscribed' in the said, 'dying' in the said (OB, pp. 36, 44, 62). This is the danger that concretely threatens *Otherwise than Being*. The *saying* says *something*. It issues in sentences with a thematic content, printed on the pages of a philosophical book. The saying, in other words, has a said that might betray the saying and present itself as the only important thing.¹³ In order to solve this methodological problem, Levinas proposes, borrowing Husserl's famous concept, to perform a 'phenomenological reduction'. What Levinas has in mind, however, is not a movement from the world of the natural attitude back to transcendental subjectivity, but rather a procedure of 'going back' from the said, in which saying is absorbed and frozen, to the saying that issued in the said – a movement back from being to the 'otherwise than being'. As Levinas puts it:

... in reducing the said to the saying, philosophical language reduces the said to breathing opening to the other and signifying to the other its very signifyingness. This reduction is then an incessant unsaying of the said, a reduction to the saying always betrayed by the said, whose words are defined by non-defined words; it is a movement going from said to unsaid in which the meaning shows itself, eclipses and shows itself. (OB, p. 181; cf. p. 7)

The last portion of this passage reminds one of Heidegger's famous analysis of a malfunctioning tool. A malfunctioning tool, according to Heidegger, presents itself to its would-be user in a certain 'unhandiness' (*Unzuhandenheit*).¹⁴ One could almost say that the useless, broken tool announces itself in a certain presence-at-hand, as merely another occurrent entity. And yet this loss of handiness on the part of the tool at the same time accentuates its readiness-to-hand in a 'farewell', as Heidegger puts it.¹⁵ This is because I am now suddenly painfully aware of what I needed the tool for – something that remains quite inconspicuous in the context of normal, unproblematic use. In a similar way Levinas seems to say that, in the movement from said to unsaid (where ultimately, nothing would be *said*, if this reduction could be carried through completely), the *saying* presents itself in a 'farewell'. The said is unsaid, and thereby the saying also 'eclipses', but not without 'showing' itself one last time.

But does *Otherwise than Being* perform such a reduction, then? Are the tortuous, sometimes almost contradictory, and often barely comprehensible, sentences of the book precisely a performative unsaying of the

said, designed to let *saying* emerge, if only briefly, in its purity? There is reason to think so. The way *Otherwise than Being* uses the traditional debate about skepticism, for example, would seem to indicate such a strategy. Levinas explicitly says that the reduction of the said must be unfolded ‘in stated propositions, using copulas’ (OB, p. 44). In other words, what contests the absorption of saying into said, what reduces the latter to the former, must itself be a said (OB, p. 44). This may appear contradictory, for while one ‘said’ might contest another ‘said’, it can hardly contest everything ‘said’ without also contesting itself. Levinas refers to the standard objection to skepticism at just this point (OB, p. 168). To contest the possibility of truth is self-refuting, since it involves claiming the truth of at least one proposition. But, Levinas asks, how come skepticism always returns, then? His answer is that skepticism refuses ‘to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said’ (OB, p. 167). The perpetual return of skepticism testifies to the circumstance that saying and said belong to different levels and orders, to different ‘times’. The saying that reduces, unsays, or deconstructs the said, also unsays what it itself says – but since the *saying belongs to a different order*, it remains unaffected by this deconstruction. *Otherwise than Being*, then, whose words unsay the said, also unsays those very words – unsays *it all* – and thereby lets the saying be heard, as an ‘echo’ already fading away (cf. OB, p. 44). Levinas’ move thus suggests a response not unlike Nietzsche’s reply to an imaginary interlocutor accusing him of advocating a self-refuting relativism: ‘Granted that this too is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to raise this objection? – Well, so much the better.’¹⁶ In a certain way, Nietzsche refuses to commit himself completely to what he has *said*. In fact he happily accepts the self-annihilation of his own said, since it leaves behind only the gesture performed by his *saying*, the gesture that precisely annihilates (or more correctly relativizes) *everything* said. Much like Nietzsche, Levinas seems to resign himself to unsaying the said, unsaying *everything* said, in order that the ‘saying’ itself, the approach and proximity of the Other be ‘extracted’ (cf. OB, p. 7). The strategy of *Otherwise than Being*, in other words, is to unsay the said ‘in stated propositions’. The unsaying is supposed to undermine those stated propositions along with everything else that is said, and thereby ‘reveal’ the saying itself as ‘otherwise’ than the said, belonging to a completely ‘different order’.¹⁷

2 Ethics in early Wittgenstein

Let me now turn to the early Wittgenstein’s approach to ethics. At first blush, no two philosophers would seem further apart than Levinas and

the early Wittgenstein. The difference between their styles alone is enough to make one doubt the possibility of even the slightest point of convergence. On the one hand, we have Levinas' extremely complex, terminologically 'sloppy',¹⁸ ethically charged prose, and on the other hand, we have the brief, almost curt, terminologically sharp, numbered statements of the *Tractatus*, apparently dealing mainly with issues in logic. But just below the surface there seem to be significant similarities. Wittgenstein thus insists that his work is not really a treatise on logic after all. Rather, it has an ethical point. In a 1919 letter to Ludwig von Ficker, concerning the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein famously states that

. . . the book's point is an ethical one. I once meant to include in the preface a sentence which is not in fact there now but which I will write out for you here, because it will perhaps be a key to the work for you. What I meant to write, then, was this: My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one. My book draws limits to the sphere of the ethical from the inside as it were, and I am convinced that this is the ONLY rigorous way of drawing those limits. In short, I believe that where *many* others today are just *gassing*, I have managed in my book to put everything firmly into place by being silent about it. . . . For now, I would recommend you to read the *preface* and the *conclusion*, because they contain the most direct expression of the point of the book.¹⁹

Another, equally important similarity concerns the relation between ethics and that which can be said, stated in propositions. As already noted in the introduction to this article, Wittgenstein appears to agree with Levinas that there can be no ethical propositions, that 'ethics cannot be put into words', that '[e]thics is transcendental' (T, §§ 6.41–6.421; cf. NB, pp. 78–9).²⁰ Thus, insofar as the *Tractatus* consists of sentences expressing propositions, its ethical point cannot be something that is stated in those sentences.

These convergences are certainly significant. But how deep do they go? This depends to a great extent on how we interpret the early Wittgenstein's conception of ethics. According to what I will call the 'received' interpretation of the *Tractatus*, the crucial distinction in this context is the distinction between that which can be shown (or shows itself) and that which can be said. Wittgenstein, on this interpretation, argues that there are features of reality that can be said, and other features of reality that can be *shown*, or show themselves, but cannot be said (cf. T, § 4.1212). The fact that Emmanuel Levinas is the author of *Otherwise than Being* is something that can be said. It can be stated in a proposition – 'Emmanuel Levinas is the author of *Otherwise than Being*' – that functions as a 'picture' of the fact (cf. T, § 4.01). But in order for the proposition to be able to represent a state of affairs in this way, it must have something in common with the state of affairs it

represents. This something, according to Wittgenstein, is its *logical form*. It seems to be the explicit view of the *Tractatus* that the logical form is itself something that we cannot depict in propositions: 'In order to be able to represent logical form, we should have to be able to station ourselves with propositions somewhere outside logic, that is to say outside the world' (T, § 4.12), which is clearly impossible. This, however, does not mean that we are completely without cognitive access to the 'logical form', because propositions, like 'Emmanuel Levinas is the author of *Otherwise than Being*', not only represent possible states of affairs; they also *show* the logical form that they have in common with reality (T, § 4.121). On the received interpretation of the *Tractatus*, the same is true of ethics. Ethics is ineffable; it 'belongs to those things that cannot be put into words, the mystical'.²¹ Wittgenstein's concept of the 'mystical' refers precisely to features of reality that cannot be put into words, but '*make themselves manifest*', show themselves (*sich zeigen*) (T, § 6.522). If we nevertheless try to put the ethical into words, we will inevitably fail: 'The attempt to express ethical judgments cannot but yield literal nonsense. It is of their essence that they should do so. For the attempt to state the ethical is to try to "go beyond the world" and hence beyond significant language'.²² This quote from P. M. S. Hacker illustrates some important features of the received interpretation. It is of *their* essence that *they* should yield nonsense, Hacker says; i.e. it is of the essence of the ethical judgments that if we try to express them, we move beyond significant language and thus succeed in nothing but the production of nonsense. The picture that emerges here is something like the following: there are 'ethical truths' out there, and they show themselves. But if we try to express them in propositions, we produce nonsense. That is, there are certain features of reality that we might *try* to put into words, but which we will necessarily *fail* to put into words.

So what about the sentences of the *Tractatus*, insofar as the book is supposed to have an ethical point? On the reading we have been outlining, it is a natural next step to assume that the *Tractatus* must be intended to *show* the ineffable ethical 'truths' that are out there.²³ But show them how? Wittgenstein himself, in the letter where he stresses the ethical point of the book, refers to the preface and the conclusion as containing 'the most direct expression' of this point. The preface and the conclusion (say, §§ 6.53–7) are both occupied with what can be said and what cannot; and both emphasize that '[w]hat we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (T, § 7; cf. p. 3). But the conclusion also contains a baffling remark concerning the preceding sentences of the book.²⁴ It is worth quoting this remark in full, because it is one we will return to more than once in the course of this article:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical [*unsinnig*], when

he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) (T, § 6.54)

Wittgenstein appears to claim that the propositions making up the *Tractatus* are nonsensical, and should eventually be ‘thrown away’. But, one might ask, how is *that* supposed to constitute a direct expression of the book’s ethical point? The logical move at this point is to assume that the propositions of the *Tractatus* try to put into words Wittgenstein’s ethical insights, but fail (as they must), producing only nonsense. But failing in this way, by producing this particular kind of nonsense, the sentences are able to *show* these ineffable ethical insights.²⁵ We must, in the end, throw the sentences away, recognizing them as nonsensical. But the *Tractatus* will have accomplished its task if we have understood what those sentences were trying to, but failed to, say. By trying (but failing) to express ethical insights, the nonsense that the *Tractatus* thereby produces *succeeds at hinting at, gesturing at, showing* those ethical insights. The pseudo-propositions of the *Tractatus*, then, constitute a very specific kind of nonsense, namely the kind that results from the attempt to express something inexpressible. This kind of nonsense must be distinguished from mere gibberish because, unlike the latter, it is ‘illuminating nonsense’: it *shows* us something, whereas ‘Blah-blah-blah’, or ‘Socrates is identical’, does not.²⁶

Precisely this distinction between kinds of nonsense is emphatically rejected by a group of other Wittgenstein commentators. These commentators stress that ‘[a]ll the nonsense there is is old-fashioned, straightforward, garden variety, completely incomprehensible gibberish’.²⁷ These commentators argue that there is something very uncomfortable about the notion that there are different kinds of nonsense, some of which are bad – i.e. misleading, or just mere gibberish – and some of which are good – i.e. illuminating, gesturing at some important, yet ineffable, truths. Nonsense is nonsense. It makes no sense, it tells us nothing and, equally important, it *shows* us nothing.²⁸ Some of these commentators, in particular Cora Diamond and James Conant, refer to this view of nonsense as the ‘austere view’.²⁹

But if we subscribe to the austere view of nonsense, how can we then possibly take seriously Wittgenstein’s claim that his propositions are nonsensical? How could he possibly mean to say that they are nothing but incomprehensible gibberish? Conant and Diamond argue that we should bite the bullet and interpret Wittgenstein as biting the bullet as well. In their view, it is no coincidence that Wittgenstein refers his reader to the preface and the conclusion of the *Tractatus*. These constitute what Diamond calls the ‘frame’ of the book, and she claims that this frame stands out from the rest of the text insofar as it contains what appear to be Wittgenstein’s instructions for reading the book.³⁰ We should consequently read the preface and the conclusion very carefully. If we do that,

the first thing we will discover is that Wittgenstein himself subscribes to the austere view of nonsense. In the preface he says that the aim of the book is to draw a limit to thought, or more precisely, to the expression of thoughts. He continues: 'It will . . . only be in language that the limit can be set, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense' (*wird einfach Unsinn sein*) (T, p. 3). The choice of words is important here, according to Diamond: Wittgenstein does not say 'illuminating' or 'profound' nonsense, but '*simply*' nonsense. He does not say that what transcends that which can be said may be important truths that we are just forever condemned to being unable to express; he says it will *simply* be nonsense. But if that is the case, then Wittgenstein's remark in the closing sections – that his propositions are nonsensical (*unsinnig*), and that we should 'throw away the ladder' – can only mean that the propositions of the book are, in the end, plain, old-fashioned, total nonsense.³¹ Attempting to substantiate this interpretation, Conant and Diamond again urge us to pay attention to Wittgenstein's exact choice of words. He does not say that anyone who understands his *propositions* should recognize that they are nonsensical, which would be absurd (for how could one possibly understand those 'propositions' if they were total nonsense?). Rather, he says that anyone who understands *him* will recognize that the propositions are nonsensical.³² Anyone who understands him, the author, will realize that the pseudo-propositions of the book are to be thrown away as incomprehensible nonsense.

But if everything between the preface and, say, section 6.53, is simply nonsense, then so is the notion of a distinction between portions of reality that can be stated, and portions of reality that can only be shown, or make themselves manifest. There would be something incoherent about an interpretation that would grant the flatly nonsensical nature of Wittgenstein's propositions, and yet insist on the truth of the saying–showing distinction (elaborated, for example, in T, §§ 4.022–4.1212). This would be what Diamond calls 'chickening out', i.e. 'to pretend to throw away the ladder while standing firmly, or as firmly as one can, on it'.³³ Diamond again urges us to bite the bullet: 'To read Wittgenstein himself as not chickening out is to say that it is not, not really, his view that there are features of reality that cannot be put into words but show themselves.'³⁴ But if this is the way we should read Wittgenstein, then there can be no ethical truths, either, that are ineffable, and nevertheless show themselves. All of Wittgenstein's statements to the contrary (cf. T, §§ 6.41–6.522) are simply rungs of the ladder that we must throw away, and throw away completely. This, however, means that the ethical point of the *Tractatus* as a whole cannot reside in the fact that it shows, or tries to show, some ineffable ethical truths.

The picture that Conant and Diamond sketch, then, looks roughly like this: if we take seriously the instructions provided by the preface and

the conclusion, we realize that all the words in between fail to mean anything at all. They also fail to show anything, or let anything manifest itself. The concluding remarks take back every word the text has said. Consequently, the *Tractatus* is a deeply ironical work in that it offers apparently meaningful propositions, only to unmask them as utter nonsense in the end. The point, according to Conant and Diamond, is to illustrate the temptations of philosophy; to offer what appear to be meaningful, philosophical sentences, lure us into the illusion that they constitute a coherent philosophical position, and then finally reveal to us that we were, all along, under the spell of an illusion. There is, then, after all a sense in which the sentences of the *Tractatus* are elucidatory or illuminative as well as nonsensical. Not because they show or gesture at something that cannot be said, but rather because they *seem* to be sentences that do so gesture at something important, yet ineffable – thereby leading us on, yet eventually collapsing, displaying their completely nonsensical nature.³⁵ In the words of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the point of the *Tractatus* is simply to let us ‘pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense’ (PI, § 464).

But the crucial question in our present investigation is to what extent we can make sense of such an enterprise as having an *ethical* point. On what I called the ‘received’ interpretation the ethical point of the book was readily intelligible: The book presents a special kind of nonsense that, to be sure, fails in putting ethics into words, but succeeds in showing it. But this conception presupposes the saying–showing distinction that the ‘new’ Wittgenstein reading repudiates. So what place is left for the ethical? According to Conant, the *Tractatus* is a work of ethics precisely insofar as it unmasks the illusory notion of features or regions of reality that we are debarred from expressing in words. This notion, Conant argues, ‘invites the false hope that philosophy holds out a promise of being able to offer us liberation and with it some hitherto obstructed possibility for (perhaps even ethical or religious) advancement’.³⁶ In other words, the idea that we are confined to being able to express only a portion of reality invites us to search for philosophical ways of breaking free of our confinement. But the whole thing is a fantasy – in fact it is a sort of escapism, where we construe purely intellectual problems, instead of dealing with ‘the weary and messy details of the task of attempting to make progress in the problems of life’.³⁷ The *Tractatus* has an ethical point insofar as it aims to unmask this escapism, and thus make us return to real life.³⁸

At this point, however, it might begin to dawn on us that Conant’s and Diamond’s reading has some severe problems of its own. Once the *Tractatus* has helped us expose the illusions we were under, what value can the book then have to us? If the book simply returns us from the escapism of philosophy to everyday life, what use could we possibly make of it once we have arrived there? Quite characteristically, Conant

accepts the full consequences of his interpretation. As he emphasizes, with reference to the *Tractatus* and Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*,

... these two works really mean it when they call upon us to reach a perspective from which we can in the end throw them away and classify them as nonsense. They mean throw the work *away*, and by 'nonsense' they mean simple, old, garden variety *nonsense*.³⁹

In fact, wouldn't it be 'chickening out' *not* to conclude that the work should be thrown away? Surely, the claim that the *Tractatus* accomplishes something of lasting value, say, that it is an ethical work of lasting importance, would be a perfect example of pretending to throw away the ladder, while in fact clinging to it?

This is very unconvincing. First of all, Conant appears to be the one who is not paying attention to Wittgenstein's actual choice of words here. In the closing remarks of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein does not say that we should throw the 'work' away. Rather, he says that we should throw his *propositions* away (T, § 6.54), and this is something altogether different. There might still be very good reasons *not* to throw the *Tractatus* (the work) away, even if we must ultimately throw its propositions away. And this leads to the second point we must make here, namely that it seems very hard to accept an interpretation of a major philosophical text, the point of which is that there is simply *nothing* of lasting value that we are allowed to take with us from the work. Conant's little exegetical error here is quite crucial, for if Wittgenstein *had* said explicitly that we should throw the work as such away, then we might perhaps have considered doing so; but in the absence of such a statement this is surely the last thing we are inclined to do.⁴⁰

So we have to find some way of avoiding the Scylla of the 'received' interpretation while steering clear of the Charybdis of having to discard the *Tractatus* as such. In the words of Marie McGinn, we must develop an interpretation that 'allows the remarks [of the *Tractatus*] to achieve something, while stopping short of holding that they convey ineffable truths about reality' (p. 498; cf. p. 512).⁴¹ This is what I will attempt to do in the next section. Using something akin to Conant's and Diamond's perspective on the early Wittgenstein, but aiming to avoid the unattractive consequences of their account, I want to pose the following questions. Could not there be something here that Conant and Diamond have overlooked, but which a comparison with Levinas might reveal? More precisely, could not the ethical point of the *Tractatus* have something to do with a Levinasian reduction of the said to the saying? Is not the 'frame' of Wittgenstein's book precisely designed to 'unsay' everything the rest of the book says?

3 The ethical residue of language

The idea is quite simple. There is only one kind of nonsense, mere nonsense, and it succeeds neither in saying anything, nor in showing anything. The sentences of the *Tractatus*, on Conant's and Diamond's reading, are nonsensical in this austere sense. If we adopt this aspect of their account,⁴² then we realize, at the end of our reading of the *Tractatus*, that the sentences we have read actually say nothing and 'show' nothing. In other words, everything Wittgenstein has *said*, everything he has written on those pages, is *unsaid*. The ladder is thrown away, and it is precisely in virtue of this move that the *Tractatus* is an ethical work.

It is important to emphasize how this reading of Wittgenstein brings him much closer to Levinas than the received interpretation. If Wittgenstein's sentences did in fact convey some deep insight, even if only by gesturing at it, then they would have a *theme*, they would (in some minimal sense) be thematically concerned with something, some portion of reality. Ineffable truths are still truths. An ineffable region of reality is still a region of reality, of being. So when Jean Greisch claims that '[w]hile Wittgenstein opposes saying and showing (*montrer*), Levinas . . . derives monstration from saying itself',⁴³ he inadvertently puts the two philosophers much farther apart than he wants to. For Wittgenstein's alleged dichotomy of saying and showing still belongs to the economy of thematization, cognition, comprehension, knowledge, truth – in short, to *ontology* in Levinas' sense of the word. This is clearly implied by Levinas' contention that '*all* monstration exposes an essence' (OB, p. 44; emphasis added). On the received interpretation of Wittgenstein, then, there is no opening to being's 'otherwise', to the 'beyond essence'.

To put the crucial claim differently, the received interpretation of the *Tractatus* stresses the existence of important regions of being, or reality, of 'transcendental' ethical truths that cannot be put into words, but can nevertheless be shown. Such a conception seems to be the target of the following passage from *Otherwise than Being*:

The hither side of or the beyond being is not an entity on the hither side of or beyond being; but it also does not signify an exercise of being, an essence that is truer or more authentic than the being of entities. The entities *are*, and their manifestation in the said is their true *essence*. The reduction nowise means to dissipate or explain some 'transcendental appearance'. The structures with which it begins are ontological. . . . But the reduction is reduction of the said to the saying beyond the logos, beyond being and non-being, beyond essence, beyond true and non-true. (OB, p. 45)

This passage, of course, is complex and difficult to unpack. Nevertheless, I think Levinas here identifies temptations that closely resemble the temptations that Wittgenstein, on Conant's and Diamond's reading, is

trying to expose. For example, there is the temptation to think that there is a realm of truths or insights that are more profound or important than what we can express in words; a 'more authentic' realm of being that cannot be *said*. There is the temptation to consider language a kind of 'box' that confines us and debars us from expressing parts of reality (cf. WVC, p. 117). According to Levinas and the 'new' Wittgenstein, there are no realities or entities – or truths, for that matter – on some hither side of what is, or can be, *said*. What can be *said* is not a pale shadow of the real or true being of things, but rather their true being itself. The 'going beyond', which is implied by Levinasian saying, 'is not a representation, however de-theoreticized its intentionality would be, of a being beyond being' (OB, p. 97), nor is it a gesticulation in the direction of profound truths beyond the truths we can state. Yet, what I have called the received interpretation of the *Tractatus* seems to attribute to the early Wittgenstein precisely the view that there are such ineffable truths, and that ethics consists in gesturing at them. According to this interpretation, there are 'entities' or 'truths' on the 'hither side' of the said – truths that might be *shown*, but not stated. If such commentators are right, then there is not much common ground between Levinas and the author of the *Tractatus*.⁴⁴ To be sure, there are interesting structural similarities between their views, but precisely when it concerns what, on Levinas' view, really matters, the early Wittgenstein turns out to be just another exponent of the ontological tradition of the West.

The new Wittgenstein interpretation presents a very different picture. Mere nonsense has no theme; mere nonsense is neither true nor false. Nor does mere nonsense as such accomplish anything, however; there is, for example, nothing ethical about 'Blah-blah-blah'. What there *is* something ethical about (in Levinas' sense) is a saying that undoes or unsays its said. If we as readers are attentive, then a text that reveals that its said is utter nonsense accomplishes, or might accomplish, something very important. Not because it allows us to catch a glimpse of some region of being beyond what can be said, for, according to both Levinas and Wittgenstein, the 'being' that can be said is the true and only being. Rather, what is important is that such a text might allow us to catch a glimpse of the *saying* as it fades away. In other words, as the *Tractatus* undoes what it has said we catch a glimpse of a pure saying opening up to the Other – what Levinas at one point calls a '[s]aying saying [*sic*] itself, without thematizing it' (OB, p. 143). It is precisely in this sense that the *Tractatus* might really be a work of ethics: after its sentences are unsaid, we see that what the work did – all that the work did – was to face the Other, to *say*. Or rather, *as* the *Tractatus* unsays the said, *as* we throw the propositions of the book away, saying, the pure position of face to face with an interlocutor, eclipses and announces itself. Wittgenstein, like Levinas, seems to realize that ethics

has nothing to do with a theme that we can communicate (either by stating something about it, or by pointing to it or gesturing at it), for then ethics would be assimilated to 'ontological' sentences, to propositions illuminating the world. Thus, there is no thematic content to be salvaged from the *Tractatus*, but only an ethical saying, the 'proximity' of the Other. What announces itself when we throw away the ladder, or better, what is heard, as an echo, is precisely what Simon Critchley has called 'the ethical residue of language': the being-placed-before-an-interlocutor, which is entailed by most discourse, regardless of its thematic content.

Note how this reading of Wittgenstein takes what is best from Conant's and Diamond's reading and yet satisfies McGinn's demand that the *Tractatus* be allowed to 'achieve something'. On the interpretation I am offering, the propositions of the book are indeed thrown away completely; they are rejected as simple nonsense, as pseudo-propositions. But their being thrown away, their being unsaid, is, on my reading, a reduction of the said to the saying – and insofar as Wittgenstein's *work* accomplishes *this*, there is every reason *not* to throw the *work* away. The work, in and through its movement between saying, said and unsaying, achieves something very important – something *ethically* important.

Yet one might still have reservations about the perspective I have developed. For example, I have emphasized ethical saying as the point of the book, but Wittgenstein himself, both in the preface and in the conclusion, emphasizes *silence*.⁴⁵ Wittgenstein explicitly states that '[t]he *whole sense of the book* might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over *in silence*' (T, p. 3; emphasis added). But again, we should pay close attention to the exact wording. What we cannot talk *about* we should pass over in silence, Wittgenstein says – and the whole point of the argument I have been trying to develop is precisely that ethics, according to the early Wittgenstein, is not a possible philosophical *theme*. Ethics is not something we can or should talk *about*; ethics is more like something that *happens* when we talk to each other. So while we ought to stop 'gassing' *about* some philosophical theme that we call 'ethics' (WVC, pp. 68–9), Wittgenstein's point is certainly not that we ought simply to stop talking. Ethics is not silence. One of Wittgenstein's later remarks concerning ethics is interesting to note here. In his conversations with Friedrich Waismann, Wittgenstein emphasizes the ethical importance of 'speaking', precisely also when there is nothing to be *said*:

At the end of my lecture on ethics I spoke in the first person: I think that this is something very essential. Here there is nothing to be stated any more; all I can do is to step forth as an individual and speak in the first person. (WVC, p. 117; cf. OB, p. 82)

Furthermore, in Wittgenstein's later philosophy, in general, the constant presence of an interlocutor is striking. Wittgenstein's philosophy from the 1930s and onwards is in fact nothing but an ongoing dialogue with an Other (or Others). Even if Wittgenstein had been tempted to preach silence, then, he certainly did not practise it.⁴⁶

More serious would be the objection that I am overlooking or downplaying essential differences between Wittgenstein and Levinas. Levinas talks a lot about the subject (or the self), and the Other; Wittgenstein, influenced by Schopenhauer's metaphysics, writes about the ego, the will, and the world – but he does not even mention the other person.⁴⁷ However, it is important to emphasize that, on the reading I have been elaborating here, those sentences in which Wittgenstein connects ethics with the will, value, etc. (T, §§ 6.4–6.43; NB, pp. 76–81) are completely nonsensical. It is *not* Wittgenstein's claim that ethics is transcendental, or that it is identical with esthetics; to say such things is, in the end, the same as uttering completely incomprehensible gibberish. And that Wittgenstein does not say anything *about* the Other need not signify such a great distance from Levinas. The latter, as we have seen, is very much concerned with the problem that, as soon as the Other becomes a *theme*, she or he is somehow betrayed. There are of course many ways in which he or she might become a theme – some less violent than others – but in *Otherwise than Being* it is nevertheless of the essence that something is done to disrupt this 'betrayal'. And insofar as this is our task, then we should not so much focus on what is *said about* the Other. Rather, we should attempt to find ways of revealing the *saying* of the text, the way the text places itself before an interlocutor. And on the reading I am offering here, the ethical point of the *Tractatus* is precisely to reveal this saying.

But there is nevertheless something right about the objection. There is indeed an important difference in the way Wittgenstein and Levinas concretely conceive ethics as first philosophy. To be more precise, their strategies for carrying out an unsaying of the said are quite different. While Levinas tries, like the skeptic, to make his text *itself* undo all it states (including the very said that states the unsaying), Wittgenstein aims to unsay what he has said by way of placing his work in a 'frame', in which the unsaying is stated. What this frame states, it does not unsay; its instructions for the reader are left standing. Levinas, on the other hand, unsays his every word. Levinas, then, seems to be a bit more radical than Wittgenstein. Here I would like to call to mind what Wittgenstein says in his 1929 'Lecture on Ethics': 'I can only describe my feeling by the metaphor, that, if a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world' (LE, p. 7). Simon Critchley has seen it correctly when he remarks that *Otherwise than Being* seems to

be Levinas' attempt to do precisely this, to write a book that is really a book on ethics – a book to destroy all others.⁴⁸ From the Levinasian and Wittgensteinian perspectives, this is a very difficult, even contradictory, project. On the one hand, a book is not a book *on* ethics if it does not *state* anything. Thus, the *Tractatus*, although it has an ethical point, is not a book *on* ethics. The 'frame' does state things, but it does not touch on ethics; and the rest of the book, although a few times ostensibly dealing with ethics, fails to state anything, and thus has no theme. On the other hand, a book can only *really* be a book on *ethics* by completely unsaying everything again – otherwise it would *reduce* ethics to a theme, i.e. to 'ontology'. Levinas appears to be attempting to do both things at once: to write a book *on ethics*. Wittgenstein thinks such a thing is impossible, a chimera (cf. LE, p. 7); he insists that what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. Levinas struggles with the paradoxical project of writing a book on ethics, while Wittgenstein simply avoids it.

4 Conclusion

These differences, however, should not prevent us from seeing the deep affinities. Let me conclude this article by briefly reiterating the main points where convergences between Levinas and Wittgenstein can be unearthed, if the latter is read the way I have urged we should read him.⁴⁹

Both Levinas and Wittgenstein consider the point of their work to be ethical, rather than ontological or epistemological. According to both Levinas and Wittgenstein, ethics is completely 'otherwise' than being, knowledge, and truth. Ethics essentially has to do with the way discourse places us before an interlocutor, rather than with anything we might state in discourse; and it certainly has nothing to do with any ineffable, mystical region of reality that might 'show' itself somehow. Ethics as first philosophy will consequently have to be very different from philosophy as we normally encounter it. It does not essentially consist of statements and arguments, and the most important thing is not what is stated, shown, or demonstrated. Rather, ethics as first philosophy must take the form of an unsaying of the philosophical said – an unsaying that lets us catch a glimpse of the saying, the face to face of discourse. The 'revelation' of this 'ethical residue of language' as it 'eclipses' is what ethics as first philosophy is all about. If it looked any different, if we were still trying to establish philosophical theses, then we would be back within the economy of knowledge, truth, being, the said – in short, 'ontology'. Ethics, according to both Levinas and early Wittgenstein, is completely 'otherwise' than the order of the said. Trying to reduce it

to this order can result only in violence (Levinas) or total nonsense (Wittgenstein).

If we accept the reading of Wittgenstein that I have sketched in this article, a whole new perspective opens up on the possibilities for a dialogue between Levinas and the early Wittgenstein. On this reading, Elizabeth Anscombe has seen something essential when, in her classical introduction to the *Tractatus*, she remarks: 'There is a strong impression made by the end of the *Tractatus*, as if Wittgenstein saw the world looking at him with a face'.⁵⁰ For at the end of the *Tractatus*, throwing away the ladder, Wittgenstein precisely finds himself positioned face to face with the Other.

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Notes

This study was funded by the Carlsberg Foundation and carried out at the Danish National Research Foundation: Center for Subjectivity Research, University of Copenhagen. I am grateful to Dan Zahavi, Lisa Käll, Cornelia Richter and Thor Grünbaum for comments on an early version of the article, and to Bob Plant for comments on the penultimate draft. Special thanks are due to Anne-Marie Christensen for a number of penetrating comments on the Wittgenstein portion of the paper.

- 1 I have borrowed my title from one of them. See Simon Critchley's lucid introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. S. Critchley and R. Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1–32, esp. pp. 18–19), as well as Critchley's book *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), p. 7. Another commentator that I have in mind here is Jean Greisch. See his article, 'The Face and Reading: Immediacy and Mediation', trans. S. Critchley, in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley (London: Athlone, 1991), pp. 67–82, esp. pp. 71–4. And though it is only a casual remark, see also John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 219. Finally, see the very recent book by Bob Plant, *Wittgenstein and Levinas: Ethical and Religious Thought* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 117, 122, and *passim*.
- 2 Although I am not convinced that Critchley is right to imply that Levinas would subscribe to the idea that 'ethical discourse is nonsense, but . . . serious nonsense' ('Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, p. 19). Levinas frequently speaks of the necessity of 'abusing' language, but it is not clear that he would say that the result of such abuse is *nonsense*.
- 3 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 30; hereafter

cited as TI. I use the following abbreviations for additional works by Levinas: CPP: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998); OB: *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

- 4 This critique is lucidly formulated in Levinas' short article, 'Is Ontology Fundamental?'. See Levinas, *Entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. M. B. Smith and B. Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 1–11. There, Heidegger is the primary target.
- 5 Which is not to say that the content (the 'said') is unimportant to Levinas. Of course it is not. The point is merely that this relation to an interlocutor is not something we find *only* in types of discourse the contents of which are somehow especially 'ethical'. But nor should we conclude that we find this structure in *all* types of discourse. Levinas himself suggests that it might be missing in what he calls 'rhetoric' (exemplified by 'propaganda, flattery, diplomacy') (TI, p. 70).
- 6 Sartre draws a similarly sharp distinction between the encounter with an object and the encounter with the Other's 'look'. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 252–302. However, one should carefully distinguish the ethical appeal that Levinas finds in the human face from the objectifying look that Sartre describes (although it has recently been argued that the two are more similar than is usually assumed. Cf. Rudi Visker, *Truth and Singularity* [Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999], pp. 130–43).
- 7 The later Wittgenstein appears to have made somewhat similar observations about the human face: 'In general I do not surmise fear in him – I see it. I do not feel that I am deducing the probable existence of something inside from something outside; rather it is as if the human face were in a way translucent and that I were seeing it not in reflected light but rather in its own.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. II, ed. G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. C. G. Luckhardt and M. A. E. Aue (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), § 170. For a development of the main points of overlap between Wittgenstein's and Levinas' thoughts on the 'face', see Søren Overgaard, 'Rethinking Other Minds: Wittgenstein and Levinas on Expression', *Inquiry* 48 (2005): 249–74.
- 8 If one expects to find in Levinas solutions to concrete ethical problems, or concrete prescriptions for moral conduct, then one will be very disappointed. As Levinas explains in a conversation with Philippe Nemo, he does not consider it his task to construct an ethics; rather, he is merely trying to uncover the 'meaning' of ethics. Cf. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. R. A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1985), p. 90. It is thus worth bearing in mind that when Levinas refers to ethics, he does not mean to advance any particular ethical theory, nor to engage in discussions about how one should act in particular situations. Levinas' basic concern is rather to establish more 'meta-ethical' claims. He thus argues that when it comes to the encounter with the Other, facts and values, 'is' and 'ought', cannot be separated: 'the answer to the question, "What do I encounter when I meet with another human being?" cannot be given

without using a normative, or, more precisely, an imperative language' (Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997], p. 137; cf. Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* [Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994], pp. 279–82; and OB, p. 94). Since the early Wittgenstein's preoccupation with ethics also appears to be removed from constructions of ethical theories as well as questions of applied ethics, our discussion in the present article will undoubtedly appear strangely abstract to many moral philosophers.

- 9 One should be careful, however, not to exaggerate this critique. There is a legitimate place for ontology in Levinas and it is not his claim that ontology is *as such* a violent enterprise. Rather, it becomes violent only when it is absolutized. See, for example, Peperzak, *Beyond*, p. 225. Presumably, however, Levinas would hold that there is a tendency in western philosophy to do precisely this: absolutize ontology.
- 10 Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), pp. 79–153, 311–21; hereafter cited as VM. The quotation is from p. 112.
- 11 This brief sketch (essential to my exposition of the transitions from *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*) of some points in Derrida's long and highly complex essay introduces a host of issues that I cannot address here. But one thing I must add is this: if my sketch of Derrida gives the impression that 'Violence and Metaphysics' is simply a critique of Levinas, it is misleading. To present Derrida in this way not only would involve a misunderstanding of the nature of deconstructive reading; it would also overlook the fundamental proximity between Levinas' concerns and those of Derrida. For a full account of both these points, see Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. See also Robert Bernasconi, 'Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy', in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley (London: Athlone, 1991), pp. 149–61. A very different perspective on the Derrida–Levinas dialogue is presented by Richard Cohen in his *Elevations*, pp. 305–21.
- 12 My exposition of Levinas' use of the saying–said distinction in *Otherwise than Being* (and Derrida's role in this) owes a lot to Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (especially pp. 4–13, 156–69).
- 13 The danger is thus that the readers of *Otherwise than Being* will interpret Levinas as offering, for example, a 'radicalization' of the 'ethical views' previously presented in *Totality and Infinity* – while overlooking the fact that the work itself aims to be an enactment of ethical saying. And the fact that Levinas repeatedly emphasizes the distinction between saying and the said does not do away with the problem, for as Peperzak points out, 'as soon as we speak about the Saying, it turns into a theme, a said. It shows itself in the words through which we try to formulate its difference from a text, thus converting itself into a text' (*Beyond*, p. 93).
- 14 Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993), p. 73.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 74.
- 16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1990), part I, § 22, p. 53.

- 17 One may wonder how Levinas, given such a project, can continue to see himself as associated with (Husserlian) phenomenology (cf. TI, p. 28; OB, p. 183). John E. Drabinski addresses this difficult article, which transcends the bounds of this article, in his recent book *Sensibility and Singularity: The Problem of Phenomenology in Levinas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001). According to Drabinski, Levinas to a great extent remains true to Husserlian phenomenology and its method of intentional analysis, despite all appearances to the contrary.
- 18 This is at least Dermot Moran's opinion. To him, Levinas is the most obscure of all Continental philosophers: 'Levinas is an exceptionally difficult philosopher to read, even judged in relation to the demanding, complex prose of authors such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida. Indeed he is perhaps the most deliberately opaque of contemporary European philosophers. His style is to make assertions, followed by further assertions, without any attempt to justify them, other than through some kind of appeal to deeply human, perhaps even mystical, intuitions. . . . Furthermore, his writing is infuriatingly sloppy.' Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 321–2. Moran's reading of Levinas, as some will have guessed, is extremely uncharitable.
- 19 The letter is published in German, and with Brian McGuinness' English translation in the footnotes, in Georg Henrik von Wright's 'Historical Introduction', in L. Wittgenstein, *Prototractatus: An Early Version of Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. and trans. B. F. McGuinness *et al.* (London: Routledge, 1971), pp. 1–34. The letter is found at pp. 15–16.
- 20 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), §§ 6.41–6.421; hereafter cited as T. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, 2nd edn, ed. G. H. von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), pp. 78–9; hereafter cited as NB. I use the following abbreviations for additional works by Wittgenstein: LE: 'A Lecture on Ethics', *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 3–12; PI: *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963); WVC: *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations Recorded by Friedrich Waismann*, ed. B. McGuinness, trans J. Schulte and B. McGuinness (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979).
- 21 P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion: Themes in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Bristol, Avon: Thoemmes Press, 1997), p. 89.
- 22 *ibid.*, p. 107. Cf. T, § 6.421; NB, p. 78.
- 23 For a reading that explicitly endorses this conclusion, see Alan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (Chicago, IL: Elephant Paperbacks/Ivan R. Dee, 1986), pp. 24–5, 190–200. See also Greisch, 'The Face and Reading', pp. 73–4.
- 24 Bertrand Russell, for one, found it hard to take the concluding sentences seriously. As he wrote in his introduction to the *Tractatus*: 'What causes hesitation [in accepting Wittgenstein's position] is the fact that, after all, Mr. Wittgenstein manages to say a good deal about what cannot be said, thus suggesting to the skeptical reader that possibly there may be some loophole through a hierarchy of languages, or by some other exit' (T, p. xxi).

- (Interestingly, Russell goes on to consider the status of ethics: ‘The whole subject of ethics, for example, is placed by Mr. Wittgenstein in the mystical, inexpressible region. Nevertheless he is capable of conveying his ethical opinions. His defence would be that what he calls the mystical can be shown, although it cannot be said. It may be that his defence is adequate, but, for my part, I confess that it leaves me with a certain sense of intellectual discomfort’ [T, p. xxi]. This is clearly a reading in line with the ‘received interpretation’: ethics belongs to a ‘region’ of reality that cannot be expressed in language. We can nevertheless ‘convey our ethical opinions’, by using other means. We can ‘show’ them, and this is what Wittgenstein attempts to do.)
- 25 Many commentators defend such a view. A very good example is David G. Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Stern writes: ‘So while the *Tractatus*, like works of traditional philosophy, consists of sentences that, on the theory of representations he sets out there, are to be condemned as nonsensical, Wittgenstein nevertheless thought that his book, unlike the others, pointed to the truth’ (p. 7). Stern is explicit that at least some of the relevant truths are ethical. Wittgenstein, he says, ‘combined the thesis that only factual and logical uses of language are meaningful with the view that philosophical insights about ethics, aesthetics, and “the mystical” lie *outside* language’ (p. 8). According to Stern, Wittgenstein ‘believed he had safeguarded what really mattered, the ethical point of his book . . . precisely by placing it beyond the limits of language altogether. These crucial insights into the nature of the subject, ethics, and religion are not supposed to be shown by logical analysis; instead, they “show themselves” in philosophy’s running up against the limits of language and so attempting to say the unsayable’ (p. 70).
- 26 David Stern distinguishes between ‘plain nonsense, which can be dismissed, and important nonsense, which points to philosophical insights that cannot be put into words’ (*Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*, p. 70). Similarly, P. M. S. Hacker distinguishes, within philosophy, ‘misleading nonsense’ (the kind that traditional metaphysics produces, according to Wittgenstein and the logical positivists) from ‘illuminating nonsense’. The nonsense we find in the *Tractatus* is of the latter kind (*Insight and Illusion*, pp. 18, 26). But Hacker’s position appears slightly more sophisticated than Stern’s. Hacker does not claim that ‘illuminating nonsense’ shows anything, but only that it ‘will guide the attentive reader to apprehend what is shown by *other propositions which do not purport to be philosophical*’ (ibid., p. 18; emphasis added). In other words, the nonsensical sentences of the *Tractatus* ‘show nothing at all’ (Hacker, ‘Was He Trying to Whistle It?’, in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. A. Crary and R. Read [London: Routledge, 2000], pp. 353–88 [356]), and thus they do not show any ineffable ethical truths either, on Hacker’s reading. They only direct our attention to the ethical that is *shown* by meaningful sentences (sentences that also *say* something) such as, ‘Emmanuel Levinas is the author of *Otherwise than Being*’. Perhaps the ‘received interpretation’ is not a monolithic doctrine after all.
- 27 James Conant, ‘Must We Show What We Cannot Say?’, in *The Senses of Stanley Cavell*, ed. R. Fleming and M. Payne (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1989), pp. 242–83 (253).

- 28 See James Conant, 'Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein', in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. A. Crary and R. Read (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 174–217, esp. p. 200. The identical point is made in Conant's 'The Method of the *Tractatus*', in *From Frege to Wittgenstein: Perspectives on Early Analytic Philosophy*, ed. E. H. Reck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 374–462, esp. p. 429.
- 29 Cf. Cora Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', in *The New Wittgenstein*, ed. A. Crary and R. Read (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 149–73, esp. p. 153. See also Conant, 'Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein', pp. 176–7 and Conant, 'The Method of the *Tractatus*', pp. 380–1. There are other commentators whose views more or less resemble those defended by Cora Diamond and James Conant (e.g. Juliet Floyd, Warren Goldfarb, and Thomas Ricketts), but I shall discuss only Diamond and Conant. Indeed, I shall give only a rough sketch of their views and arguments, since my interest pertains to the structural similarities between the early Wittgenstein and Levinas that certain aspects of Conant's and Diamond's readings would seem, unbeknown to them, to uncover.
- 30 Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 18–19. Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', pp. 149–51.
- 31 It is significant that Wittgenstein writes *unsinnig* and not *sinulos*. If he had said that his propositions were 'meaningless' (*sinulos*), then they would – like tautologies and contradictions – lack meaning in the sense that they say nothing about states of affairs in the world; they would be borderline cases, as it were, of the meaningful. That would have given a completely different interpretative situation.
- 32 Conant, 'Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein', p. 198; Conant, 'The Method of the *Tractatus*', p. 424. Diamond, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', p. 150.
- 33 Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit*, p. 194.
- 34 *ibid.*, p. 181.
- 35 Cf. Conant, 'Elucidation and Nonsense in Frege and Early Wittgenstein', p. 196; Conant, 'The Method of the *Tractatus*', pp. 421–2.
- 36 Conant, 'Must We Show What We Cannot Say?', p. 254.
- 37 *ibid.*
- 38 In her article, 'Ethics, Imagination, and the Method of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', Diamond is also concerned with the question of the ethical point of the *Tractatus*. Her account gives pride of place to the imaginative activity of understanding someone who utters nonsense. Though I cannot argue the point here, I think this is even more far-fetched than Conant's attempt to make sense of the ethical, and thus clearly illustrates the fundamental weakness of the 'new Wittgenstein' reading.
- 39 Conant, 'Must We Show What We Cannot Say?', p. 253.
- 40 And the irony of this, of course, is that if there is anything Conant and Diamond are *not* doing, it is precisely throwing the work away. In fact, one has the impression that were it not for their ongoing interpretative engagement with the *Tractatus*, this book would not figure in anywhere

- near the number of philosophical publications it actually figures in here at the beginning of the 21st century.
- 41 Marie McGinn, 'Between Metaphysics and Nonsense: Elucidation in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 49 (1999): 491–513 (498). I agree with McGinn that it is one of the great weaknesses of Conant's and Diamond's interpretation that '[w]e are not left with anything after we have thrown away the ladder' (*ibid.*, p. 495), while the received interpretation (McGinn calls it the 'metaphysical' interpretation) at least allows us to carry something away with us after having finished the work (p. 496). The reading I will offer differs from McGinn's so-called 'elucidatory' interpretation, but it meets her requirements.
 - 42 Which is the most attractive part of Conant's and Diamond's 'new' reading; the part that motivates the whole project of re-reading the *Tractatus*. P. M. S. Hacker has provided a powerful battery of arguments – drawing on internal evidence of the *Tractatus* as well as on other texts from the period – intended to demonstrate that the 'new' reading of Wittgenstein is seriously flawed (cf. Hacker, 'Was He Trying to Whistle It?'). But even Hacker acknowledges that there is a very good reason why philosophers are attracted to Conant's and Diamond's interpretation (*ibid.*, p. 364). Nonsense is nonsense, and we are perfectly entitled to be suspicious of any philosopher who claims that *some* nonsense reveals certain deep ineffable truths about the world. Could Wittgenstein really have claimed that?
 - 43 Greisch, 'The Face and Reading', p. 77.
 - 44 I think Catherine Chaliel is right to stress that 'Levinas shows no particular love for the ineffable and the unsayable; he indulges in no *pathos* of the incommunicable' (Chaliel, *What Ought I to Do? Morality in Kant and Levinas* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002], p. 120), although in a few places, Levinas might give a somewhat different impression (e.g. OB, pp. 7, 44).
 - 45 See Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p. 184. Note that he only poses the *question* ('unresolved if intriguing', as he says) whether this circumstance is 'enough to deny any possible *rapprochement* between Wittgenstein and Levinas'.
 - 46 The importance of this dialogical aspect of Wittgenstein's philosopher is emphasized by Beth Savickey in her book *Wittgenstein's Art of Investigation* (London: Routledge, 1999), especially pp. 125–6. According to Savickey, 'It is not just that the interlocutor is set up as an imaginary adversary, or as a "straw person" for Wittgenstein's philosophical attacks. Rather the interlocutor is essential to his understanding of language and philosophy' (*ibid.*, p. 126).
 - 47 Cf. Greisch, 'The Face and Reading', p. 74.
 - 48 Critchley, 'Introduction' in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, p. 19.
 - 49 How to critically evaluate the two positions is a different, and of course sizeable, question, which I cannot possibly do justice to here. However, I cannot resist the temptation to suggest one question that might be relevant in the context of such a critique. If the need to unsay the said has anything to do with the idea that philosophical discourse, and perhaps theoretical discourse as such, has an inherent tendency to reify and perhaps objectify

its theme, thereby excluding what is truly ethical, one might conclude that the need is not so great after all. For is it really evident that *all* theoretical discourse is *inherently* reifying or objectifying? In a recent collection of essays on the philosophy of Levinas, Theodore de Boer argues for a negative answer to this question: 'We may have the intuitive insight that an ethical situation belongs to a different category than theoretical objectivization. This insight is not undone by noting and formulating it. There is no contradiction in theoretically establishing: A is objectifying knowledge, B is not, it is something else: an awareness of obligation. When we take something as a philosophical theme this does not mean that it automatically takes on the status of a theme of objectifying thought. It does not thereby become "object" in the technical sense of a *Gegenstand* of theoretical intentionality.' Theodore de Boer, *The Rationality of Transcendence: Studies in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1997), p. 70.

- 50 G. E. M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (London: Hutchinson, 1959), p. 172.