Abstract:
To be able to account for the human experience of reason and embodiment we need the dimension of the other. Levinas provides us with this dimension. We have evidence to demonstrate that reason is plural and that a pluralistic reason works. A pluralistic reason shows how diversity is strength rather than a threat. In Levinas, we see how ethical concerns bring us to metaphysical exteriority, where the orthodox opposition between theory and practice evaporates in the face of a metaphysical transcendence that establishes the “absolutely other” as truth. The theoretical exercise of thought does not monopolize transcendence any longer. We do not have an intellectual knowledge or comprehension of the Other; rather, through the phenomena of language, desire, and concern for justice the Other challenges and calls our self-complacency into question. This activity of the Other holds our excesses in check, calls us to order, and so founds reason. True, one’s relation with the Other, who questions the “brutal spontaneity” of one’s egoistic behaviours, initiates within one a new experience of oneself (Levinas, 1969, 203). Yet this response to one’s irresponsible and irrational freedom halts violence and irrationality, and, in so doing also, “founds Reason.” The totalizing thinking aims at absorbing all Otherness into its total system of harmony and order. It intends to have a general knowledge of the Other and of everything in order to put them into one of its categories and to give them a place in its egocentric world. It aims at categorizing with a view to manipulating (Levinas, 1969, 12-18). To reject the self-centered totalizing project of systematic metaphysics is not to break with systematic/orderly thinking or to break with rationalism. It is instead to be authentically rational. Levinas shows that though the Other is other than we are, he does not negate us, as Hegel and his proponents would have us believe. Levinas’s middle way proffers us an Other-regarding solution that values and respects the Other in our behaviour, thought, and speech. This way of thinking rejects the traditional idea that reason has no plural.

Keywords: Diversity thinking, complexity research, harmonious coexistence, pluralist metaphysics, reason and the other.

Preliminary Thoughts
Philosophizing on the human experience of reason and embodiment has always proved problematic. Our investigation in this work shows that it needs the dimension of the other. Levinas provides us this dimension. His Totality and Infinity affords us a work on the dimension of the other that is fundamentally anthropological in nature and yet so comprehensive that it offers new and original insights. It simultaneously shows the inexhaustible richness of our lived experience and the fruitfulness of reflecting on its forms and patterns. Levinas reveals how we co-inhabit a universe of bodies that are other than ourselves, and yet do not negate us.
Introducing Diversity Thinking

On a psychic level, embodiment means one’s capacity to apply the signifying pattern or function to oneself. It is the attainment of that level of being where the sign function is recognized. It entails one recognizing and identifying with something else as representing oneself. Embodiment in this sense means closing off and losing “privileged access” to our “organismic unity” as opposed to animals that are incapable of identifying something else as standing for them (Van de Vijver, 1999, 625).

This symbolic identification occasions the internalization of the dialectics between the inside and the outside. But entering language brings along with it the impossible coincidence between word and thing. The problem this poses is that of how to know the other: other humans and things. Incidentally, the identificatory judgments associated with speaking and the new kind of body acquired through it, a linguistic kind, does not lead to a solipsistic enclosure. For symbolic identification, though a basic mechanism for psychic closure, is not only a window to a world, but also a creation of a world in which understanding-conditions need to be created again and again through interaction in a social context. This is one good way of reading the way psychic beings embody their beings (Van de Vijver, 1999, 613-630).

From a “dynamic structuralist” perspective, one who is incapable of this significatory, identificatory judgment would also fail the embodiment test. At the basis of this perspective is the understanding that the human body is not an exteriority devoid of meaning. Instead, the body participates intimately in mental life at the respective tiers of hierarchy and development. Van de Vijver rightly believes that the symbolic could be the most significant among these levels. It therefore becomes important to understand the mechanisms involved in the complex and intimate relationship between mind, body, and language. It is also essential to examine the history of development and articulate the ways the body and the mind “concomitantly develop particular forms of coherence” (Van de Vijver, 1996b, 2).

One is able to recognize that a thing can stand for something else only when one has the power to make a judgment that signifies and identifies something, by which one takes something (word or sign) as standing for oneself in some form. This power to judge in ways that identify and signify is what it means to be embodied. And this way of being body or of embodiment is present at the beginning of the “development of the mental and the cognitive.” It also implies acknowledging the fellow human being.

Thus, the body is not present to one from the beginning; rather, one constructs and reconstructs one’s body at different hierarchical levels of organization. Again, these constructions at respective levels of organization characterize the relationships between self and body; at every level the body is re-appropriated, and earlier constructions (of the body) are possibly undone or affected. Moreover, language is another factor that adds a basic level of organization; it yields diverse manners of “assuming one’s body;” it affords us the “spoken body.” Finally, in every construction of the body, the social question is at issue; it involves acknowledging the fellow human being (Van de Vijver, 1996b, 14).

Hence, language also expresses a manner of being in the world, bodily, spatially, and temporally. Van de Vijver argues that the biological reappropriates being linguistically in much the same way as it does dynamically. Thus, speaking beings are “topological,” taking on new shapes as they are talking, and talking as they are taking on new shapes; in much the same way as moving beings are topological, taking on new shapes as they are moving, and moving as they keep taking on new shapes (Van de Vijver, 1996b, 14).

Naturalizing Meaning

Embodiment research finds expression in both cognitive science and complexity research. While the cognitive sciences are in the forefront of these inquiries, the road to this field of research
has been difficult. Consequently, there are helpful approaches and unhelpful ones, some of which are highlighted by Van de Vijver and colleagues. Strict Cartesianism amounts to conceiving of the mind as an “absolute interiority independent of its physical environment,” it also boils down to conceiving of the body as an “absolute exteriority” bereft of meaning. Studies in philosophy of mind that are supposed to articulate the body, despite “anti-Cartesian declarations,” continue to conceive of mind and body from a Cartesian standpoint (Van de Vijver, 1996b, 4). By understanding meaning and content as equivalent to being in a certain internal state, and taking mental processes as having no access to semantic properties, classical cognitive science equates psychological explanations to causal ones, and in the wake of this dualism separates the symbolic from the symbol (Van de Vijver, 1996, 288).

In contradistinction to the dualistic underpinning of orthodox cognitive science and the apparent logical inconsistency of the emergentist naturalistic explanatory frameworks (in accepting that emergent properties have novel causal powers, while refusing to admit that the powers in question must manifest themselves by causing either mental or physical properties), Van de Vijver proposes Petitot’s type of epiphenomenalism and a morpho-dynamical brand of emergentist naturalism (Van de Vijver, 1996, 296).

The emergentist attempt at naturalizing meaning intends to explain the origin of meaning in two ways. First, the explanation is: (a) nomological, relating to the laws of the mind; and (b) one that shows the causal determinations underlying mental-symbolic representations, as it explains the relationship between a system of cognition and an environment. Second, causal determinations are understood in relation to an emergent dynamics.

Regarding this second criterion, the Petitot brand of emergentism explains naturalization in terms of internal and external physics. At the level of internal physics, symbolic structures are simply emerging realities. They are products of a “self-organizing dynamics of underlying micro-

structures of the brain” (Van de Vijver, 1996, 290). At the level of external physics, as physical objectivity is far from being amorphous, the “morphological organization of the material substrata” is held to be objective. This forms the basis for Petitot’s “morphological and qualitative pheno-physics.” One sees here “intrinsically significant forms” that become the springboard for naturalizing meaning (Van de Vijver, 1996, 291).

Thus, while the sphere of internal physics treats symbolic structures as emerging reality, external physics addresses the phenomenological world of forms with its qualitative structuring of the sensory world. This includes “things, events, processes, and atomic facts that are qualitatively structured, perceptually understood, and describable in language” (Van de Vijver, 1996, 290). Petitot does not allow the constitution of the object of knowledge to be reduced to a matter of logical syntaxes, as in classical cognitivism.

The meeting point between the internal and external physics in Petitot is indeed an important one. He recognizes that the process by which meaning emerges at the cognitive level begins in an objective situation that is connected with the way the world is qualitatively structured. He associates language with two pivotal functions: (a) giving form to the “qualitative physics” of the exterior world of space time that perception organizes; (b) providing the “discrete and formal categorizations” that convey the world’s character of logic and symbolism (Van de Vijver, 1996, 292).

Complexity Research

Living organisms are systems that are complex and dynamic, developing and evolving in connection with environments that are themselves also complex. Van de Vijver shows how complexity is not the same as complication; it is also not synonymous with chaotic determinism. Systems that are complicated (e.g., aero planes) have externally definable and controllable part-whole relations. On the contrary systems that are complex have part-
whole relations that are only to an extent internally definable. Systems that are mechanical (e.g., aero planes) are very complicated, but not complex because the operation of every part is identifiable in the whole, and this is definable and controllable from the outside. Conversely, even as living systems may have fewer components and fewer elements than aero planes, their (living systems) behaviour, upkeep and wholeness are not adequately describable and controllable from the outside. Complex systems (or living systems) are better accounted for through their internal viewpoint, “their “subjective” or “perspectivist” dimension, and their “self”” (Van de Vijver et al., 2003, 103).

In discussing 20th century attempts at capturing the complexity of living organisms Van de Vijver recalls the motivation for and the seminal nature of Kant’s theory of living systems. First, we find Kant aiming at relating with living systems and communicating with them. Second, we see him substituting the orthodox metaphysics of substance, with an inter-subjectivist and communicative metaphysics. Third, we find him bringing in the question of choice and perspective into epistemology (Van de Vijver et al., 2003, 107).

Van de Vijver draws attention to the lip service paid by the various models of complexity research to the complexity question. It is interesting to know that systems biology and complexity discourse, having first sensationalized complexity thinking, now drag their feet in bringing this to bear on scientific research and life circumstances. Instead they prefer mere rhetorics and are at best reductionist in their handling of the matter (Van de Vijver et al., 2003, 116 & 128).

Also noteworthy in the theoretical frames that study living organisms is the difference between evolution and development. First, the two adhere to different time scales. Second, although they both see development as construction, they disagree in their explanations. For evolution, traits and representations of traits are transmitted to offspring; and organism and environment change over time. The engine of construction and change here is adaptation. For development, the offspring have developmental resources; organisms and populations are molded by their environments. The propellant for niche construction is the phenomenon of existing, which compels organisms to change their local environment somewhat (Van de Vijver et al., 2003, 129).

Van de Vijver argues that complexity reasoning emerges in philosophy and subsequently in science to occasion a critical handling of and reflection on the problems of “perspective” and “context.” That is to say, complexity theories are there to analyze the multiple ways in which contexts determine systems and the multiple styles in which these systems “actively co-determine their environment.” As in Kant’s era, complexity thought originates in the impossibility of getting “universal principles” to articulate in a priori language a given behavioural specificity of “complex systems.” Second, it grows out of the impossibility of obtaining a global point of view that accounts for the “local processes at play in complex systems.” Third, it arises due to the irreducibility of “complex systems to their basic constituent components.”

Complexity thought does not decide which of the possible solutions should be adopted. Instead, it enables us to become aware of the multiplicity of perspectives. It also gives details of the diverse perspectives, highlighting their consequences and effects. Thus it possibilitates to a greater extent the explication of the “priorities and interests” that give character to their actualization.

In the absence of a universal method of deciding the meaning of terms, the question, “Who or what decides?” becomes an essential issue. Thus Van de Vijver argues that the different approaches that characterize complexity research demonstrate four things. First, they show that the complexity standpoint in the biological sciences provides further details and more information about the notion of perspective by disclosing how it is organizationally stratified. Second, complexity reasoning in biology also reveals levels at which we consider context in thinking. It shows we have points of view that are very dynamic and
liberal (DST), and those that are mildly or averagely dynamic (epigenetics). Third, the degree to which we take account of context decides the perspectives we take. These include “molecular interactive exchanges (epigenetics, organismism)” and the processes of development or evolution (DST and Evo-Devo). Fourth, the different ways of addressing the complexity question show that the various “priorities and interests” of study influence the points of view (Van de Vijver et al., 2003, 133). These may find expression in the aspiration to universalize our explication in the area of manipulating and controlling (epigenetics). They may also involve a rather local aspiration to describe “complex systems” as regards their processes of interaction, communication, and interpretation (IC, DST).

Thus Van de Vijver insists that it is not only that perspectives make a difference but that it is even more crucial to know “which perspective makes a difference at what moment and within which conditions.” The epistemic import of complexity studies is the recognition of the relativity and contextual character of all answers, including those considered “a priori, objective, a-contextual and a-historical.” Added to that are the “obligations” and commitments associated with “perspectives and choices.” Currently complexity studies in biology simply remain in the sphere of the speculative and the “rhetoric.” There is virtually no commitment to the area of experimentation. The commitment to articulate the aims and purposes that scientific research should serve and the issues that it must address is lacking. Yet articulating to what use we intend to put science should be the primary concern of complexity research. Philosophy can be the engine of change here; however, it must not simply stop at the point of lending support to the consciousness that a viewpoint does make a difference. It must also show how critically adopting a point of view can “enlarge the scope of the encounter with other perspectives” (Van de Vijver et al., 2003, 134).

**Reason and Diversity**

Modern phenomenology attempts to describe patterns of human experience the way these are concretely lived through. Sartre describes life as we live it, but his ontological dualism of being for itself and being in itself is inadequate. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the pre-objective world of perception is a landmark. He recognizes life as it is really lived. Incidentally he did not live (long enough) to come to an ultimate articulation of his phenomenological insight. Heidegger’s ontology addresses our contemporary “living experiential thought.” As a complete ontology it also addresses some of our phenomenological concerns. But he exaggerates the role of the subject and this is a big handicap (Levinas, 1969, 11).

Levinas’s Totality and Infinity is different. It is as fundamentally “anthropological in character” as it is a comprehensive position that offers new and original insights. It contradicts the transcendental idealism of Husserl and the Heideggerian hermeneutic philosophy of Dasein. Thus it reveals the “inexhaustible richness of our lived experience and how fruitful it could be when we reflect on its forms and patterns.” Levinas shows how we find ourselves living in a universe of foreign “things and elements” that are other than ourselves, but do not negate us.

However, our originary experience is prejudiced and self-centered. We assume the primal place in relation to the objects and people around us and get acquainted with manipulating and controlling them to our advantage. We use and enjoy things anyhow it pleases us without reference to the world around us.

Levinas regrets that Heidegger and other phenomenologists neglect this originary experience of egoistic enjoyment. Enjoyment and pleasure are important factors in describing the human Erlebnis (experience). Individuals and groups tend to preserve this “egocentric attitude” and to regard other persons and communities either as “extensions of the self” or as foreign objects that should be “manipulated for the advantage of the individual or social self.” Levinas insists that neither of these self-centered
postures is true to our originary experience of the other person (Levinas, 1969, 12).

Levinas describes the other person that we experience in a face-to-face relationship. He reveals that this Other is other than ourselves, but not a negation of ourselves as in Hegel and his followers. This other person is also not an object that we should put into one of our categories and assign a certain tiny space in our egocentric world. Both the theory that considers the Other in Hegelian terms and the theory that regards the Other as an object to be slotted into a category all are “egocentric and reductive.” None of these views is true of the Other as we experience him in a face-to-face encounter. This personal encounter enables the Other to be present to us in the flesh. Even so, there is somehow a “distance and absence” in his questioning look. Our duty is to find how to coexist with the Other without violating (or tampering with) his “Otherness” (Levinas, 1969, 13).

Levinas believes that it is through “communication and community” that we can coexist with the Other and yet leave his otherness intact. The questioning face of the Other seeks a meaningful and honest answer. A genuine and responsible response will achieve communication and community. This genuine response includes our putting our “world into words” and offering it to the Other. “Responsible communication” relies on an introductory generous act, wherein we give our world, with all its “dubious assumptions and arbitrary features,” to the Other. The other then subjects these (our assumptions and arbitrariness) to critical questioning, and this enables us to escape from our egocentrism.

The other person is not an object that our enlightened minds need to interpret and illumine, “he shines forth with his own light and speaks for himself.” To become social people, we do not need to be first and foremost systematic. Instead, by making an inaugural ethical choice (for the social, for community with the other or) for a generous interactive communication we come to be “systematic and orderly” in our reasoning (Levinas, 1969, 14). Often (and regrettably too) we reduce thought and speech to a “succession of egocentric monologues.” But Levinas insists that thought and speech become serious and responsible only when we pay attention to the other person and consider him and his strange world. When we respond to the Other, we become aware of our arbitrary attitudes and “uncriticized freedom.” This helps us learn to do justice to the Other in the way we think and act.

Proponents of Hegelian philosophy defend the “objective rational systems and social organizations” that subdue or suppress the individual. Yet Hegelian subordination or repression of the individual leads to “social suppression and tyranny.” Totalitarianism seeks a panoramic view of all there are. This mode of thinking considers reality, including the Other, from a neutral and impersonal viewpoint. Such is the case with Heidegger’s Being and Hegel’s Geist. For this type of rational system being free is being rational, and being rational is surrendering oneself to the total system that is unfolding in world history. History is the final arbiter; Hegel holds (Weltgeichichte ist die Weltgericht). Totalitarian thinking attempts to absorb all otherness into this “total system of harmony and order.”

Levinas proposes a midway between totalitarianism and anarchism. His face-to-face encounter with the Other is different from “subjective anarchism” because it considers the Other and his (the other’s) critique of our egoism. It is also different from totalitarian thinking in many ways (Levinas, 1969, 15). Levinas’s midway is an Other-regarding way of acting, thinking and speaking that allows for the “diversity of dialogue” and more development thanks to the “dynamics of question and answer.” This thought style denies the orthodox claim that “reason has no plural,” because our experience shows that reason (has many centers and) accesses the truth in diverse ways. Against thought systems that ignore or dilute individual diversities, Levinas’s thought pattern begins by analyzing the features that are unique to each individual in its otherness; after this it then begins clarifying the relationship that this
individual has with others in relation to its unique features.

This other-regarding thought style seeks to encounter things the way they are in themselves, that is, in their “radical otherness.” It emphasizes the preparedness to “listen and learn from experience” and de-emphasizes concepts formation. It denies that knowledge gathering must come first and that action must only follow later on. Instead, it insists that action, “justice and peace” are prior to thought and speech. The fundamental difference between this other-regarding mode of thought and the totalitarian system of thought is clear. The key difference is between a thought paradigm that concentrates all there are around the mind of the thinker and an other-oriented (outside-oriented) style of thinking that seeks to encounter the radically Other.

Through a face-to-face encounter with the Other we enter into a relationship with him wherein none of us will be necessarily dependent on the other. And anyone of us can pull out of the relationship with his “integrity intact” (Levinas, 1969, 16). We can respond to the Other and engage in a mutual exchange with him without endangering his or our own being. As Plato remarks, the good lies beyond metaphysics; so we must go beyond metaphysics so as to find in ethics the appropriate answers and responses to human questions and situations.

Levinas asserts that the totalitarian thinkers (totalizers) are “satisfied with themselves and with the systems they can organize around themselves as they already are.” They try to obtain “power and control” and look for “order and system.” On the contrary, those (Infinitizers) who believe in the infinity of Being, which exceeds the totality, try to obtain “higher quality of life.” They are dissatisfied with the status quo and look for freedom and creative advancement. The difference between these two mental dispositions or attitudes forms the caption of Levinas’s Totality and Infinity. Whereas the history of Western civilization is replete with examples of the totalistic thinking, as Levinas shows, we are yet to try out Levinas’s idea of the infinity of Being.

The egocentric totalistic thought “organizes men and things into power systems, and gives us control over nature and other people.” Thus it has “dominated” the events of man’s history. It regards as important only the “neutral and impersonal.” It considers as real only what the senses and the mind can treat as an object (objective thought!). It disregards the “acts of sensing, thinking, existing” as we live these through in the concrete; it considers them to be subjective and inferior. It considers the group to be of utmost importance in contrast to the individual. It believes that to attain freedom the individual must give up what it calls the “arbitrary inner self” and conform to a rational system built on the totalitarian logic (Levinas, 1969, 17). In contrast to inner feelings, the literary works and writings of people are accessible (or on hand) and endure. Because these works/writings abide and the group also lasts, the group can evaluate them; so goes the argument. Whatever judgment the ongoing course of history passes on these works; it is exactly what they are. Since this totalistic system includes everything, and there is nothing that can come after it, the judgment of the group cannot be appealed. Thus the judgment of the totalistic thought system is final. Hegel sums up this attitude when he writes that, “Die Weltgeschichte ist die Weltgericht.” (History is the final arbiter of history).

On the contrary, those who believe in the infinity of Being (Infinitizers) argue that the absolutization and application of systematic thinking to free people becomes violence. We see this in the unintentional/casual exhibition of armed force as well as in the “permanent tyranny of power systems.” Free people should refuse and defy this, they maintain. They also hold that slavery is the domination of the “active and personal” by the “neutral and the impersonal.” Finding out who is writing or speaking and why he is writing or speaking is more important than merely knowing what he is saying. It is not necessary to know the other person “as he is in himself,” we never succeed in knowing him (as he is in himself) anyway; we only need to act with
him. We need to coexist with the Other, rather than wanting to know him so as to “categorize and manipulate” him. To fit into a system does not translate into the achievement of freedom and responsibility by the individual. Instead the individual achieves freedom and responsibility when he fights the system and acts on his own. Those who acquire some “sense of the inner life” through a face-to-face encounter with the Other do not judge other people merely by their literary/well-written works. Such people rightly realize that dead writers/authors are no longer there to give proper explanation and defense of their writings; and their writings are left with their survivors who judge them crudely and subjectively.

Hence those who achieve some “sense of the inner life” through a face-to-face encounter with the Other (i.e., those who believe in the infinity of Being) do not accept the judgment of history as final. They reject the concept of history as final and try instead to base their own/individual judgment on an Other-regarding and transcendent principle (Levinas, 1969, 18). Thus for Levinas we are not obliged to embrace the status quo as correct, and history cannot be the final arbiter of history. Levinas backs up his pluralistic philosophy with a lot of concrete illustrations and phenomenological evidence. He illustrates and describes our face-to-face encounter with the Other. He also describes the phenomena of “suffering and patience.” With much phenomenological evidence, he describes how something other that we do not yet possess attracts our desire. He also grounds his analysis of the family on phenomenological evidence. He, however, refuses to accept Hegel’s supposition that the family is a step towards the state. He also describes the phenomena of “suffering and patience.” His descriptions and illustrations demonstrate that the lived body is “neither a thing nor a purely subjective principle” as Merleau-Ponty occasionally seems to suggest (Levinas, 1969, 19).

The idea of infinity refers to the mind before it begins to distinguish between what it finds out on its own (unaided) and what it gets from opinion. Being is infinite; it transcends the mind of the thinker. Infinity “overflows the thought that thinks it.” The experience of the absolutely Other is also the experience of infinity, because the experiencing of the Other overflows the mind that thinks and makes this experience (Levinas, 1969, 25). Thus Levinas defends subjectivity not in order to refute totality but because subjectivity is grounded in infinity. He demonstrates that the idea of the infinity of Being has primacy over the idea of totality. He demonstrates that Infinity grows out of our encounter with the Other. He demonstrates that the “particular and the personal” are the fields wherein infinity is produced (Levinas, 1969, 26).

Levinas helps us see how the idea of infinity of Being, which cannot be reduced to the representation of Being, is the origin of both “activity and theory.” He reveals how conscious subjectivity is not putting Being on par with representation (Levinas, 1969, 27). Consciousness is instead about the overflowing of phenomenology and the “accomplishing of events” whose ultimate meaning (contrary to Heidegger) does not consist in “disclosing” Being (Levinas, 1969, 27-28). Phenomenology helps us understand Being by bringing the events of Being to light. But the phenomenon of disclosure is not the “ultimate event” of Being. And the destiny of the event of Being is not to enjoy the privilege of being merely disclosed. So the ultimate event/role of philosophy cannot be the disclosure of Being. The ultimate destiny of the event of Being is the accomplishing of cordial reception of the Other and of doing justice to the Other in thought and action. It is genuine communication and just and shared community with the Other. Levinas demonstrates how accomplishing this is also the ultimate role of philosophy. He also reveals how this welcoming of the Other and a sense of justice toward him (the Other) are the very conditions for the disclosure of truth (Levinas, 1969, 28).
Reason and Coexistence

Through an analysis of a face-to-face relation with the Other, Levinas not only breaks with the ethical neutrality of Western ontology but also restores the human phenomenon as an I can rather than I think. He makes a case for the limitless depth of our lived experience and shows how fruitful it can be to reflect on its patterns. The main thrust of his ontology of Erlebnis is that we do not have an intellectual knowledge or comprehension of the Other; rather, through the phenomena of language, desire, and concern for justice the Other challenges and calls our self-complacency into question. This activity of the Other holds our excesses in check, calls us to order, and so founds reason. This whole new way of doing ontology contradicts the transcendental idealism of Husserl and the Daseinsanalytik (interpretative philosophy of being) of Heidegger. In his Totaite et Infini (1961), Levinas brings reason to the domain of lived experience (Erlebnis, in the preferred terminology of Husserl), where it emerges and where it has meaning. Under a subheading captioned “Reason and the Face,” he discusses and reveals reason as a question of coexistence.

He holds that when we make an intelligible form manifest, such that terms connect to one another, we should not think we have in so doing produced human expression. By connecting terms to one another, we may produce a “circle of understanding,” but the “primordial event of the logic of being” is something else. Human expression of meaning is prior to attempts at articulating it by connecting terms to one another. The originary event of human expression lies in “bearing witness to oneself and guarantying this witness” through one’s unequivocal presence. Attesting to oneself in this way is only possible in a face-to-face encounter with the Other; it is only possible in a dialogical relationship. It marks the beginning of intelligibility (Levinas, 1969, 201).

Levinas insists that as an “exchange of ideas about the world,” language requires, as a prior condition, the originality of a face-to-face encounter with the Other. Without this original human face, language would not begin, because it involves “mental reservations.” Since it involves earnestness and deception it would require “infinite psychoanalysis or sociology” in the absence of this originary face. Language requires the “straightforwardness of the face to face” relation with the Other. Human expression does not offer us the “interiority” of the Other. In expressing himself (for example, in well-written works), the Other does not offer us himself, because he can lie or hide something from us. Levinas maintains that we cannot place a value on the “presentation of being” in a face-to-face relation with the Other. He defines the face as the “presentation of self by self,” which contrasts with the “presentation of realities” that we merely give, which are “always possibly dreamt up.” Seeking truth involves establishing a “relationship with a face” that guarantees itself and whose “epiphany” is itself in a way a “word of honor.”

This face-to-face relationship with the Other is an “ethical relation” and it has a “rational character.” It outmatches “mystical” relationships where other events swallow up the untainted earnestness of the “presentation of the original being.” The face-to-face encounter avoids equivocations and evasiveness and preserves the originary univocality or unambiguity of expression (Levinas, 1969, 202). Herein, Levinas holds, lies the “rational character of the ethical relation” and of the dialogical encounter. This face-to-face relational encounter is straightforward. It also “preserves the discontinuity of relationship” and defies fusion. In this ethical relation the “response does not evade the question.” For Levinas discourse is prose, it ruptures and commences, it breaks up rhythms. It is unlike the poetic activity where we merely play roles, often in dramas that begin outside of us.

Levinas insists that the Other’s self-presentation in a face-to-face relational encounter with us neither negates the Other nor does violence to him as authorities or opinions about him do. Similarly, the Other’s self-presentation neither negates us nor does violence to us. It is exceedingly non-violent. Rather than violate our freedom it “calls it to responsibility and founds
it.” The Other’s self-presentation preserves the Other’s plurality and ours. “It is peace.” Our face-to-face relational encounter with the Other is “not exposed to the allergy” that hurts the I-Other relation in a totality (i.e., in a totalizing framework of systematic metaphysics), upon which Hegelianism constructs its dialectics. The Other is not a scandal for reason that should launch reason into a “dialectical movement.” The Other is instead the “first rational teaching, the condition for all teaching.” He helps us see the irrationality of a freedom that lacks “scruples.” The Other helps us see how our freedom to swing our arms ends where the Other’s eyes begin (Levinas, 1969, 203).

Levinas makes the point that freedom is not inhibited because there is the Other who resists our freedom. It is rather our arbitrariness that inhibits freedom. What inhibits freedom is that irrationality which stops us from recognizing that freedom has responsibility. What inhibits freedom is that lack of reason that prevents us from seeing how our freedom to swing our arms ends where the Other’s eyes begin. When eventually we realize how irrational we have been with our freedom and feel a sense of guilt, then we rise to responsibility. When freedom becomes rational in this way the human being gains rationality. This is the beginning of reason and authentic rationalism! Freedom “rises to responsibility” when it acknowledges the arbitrariness of its behaviours, the guilt of its actions and the timidity of its sitting on the fence. The irrational manifests itself to us within us, and not outside of us. The irrational does not consist in the imaginary limitation that the Other imposes on us; the irrational is rather our “egoism,” which is in itself unjustifiable and unwarrantable, and as such illogical.

True, our relation with the Other, who questions the “brutal spontaneity” of our egoistic behaviours, initiates within us a new experience of ourselves (Levinas, 1969, 203). Yet this response to our irresponsible and irrational freedom halts violence and irrationality, and, in so doing also, “founds Reason” (Levinas, 1969, 203-204). The totalitarian thinking aims at gaining an-all-inclusive and panoramic view of all things, including of the Other, in a neutral and impersonal way. It intends to have a general knowledge of the Other and of everything in order to put them into one of its categories and to give them a place in its egocentric world. It aims at absorbing all Otherness into its total system of harmony and order. It aims at categorizing and manipulating (Levinas, 1969, 12-18).

To reject the self-centered totalizing project of the totalitarian thinking is not to break with systematic/orderly thinking or to break with rationalism (Levinas, 1969, 204). Levinas insists rather that we become systematic and orderly thinkers by making the ethical choice for reasonable (informed) generosity, responsible communication and honest/committed dialogue with the Other. We become systematic when we make this enlightened ethical choice for social responsibility and for community (fellowship) with the other. The lived experience of language shows that there is “always room for the diversity of dialogue and for further growth through the dynamics of question and answer.” This “other-regarding” and pluralistic manner of reasoning turns down the orthodox claim that reason cannot be pluralistic. It compels us to acknowledge what our lived experience teaches us, namely, that “reason has many centers,” and that it accesses the truth in diverse forms. Totalizing thought-patterns construct grandiose systems that dilute or gloss over “singular diversities of things and persons.” On the contrary the other-regarding thought pattern that Levinas proposes first analyses the features that are peculiar to each “being in its otherness,” after this it then analyses the relationship this being has with other things in reference to its distinctive features (Levinas, 1969, 15-16). This is what Levinas’s idea of infinity involves; and it is unique in western thought, because it founds reason on genuine human relations, and grounds the metaphysical in the ethical.

This idea of infinity means recognizing that though the other is not an extension of oneself, he is a human being the way one is. The idea of infinity means doing justice to him in one’s thought and in one’s action. Thus it parts company with the prejudices and egocentricism of the totalitarian thought pattern (that violates
the mind of the Other), without breaking ties with rational thought. For rather than doing violence to the mind, it becomes a conditio sine qua non for not violating the mind. In this way, it “establishes ethics” and founds authentic (authentic because it is inclusive and evenhanded) rational thought (Levinas, 1969, 204).

In this other-regarding way of thinking that Levinas proposes, the “other is not for reason a scandal” that propels into beginning a dialectical movement; he is instead our “first teaching.” The face-to-face relational encounter with the Other brings us to reason; it teaches us to reason. This acquisition of reason through direct contact and direct engagement with the Other is an ongoing process. Constant engagement and encounter with the Other affords us an “incessant reception of teaching.” Rational thought or reason means having this type of “idea of infinity, or to be taught” in this way. “Rational thought refers to this teaching,” Levinas insists. For the totalizing thought-pattern, reason is about logic, it has the “formal structure of logical thought.” It begins with definition and emphasizes concept construction.

The other-regarding way of thought of Levinas has a different structure. Its structure is a face-to-face relationship with the Other; and its emphasis is on the readiness to listen and learn from the experience of a face-to-face relational encounter with the Other. This direct engagement with the Other has an “ethical essence” and a rational character. As the “divine veracity” sustains the rationalism of Descartes, so does the face-to-face relation, as the “evidence” that possibilates evidence, sustain the rational philosophy of Levinas (Levinas, 1969, 204).

Levinas teaches us how diversity is strength rather than a threat. He shows us how the rational consists in an other-regarding philosophy rather than in an egoistic and manipulative philosophy. The lived experience upon which he builds his philosophy makes it authentic, undeniable and defensible. Developments in China and India are a further proof of the rational character of diversity and of the other-regarding philosophy of Levinas. All the rich nations of the world now want to have a piece of the Chinese cake. Yet China represents all that is irrational in our western thought. If we had succeeded in stopping the development of China, because it represented otherness, who would be lending USA all the money it borrows from China today? China has all the features of otherness in relation to our philosophy and civilization. It has an explosive population, a communist economic and political model, diverse cultures and a different world view. Yet in the areas of economy and social harmony it is the wonder of the 21st century. Diversity or otherness is after-all rational and it works.

**A Critique of Levinas**

People find fault with Levinas’s description of enjoyment as something purely subjective. They demand more clarification on Levinas’s idea of “inner life” vis-à-vis what he regards as purely subjective conditions; they find it hard to see the difference between the two. It is also not clear whether man’s experience of the Other is a “sufficient ground” for Levinas’s idea of the infinity of Being. Some people also find it curious that Levinas’s self-other relationship accords the other person non-negotiable primacy (Levinas, 1969, 19).

**Positive assessment of Levinas**

The author of this book welcomes Levinas’s description of an other-regarding attitude as a higher quality inner life and his description of the egoistic attitude as purely subjective. Our originary experience of enjoyment is egoistic to the extent we manipulate and control things and people exclusively to our advantage. We use and enjoy things anyhow it pleases us without thinking of other people. Levinas is right here because providing bread for oneself is a material issue, but providing bread for the Other is a moral matter. The first attitude (bread for the self) does not go beyond the animalistic satisfying of self. The second attitude (bread for the other) transcends self and thinks of
something other. This is what is missing in our ontology. Levinas takes phenomenology to a higher (ethical) ground. It is on this ground that the primacy that Levinas accords the Other in the Self-Other relation makes sense. This capacity for an other-regarding attitude should distinguish us from the rest of the animal world. It should be the distinctive characteristic of our humanity. The animal cannot think beyond itself or beyond its immediate group. The human being should be capable of a little more than that if we are to justify our claim of superiority over the animal kingdom.

Many people agree that Levinas’s philosophy is a unique pluralistic perspective. He carefully describes and analyzes a broad range of “empirical patterns” of human experience (Erlebnis). He reveals how rich our Erlebnis is and how fruitful it can be when we reflect on its forms and patterns (Levinas, 1969, 19). Remarkably, he does not merely reinterpret “what has been said before” as we often do in philosophy. Levinas’s other-regarding philosophy is highly original and radically different. He grounds/bases it on phenomenological evidence and learns from Husserl and Heidegger. Yet he repudiates Husserl and Heidegger (Levinas, 1969, 20). It is not interpreting what has already been said or mere theoretical concerns that matters. He takes his inspiration from the dialogical reflections of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber.

Conclusions

Franz Rosenzweig strove to create a “new thinking,” through a blend of philosophical and theological insights and a complete renewal of the way we think. In genuine dialogue we evolve an interpersonal relationship between “I” and “You” that constitutes selfhood and redeems the community. In Rosenzweig’s "The Star of Redemption" we see a philosophical system in which Jewish and Christian “revelation” conceptually and methodologically offer glimpses, through their various liturgies, of the "redemptive Unity" of that "All" that the philosophical enquiry explores (Pollock, Benjamin, 2019). Martin Buber’s book, I and Thou (1923) gave Levinas the insight that an I-Thou (Ich-Du) interconnection obtained in encounters among subjects, transcending the scope of the Cartesian subject-object tie-up, where an I-it (Ich-Es) relation existed between subjects and their objects of thinking and acting (Zank, Michael and Zachary Braiterman, 2023).

It is encountering the Other, Levinas insists, fellowship (community) with him, and doing justice to him in thought and action that counts. It is this that makes us responsible and rational.

In Levinas, we see how ethical concerns bring us to metaphysical exteriority, where the orthodox opposition between theory and practice (self and Other) evaporates in the face of a metaphysical transcendence that establishes the absolutely Other, which is truth. The theoretical exercise of thought does not monopolize transcendence any longer (Levinas, 1969, 29).

References


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