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Lévinasian Conception of Otherness in Trauma Therapy”

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When Lévinas claims that “the relationship between the Same and the Other is language”¹ in *Totality and Infinity*, what is meant by the “Same,” what is meant by the “Other,” what is meant by “language,” what is meant by “relationship”? And, how can the findings (psychosomatics of Lévinas’ ethics) be connected/applied to enhance (the therapeutic relationship in) Trauma Therapy?

What does reading Lévinas’ account of the ethical relation in *Totality and Infinity* tell about the needs of the traumatised? What is the therapeutic relevance and take-home for trauma workers from Lévinas’ philosophy in *Totality and Infinity*?

¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 39.

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I write this thesis for my brother, for those who knew and love him, and in hope that it can provide solace to anyone who has lost a loved one in their life. I also write for anyone who knows of unbearable pain and the inability to handle it alone.

Thank you

To my family. With love.

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Thank y o u, stranger.

Preface

“Hurt.”²

How can humans survive unbearable pain? And, not enough (note the difference between survival mode and quality of life): How can they *live* with it? — The first is a question for neurobiologists and psychologists. The second one is the interest of this philosophical investigation. How can humans *live* with unbearable pain?

What characterises unbearable pain? — It must be felt, but it cannot, because it is too much, too grave. How can it be felt, nevertheless? How to live with it? Rainer Maria Rilke writes in *Das Stundenbuch (The Book of Hours)*:

Let everything happen to you:
Beauty and Terror.
One must only keep going:
No feeling is final.
Don't stray far away from me.
Nearby is the land they call life.
You will know it
by its graveness.
Give me your hand.³

What is he saying? — Life is full of pain. But not just that. Take my hand. Let's walk together through beauty and terror. *You are not alone.*

² Leonie Holzner, Vienna, 2020.

³ As translated by James Owens from Rilke's original version in German: “Lass Dir alles geschehen: Schönheit und Schrecken. Man muss nur gehn: Kein Gefühl ist das fernste. Lass dich von mir nicht trennen. Nah ist das Land, das sie das Leben nennen. Du wirst es erkennen an seinem Ernste.”

Es ist Zeit, dass der Stein sich zu blühen
bequemt,
dass der Unrast ein Herz schlägt.
Es ist Zeit, dass es Zeit wird.

Es ist Zeit.⁴

“Corona” by Paul Celan

The literal and loose translation of the first line would be: “It is time that stone blooms.” Or rather: that it is timely that the stone blossoms, that it should (finally allow itself to) blossom.

Now: *How could a stone ever blossom?*

Without analysing *en detail* what Paul Celan writes about, allow me to point towards his experiences of the second world war that fed his poetry which ‘speaks its own language.’ It reflects the difficulty of sharing and also connecting and relating after traumatic experience(s) such as the horror of the Shoah. Some experiences cannot be shared or even grasped. Because, grasping and sharing would require a language that in traumatic experiences often is lost (especially words⁵). It is paradoxical how Celan and other survivors of the holocaust have nevertheless found words or used words to process and share. This highlights that each person processes their experiences differently, and that we rely on

⁴ German is the original language in which this poem was written. Because the whole of this thesis is concerned with language and relating through language, the issue of translation is also touched upon. For the reader(s) who do not (yet) understand this German version, be assured that there will be a full English translation in the epilogue.

⁵ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 231.

sharing these experiences in order to be in relation, to understand each other. But, through trauma, the (common) ground is gone.⁶

Allow me to illustrate with the conceptual work of art, '*Shibboleth*' (2007) by the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo. It showed a crack in the floor of Tate Modern, London, indicating a partition in the ground. Without its title, it would not as obviously have referred to the concept of separation that *Shibboleth* irrevocably does. "Friends and enemies are parted by fine, linguistic lines," writes Doris Bravo regarding Salcedo's piece.⁷ These lines are characteristic for *Shibboleth*. They are characteristic of the phenomenon of a surface that cracks, that has broken, that opens up a void. Language can also open up or call attention to such void. Note that 'language' in German ('Sprache') refers both to 'language' *and* 'speech.' As the expression goes: 'two people speak the same language,' which means that they understand each other. However — as writes Doris Bravo — it is often the case that humans do in fact, *not* understand each other. They do not share the experience nor the language to make others understand that experience. They are parted. There is *Shibboleth*.

The glossary says that 'speaking the same language' depends on shared opinions and values — but this misses something. For, it depends on a multitude of factors. One way to compress these factors is in *shared experience*. Shared experience is facilitated in shared

⁶ "In jeder Grenzsituation wird mir gleichsam der Boden unter den Füßen weggezogen." (Jaspers, 1925, p. 249), loosely translated as: 'In every limit situation the ground is cut from under my feet.' That which is the Gehäuse (transl. 'Housing' or 'Casing' or 'Case') is broken. It is that which offers protection — from constantly being occupied with the existential reality of the *conditio humana* that involves the awareness of death, of the suffering other, of injustice, morality, and freedom of action. See also: Fuchs, 2021, p. 311f.

⁷ See: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/salcedo-shibboleth-i-p20334>. An image for this could be the passage in the Bible that Derrida refers to in this text on *shibboleth* from 1999: In order for the Ephraimites to pass over the river Jordan, the Gileadites ask them to pronounce the word "Shibboleth." Their cultures are very similar, but in one of them they are able to pronounce the "Shh" in "Shibboleth" and the other not. This is a symbol for cross-cultural relations and their difficulties. (These will be addressed throughout the thesis as we go into Otherness, too.)

environments. And, shared environments can lead to an ability in understanding, to speaking ‘the same language’ in spite of other differences (that shape one’s view of the world). There is a common ground established. It is the ground that something can grow out of — no matter the difference. *This thesis is about searching for a ground in spite of it.*

This thesis is about trauma; an experience that cannot be but somehow must be shared in order to relate to others again. Salcedo’s piece serves as metaphor: Due to the traumatic experience there is a crack in the ground. There is *Shibboleth*. There is no relation or connection.

Special awareness and diligence is required if one realises that there would be a void opening up in a human encounter, if such a common ground or common language would be missing. *Especially for human encounter after trauma.* And with that awareness, if relating is an aim — which it must be, because no one can exist solely by themselves — comes the necessity of establishing a common ground, of finding a common language, a way of communication. Which kind of language or which kind of communication that may be, is of concern here. By concentrating on this path (out), something (new) may be understood about trauma; something about stones, brokenness, blossoming — in another language. For, each person speaks a different one.⁸

⁸ Theresa Kinzl, Trieste, 2022: “Each person speaks a different language.” A reference to *Die politische Kraft der Liebe* by Clemens Sedmak.

*

Etwas

Entsteht

Im Zwischen In der Distanz Im Blick

ist schon da; das Zwischen Die Distanz Das Gesicht

gibts nicht

Im Zwischen.

Nähe?

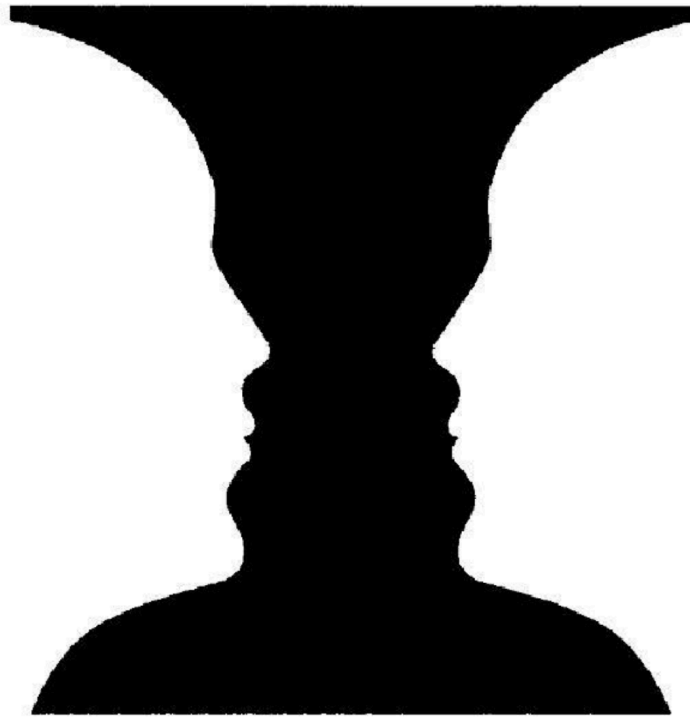
Berührung?

(Die) Im Bewusstsein des Zwischen Des Dritten

Entsteht

*9

⁹ This is self-coined with Lévinas in mind. Translated: 'Something Emerges In-Between In the Distance In the Gaze Something Is already there; The In-Between The Distance The Face Something Is not In-Between Closeness? Touch? (That) In the Awareness In-Between The Third.'



I. Introduction

If nothing human is alien to me then nothing alien can be recognized as essentially human.¹⁰

What is essentially human?¹¹

Well, for one, asking questions such as this one. Asking about the essence, the origin, the beginning. A distance to the things themselves, then, would be ‘essentially human,’ a not-letting-things-be, but putting them in question — and, with that, detaching oneself, distancing oneself — perhaps in order “to know or to be conscious” which “is to take time to avoid the instant of inhumanity,”¹² according to Emmanuel Lévinas. The aim of this thesis is ‘to know or to be conscious’ of our *shared humanity*. With Lévinas, this is “the human Other”¹³ and also the distance, *Shibboleth*, between the Same and the Other¹⁴. In accordance with the quote above, part of what it means to be human, essentially, includes the experience of being alien, the experience of alienation. It means, very briefly, that there is a “problematic separation

¹⁰ Kirmayer, 2008, p. 470.

¹¹ I invite you to pause for a moment.

¹² Lévinas, 1969, p.15.

¹³ Galetti, 2015.

¹⁴ They are capitalised throughout the text because they are here understood as figures, first and foremost.

between same and other that belong together.”¹⁵ Why would that be or could that be problematic? — it may be problematic when the separation *hurts*. That is how ‘trauma’ could be understood: a painful separation between that which belongs together.

In Lévinas’ ethics, however, this separation is essential for ethical action. And trauma is, too. This distance through the separation of (the Lévinasian) ‘trauma’ — through the ‘language’ of the Other — calls for responsibility. It is a responsibility that can never be fulfilled because the distance is too vast. But, in this awareness of the distance to the Other and an awareness of the distance itself (which is also Other to oneself), the ethical encounter can happen. With Lévinas, ethics is determined by the consciousness of the distance and, henceforth, this “openness of being”¹⁶ for that which is ‘Other,’ for that which is ungraspable — the human Other/the other human and their experience. The ethical then entails a space of Otherness (the distance) that Lévinas calls ‘Infinity.’ This is “the absolutely other.”¹⁷ In the “creative Infinite”¹⁸ a ‘language’ can be found to make that which is ‘other’ graspable: the human Other/the other human and their (traumatic) experience. This is what trauma therapies work with in order to discharge and integrate trauma somatically (chapters VI and VII). In Ancient Greek, *Soma* means ‘body.’ It refers to unconscious processes, hence, to

¹⁵ Leopold, 2022. For a more detailed definition, see Rahel Jaeggi, 2014, especially the “foreword,” as well as pp. 22–25. Here an excerpt of how it is to be understood here: “The concept of alienation — a product of modernity through and through presupposes [...] a conception of the human essence: whatever is diagnosed as alienated must have become distant from, and hence alien to something that counts as the human beings true nature and essence.” This “denotes relationlessness of a particular kind: a detachment or separation from something that in fact belongs together, the loss of a connection between two things that nevertheless stand in relation to one another. Being alienated from something means having become distanced from something in which one is in fact involved or to which one is in fact related or in any case ought to be.” It describes not the absence but the *quality* of relation. It means “disconnectedness or alienness, but an alienness that differs from simple relationlessness.”

¹⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 44.

¹⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 49.

¹⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 104.

‘Otherness’ (in one understanding of the word). There are multiple understandings explored throughout this thesis: Otherness (as) in another person or an-other ‘language’ for as well as their (traumatic) experience itself. Then, there is the unconscious processes (of the body and the psyche), another is the lived experience of the body. That is how trauma is commonly dealt with: through and with the body.¹⁹ In trauma therapy, such a space that welcomes “Being”²⁰ with “openness”²¹ is particularly relevant so that trauma can be expressed through the body; somatically. But, such a space of letting-be requires being at a distance (so Lévinas) — in order to ‘know or to be conscious’ of what can be spoken in order for the Other to be. It requires the *psyche* (‘soul’), too. This thesis serves as such a distancing in order to put things in perspective.

I hope to broaden our understanding of handling trauma with the philosopher(s)²² at hand. Because, contrary to what may be commonly thought, the discipline of philosophy — in which this thesis is written — can be embedded in our common lifeworlds: as philosophical practice and somatic encounter. And, according to Richard Kearney, “one might describe the healing arc of trauma therapy — at both personal and communal levels — as movement through different somatic stages.”²³ This thesis is such a “movement of the soul”²⁴ (or, in Ancient Greek: the *psyche*) — similar to *Totality and infinity* (the way Goodman/Grover read it). It introduces (a) philosophical practice through (a kind of) somatic encounter

¹⁹ After all, “The Body keeps the Score.” See: van der Kolk, 2014.

²⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 44.

²¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 44.

²² There are, of course, some other figures important for this thesis apart from Lévinas. Most prominently are Anna Westin and Jacques Rancière.

²³ Kearney, 2010, p. 12.

²⁴ Goodman/Grover, 2008, p. 249.

in text. This is explored with Emmanuel Lévinas and psychological research.²⁵ It is not just rational thinking, then, but emotional labour.

By developing a theory that implies trauma, Lévinas shares his traumatic experiences from the Shoah. What this does to us, who are reading him giving voice to his trauma, is this: “we are affected.”²⁶ We are affected because the experience is (implicitly) shared this way. The way that he is processing (or his processing is reflected) is interesting both because of *the way* of his writing as well as *the content* of his writing. Both can be applied to therapy that — from Ancient Greek *therapeia* — is about ‘curing, healing, service.’ Both are considered in this thesis. As said, in trauma therapy, the question posed is “how we live out that affect.”²⁷ It requires ‘speech’ — a spoken response to the face-to-face.

Since trauma is an emotionally overwhelming experience, it must be shared in order to “hold the pain.”²⁸ This can only be done together. Due to the overwhelm, the subject may dissociate, hence, lose the ability to express their emotions because they cannot be felt anymore. In dissociation, the subject exits the body. This also describes an alienation: a ‘problematic separation between same and other that belong together.’ In this case, it is the mind-body-organism²⁹. It is problematic because dissociation also leads to an inability to relate to others because the subject is not able to relate to themselves (or that which is ‘Other’ in oneself, i.e. the unconscious processes linked to emotions in/and the body and their lived bodily experience). How this relationship can be reestablished is explored with Lévinas’

²⁵ Admittedly, it is quite a project bringing these together because in this way neither one can be done justice in this set-up. Please acknowledge the attempt

²⁶ Westin, 2022, p. 4.

²⁷ Westin, 2022, p. 4.

²⁸ Bamber, 1998, p. 228.

²⁹ This is a term from *Somatic Experiencing (SE)* that is used throughout this text, too.

statement that “the relationship between the same and the other is language.”³⁰ D'accord, *the Research Question*: When Lévinas claims that “the relationship between the Same and the Other is language” in *Totality and Infinity*, what is meant by the Same, what is meant by the Other, what is meant by language, what is meant by relationship?

Considering that one loses one's ‘language,’ one's way to express oneself and what is going on within oneself after a traumatic experience, and has lost control over “[one's] own ship”³¹, it is relevant to ask how the traumatic experience can be shared and expressed or spoken of accordingly. What kinds of language are there for respecting the trauma(tic experience)? How is association (‘connection’) possible again? How does Lévinas conceive relation (and with it, ‘language,’ ‘Same,’ ‘Other’)?

After engaging with the question: How do we encounter ‘Otherness’ in ourselves and others? (chapters II-V), another perspective on the lived experience of and with trauma emerges (chapters VI-VII). From this perspective, a way of how to be with other (traumatised) humans can be derived (chapter VII). In order to approach that which is Other as opposed to the familiar, a medium and a method (a common ground; a common language) are required. This is investigated by considering the content of *Totality and Infinity* with reference to (*Somatic Experiencing*) trauma therapy. Further research inquiries are:

What does reading Lévinas' account of the ethical relation in *Totality and Infinity* tell us about (the needs of) the traumatised?, and

³⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 39.

³¹ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 4. Meant by this here is the relation-ship to oneself. This is broken up due to dissociation as one of the consequences of (a) trauma(tic experience).

How can the Psychosomatics of Levinas' Philosophy be applied to and enhance Trauma Therapy? What is the therapeutic relevance and take-home for trauma workers from Lévinas' Ethics in *Totality and Infinity*?

The Hypothesis at hand: The Lévinasian ethics of alterity in *Totality and Infinity* and his conception of Otherness that is central to his conception of the ethical can be useful³² for trauma therapy. It opens up a new perspective.

His ethics of alterity and his conception of Otherness is about an effect that affects. So, the central conclusion of this thesis is this: *the Lévinasian ethics in Totality and Infinity is about a traumatic effect that affects. This affectedness must be lived out.*

For overview, the architecture of the thesis goes as follows:

First, psychosomatic research of Otherness hence the physiology and psychology of trauma are elucidated in chapters (I) and (II).

Then, the Lévinasian conception of Otherness is introduced in chapter (III), followed by the meaning of Otherness — or of the Other — that is explored in chapter (IV) on language (bringing the 'Same,' the 'Other' and 'relation' together), and in chapter (V) the ethical relation. Chapter (VI) lays out the aspiration of therapy, and a few trauma therapeutical methods and highlights their common core: *soma*. Finally, in chapter (VII), a meta-analysis of Lévinas' body of work in *Totality and Infinity* follows. This means that his writing will be analysed formally, not so much in content (as is the case in the other chapters).

Furthermore, these topics and questions are closely linked to the hypothesis:

³² 'useful' has a very broad connotation in this thesis as much of it is about the difference between 'useless' and 'meaningful.' Hence, with the usefulness of Lévinas' philosophy for trauma therapy is meant that it opens up a new perspective that could be very potent for trauma therapy.

- What determines the Lévinasian ethics? (Chapters II, III, IV, V on Otherness, the Same, the Other, language, relation, responsibility)
- What is this traumatic effect? (Chapters I, II, VII on trauma, two types of trauma, and the psychosomatics of writing/reading)
- *How* does it affect? (Chapters II, VII on the traumatic effect and the psychosomatics of writing/reading)
- Why must it (especially emotions after trauma) be lived out? (Chapters I, VI on trauma, dissociation, and on trauma therapeutical methods as well as therapeutic responsibility in Chapter V)
- How is it and how can it be lived out? (Chapters VI, VII on trauma therapeutical methods and on the psychosomatics of writing/reading, and Outlook)

Materiality and text, physical sensations, the somatic, and scientific ‘truth’ will merge together. That is why there is such a vast array of different sources from various disciplines: they are needed to form the whole picture of the account of embodied healing with trauma. The selection of text and research is, of course, based on the focus of this project: language and relation with regard to trauma. So, if there is reference to research on psychosomatics, then it is research with regards to somatic expression in relationships. If there is reference to research on trauma, then it is about relational trauma. If there is reference to research on therapy, it is about trauma therapy, and psychosomatic research used in trauma therapy. If there is reference to research on a therapeutical method, it is a method that treats relational trauma and the dissociation that occurs through such trauma. If there is reference to research on dissociation, it is research conducted with the focus of dissociation through relational experiences and the loss of the ability to express oneself due to the lack of connection to the

body. If there is reference to research about the body, it is from a phenomenological or *SE*³³ perspective. Either, it is current research and debate, or pioneering research and debate. The discourse on trauma both philosophically and psychotherapeutically is not very old after all (The diagnose of PTSD³⁴ is from 1980 when “a new era of trauma studies”³⁵ emerged).

There is already quite an array of sources to choose from. And, since I have intended to approach this topic as holistic as possible, the thesis will not discuss details in the specific areas. So, let it be mentioned that there is much more to say about each of the concepts that are introduced (such as trauma therapy, relational trauma and other trauma, dissociation, psychosomatics etc.). They are merely touched upon; which is unfortunate but necessary in order to fulfil the demands of the research question. However, these concepts allow for embedding Lévinas’ theory in another context; and, for connecting Lévinas’ theory in *Totality and Infinity* to other disciplines. In particular, this allows to demonstrate the implications of his existential phenomenology and ethics for trauma therapy. It is challenging to translate Lévinas into therapy by reading him somatically, so I would hereby like to ask the reader for patience and openness for this attempt, acknowledging that it is exactly that: an attempt. In chapter (VII), the ‘psychosomatics’ of Lévinas’ philosophy both in content and in form, and a

³³ Short for “Somatic Experiencing”: a trauma therapeutical method that is focused on body experience and works with the felt sense of the body to release trauma. It is abbreviated as “SE” and will be italicised when it is used in this thesis.

³⁴ This is short for “Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder” that was first diagnosed in Vietnam Veterans and then formally defined by the American Psychiatric Association (Schiraldi 2016, p. 4)

³⁵ Kearney, 2020, p. 2. Hereby let it be mentioned that the initial trauma studies however, began with Sigmund Freud’s (1920) book called *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which he calls trauma the “shell shock” in veterans. It was only further developed and the new, body-based rather than analytic approaches in treating trauma were developed. For this reason, Kearney writes of the ‘new era’ in trauma studies.

suggestion of how this can — or must³⁶ — be applied to trauma work are summarised. Now, to begin with, the psychosomatics of trauma are defined in chapter (II).

³⁶ — in that very grave sense of there being no other way.

II. The Psychosomatics of Trauma

In this chapter the psychosomatic research of Otherness — which amounts to the psychology³⁷ and the physiology³⁸ of (the) trauma(tic experience) — is elucidated. To establish the connection between Otherness and trauma, it is important to note that Otherness in Lévinas' existential phenomenology “keeps the character of a phenomenon.”³⁹ The traumatic experience (the moment) and trauma (the consequences that this experience entails that become lived experience, too) are such a phenomenon of Otherness.

II.1. *Psychosomatics*

Since the concern here is psychological trauma, it is the psyche of the person that is affected. Nevertheless, this is about both, the mind and the body. For the purpose of this inquiry, let *psychosomatics* be defined as “relating to a physical problem caused by emotional anxiety and not by illness, infection or injury.”⁴⁰ To be more precise:

1. “relating to, concerned with, or involving both mind and body”⁴¹
2. “relating to, involving, or concerned with bodily symptoms caused by mental or emotional disturbances”⁴²

³⁷ Regarding the human mind and its functions.

³⁸ Regarding the body and whole body-organism and its functions.

³⁹ Waldenfels, 2006, p. 73.

⁴⁰ *Cambridge Dictionary*, 2022.

⁴¹ *Cambridge Dictionary*, 2022.

⁴² *Cambridge Dictionary*, 2022.

And since psychosomatic medicine is concerned with body and mind as they are always both affected,⁴³ body and mind are examined with respect to trauma and Otherness in the following sections.

II.II. Trauma in Mind and Body

Any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person's attitudes, behaviour, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behaviour (e.g. war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g. earthquakes) and often challenge an individual's view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place.⁴⁴

At the core of this investigation lies trauma — derived from the Greek noun τραῦμα (*trauma*), translated from Ancient Greek to 'wound,' 'hurt,' 'defeat.' Since 1894 there is also this sense of "psychic wound or unpleasant experience which causes abnormal mental stress and resulting illness or damage to the physical body."⁴⁵ It can be connected to the philosophical concerns of alienation⁴⁶ and 'Otherness.'⁴⁷

The psycho-traumatologists Fischer and Riedesser have defined trauma "as the experience of vital discrepancy between threatening factors in a situation and individual

⁴³ Kugelstadt, 2020, p. 26.

⁴⁴ *American Psychological Association (APA)*, 2022.

⁴⁵ *Etymology Dictionary*, 2022.

⁴⁶ A reminder: this is a "problematic separation between same and other that belong together." (Leopold, 2022)

⁴⁷ Otherness and Other will be capitalised throughout the text. After all, the Same and the Other are understood as figures.

coping abilities.”⁴⁸ It is difficult to grasp what trauma in fact means because it is beyond the human ability to do so. That is why there is a better chance to grasp trauma — this experience which is ‘outside of usual’⁴⁹ — if it is elucidated from several angles. It affects the whole life world of a person, all aspects of the ‘usual.’ It disrupts. This disruption is — amongst other things — reflected in the body and the mind of the person; discussed down below. First the body, then the mind. *D’accord* with the common approach of trauma therapies, the structure of elucidation is a bottom-up (body to mind) one.

II.II.i. In the Body

How does trauma impact the body?

According to *Somatic Experiencing (SE)*, trauma is stored in the nervous system. The approach is based entirely on the human biology that is an animal architecture and thus has the same bodily responses as other animals do in situations of heightened and overwhelming distress. If the traumatic stress is not discharged, there remains a charge, a stress. It is an underlying but omnipresent stress in the autonomic nervous system (ANS). The functions of the ANS run automatically. One does not have to organise or think about them, but also, one cannot control them. It is understood as the instinctual part of our bodily organism. Other areas that are affected are the limbic system and the neocortex. The neocortex can be engaged by practicing ‘conscious awareness’ and focus on one’s bodily

⁴⁸ Fischer/Riedesser, 2009, p. 84.

⁴⁹ This phrase will become interesting with Lévinas later when talking about immanence and transcendence — exterior and interior.

sensations — which are overwhelming, too, since due to the traumatic experience the limbic and the primitive brain are in a constant state of over-activation.⁵⁰

The limbic system (hippocampus and amygdala) is responsible for emotion regulation and behavioural responses and connects sensory and memory function. It is closely linked to the ANS and thus strongly affected by a charge in that area.⁵¹ Pierre Janet, a leading researcher on psychological trauma, says that an *émotion choc* (‘emotional shock’) occurs after trauma — which is located in the limbic system.⁵² This shows in “impulsive, automatic reactions, which alternate between frenzy, withdrawal, and immobility/paralysis.”⁵³ Thus, the body *reacts* automatically. The mind is usually the part of us that is responsive, not reactive (at least, there would be a chance to). However, trauma affects ‘all aspects of the usual.’ So, how does trauma affect the mind?

II.II.ii. In the Mind

Trauma cannot be processed. Hence, the mind, too, is affected. The neocortex is responsible for “our use of language, communication skills, and our higher cognitive functions including reasoning, planning, and flexibility.”⁵⁴ To illustrate: Jean Piaget, a primary psychologist of emotional trauma, found “the harmony or synthesis of an organism and environment may be represented by internal regulation systems called schemas.”⁵⁵ There are relationship schemas that contain cognitions and emotions (affects, etc.) that are responsible for assimilation and

⁵⁰ “Somatic Experiencing Beginner Year” Manual, B1. 14.

⁵¹ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 65f.

⁵² van der Kolk, 2014, p. 65f.

⁵³ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 65f.

⁵⁴ “Somatic Experiencing Beginner Year” Manual, B1.14.

⁵⁵ Piaget, 1947.

accommodation in the world. This helps in understanding each other, or have an understanding of each other.⁵⁶ When a person is healthy, their schemata as inner models and maps are interconnected. However, traumatic experiences cannot be integrated into those schemas. They are not connected to the other cognitive or emotional maps. Thus, they stand alone. This means that they remain as ‘dissociated schemas.’ Now: What does it mean to have something dissociated? What does it mean *to be* dissociated?

II.III. Dissociation and Association

“Dissociation” is “the essence of trauma.”⁵⁷

Dis-Sociation. Alienation⁵⁸ on multiple levels. In a single moment “the collapse of connection between our mental and somatic components”⁵⁹ occurs. The following explanations serve to briefly illustrate the phenomenon.

Dissociative Disorders are due to “the ability to exit one’s body when something harmful occurs to it.”⁶⁰ It is one of the defence mechanisms of the brain, a rather complex one;⁶¹ and, if it happens, then there is no longer an awareness of the bodily sensations, feelings, needs. In the most extreme form of dissociation, the traumatised subject cannot experience past, present, and future because their time perception is distorted or lost. The subject then detaches themselves from the present moment, hence there is no sense of time

⁵⁶ Kirmayer, 2008.

⁵⁷ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 66.

⁵⁸ Remember the definition of alienation in the introduction: the problematic separation between Same and Other.

⁵⁹ Kearney, 2020, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Koch, 2012, p. 369.

⁶¹ Weber 2021, p. 38.

(detemporalisation).⁶² This means that they cannot locate themselves in time and space anymore, which subsequently means that they have lost their narrative sense of personality (their understanding of themselves and being in the world) — depersonalisation.⁶³ With such loss of “psychological energy,”⁶⁴ one’s own behaviour cannot be regulated anymore.

As we learned in section (II.II.i) on trauma’s effects on the body: the limbic brain connects sensory and memory function, and is responsible for emotion regulation and behavioural responses. Hence, if trauma affects these functions of the limbic system, then it also affects the narrative sense of self and the ability to be in the present moment. What is needed, then, is the activation of the limbic brain. In order to activate the limbic brain, other people are necessary. Because of this dissociative and alienated⁶⁵ aspect of traumatisation, it is crucial that the process of healing cannot remain an individual endeavour, but is a social one.

The counterpart to dissociation is association, which means ‘connection’ and ‘cooperation.’⁶⁶ It is that which must be regained after trauma.⁶⁷ The problem brought up by the traumatic event cannot be solved by the individual alone, because the traumatised individual cannot stand alone; it cannot sense themselves (as a mind-body-organism as well as their social identity). Recovery, then, requires relationships through which one can sense themselves again.⁶⁸ It is not possible alone.

⁶² Beere, 1995, p. 16.

⁶³ Beere, 1995, p. 117.

⁶⁴ Heim, 2006, p. 112.

⁶⁵ Remember: the separation between same and other.

⁶⁶ *Cambridge Dictionary*, 2022.

⁶⁷ Mancini/Buchner, 2022, p. 33.

⁶⁸ Herman, 1992, p. 17.

Because of this, it is important to consider relationships when facing the issue of dissociation, i.e. finding ways to grasp the trauma(tic experience) and to share it. This can be safely done in therapy. Hence, the therapeutical relationship is particularly necessary, as it is a safe way for the traumatised to re-connect to others and to themselves.⁶⁹ If one cannot sense oneself, it is this which must be reestablished: a sense of self. Through and with others. How? Does simply being there with one another suffice for association?

II.III.i. Dissociation and Release

When the body is dissociated, one lives in a meta-somatic state, the nervous system is stuck in fight, flight, or freeze. One becomes a victim of one's bodily stress symptoms, and lives in constant overwhelm that cannot be felt. In her book *Embodied Trauma and Healing*, Anna Westin summarises the body's *reaction* to trauma with Peter Levine, the founder of *Somatic Experiencing (SE)*. It is important to note that it is only a method, not a therapeutic school such as, for example, *Gestalttherapie* or Existential Psychotherapy. Still, in addition to therapeutical, clinical, or other professions⁷⁰, it can be used as trauma therapy.⁷¹ There are:

four components of traumatic reaction, which include hyperarousal, constriction, dissociation and freezing, or immobility, that is attached to experiences of helplessness. Understanding the trauma, then, requires exploring where these defensive energies have emerged from, and why they were not appropriately discharged and released back into the flow of bodily energy. Even though it is at a

⁶⁹ There is research on mirror neurons regarding this as well, but this cannot be discussed further.

⁷⁰ Such as body-based movement.

⁷¹ Other trauma-therapeutical methods are discussed in chapter (VI).

non-verbal level, the body is communicating. It signals that something has happened to the person, which has not yet been fully ‘discharged or integrated.’⁷²

So, the conclusion from this section is that *trauma must be discharged and integrated somatically through and with others if one is to re-arrive in the body*. A reminder of part of the hypothesis is that the Lévinasian trauma is about an effect that affects. This must be lived out. It seems here, now, that this must happen somatically. Since we are concerned with the psychosomatics of trauma here, could there be a discharge through the psyche as well? What happens to the psyche and the mind after (a) trauma(tic experience)?

II.III.ii. Dissociation and a Broken (Self-)Understanding

The overwhelm also shows in the mind: In *The traumatized subject*, Rudolf Bernet points out that the narrative self is broken, that the identity of the person is broken in this moment of the traumatic. The usual way of processing and integrating an experience is interrupted (remember the dissociated schemata), and another method seems to be needed. Bernet points to the destruction of subjective identity through the traumatic event⁷³ as the event that breaks the subjective because “something completely Other falls into the subjective reality.”⁷⁴ Going back to Piaget, what seems to be necessary is to associate the cognitive maps and inner models that constitute one’s subjective reality, to as-, or re-sociate the schemas⁷⁵ that are split off.

⁷² Levine, 1997, p. 132.

⁷³ Bernet, 2000, p. 234.

⁷⁴ Bernet, 2000, pp. 227f, 231.

⁷⁵ Or also: “Schichten” if we use Karl Jaspers’ term from his psychopathology.

After all, the traumatic event causes, metaphorically speaking, a crack in the grounding of the subject. Such a crack can be understood, more concretely speaking, as partition between two subjective realities: the one that the subject lived in before the event of traumatisation, and the one after the moment or the time period. The crack itself represents the traumatic moment that splits something up, breaks something seemingly unbreakable, splits oneself (mind and body) off from oneself and (from the Otherness) in others. The body is affected in trauma. Since it is one way of relating to oneself and to others,⁷⁶ it becomes impossible to truly encounter others, because one cannot be (bodily) present with oneself and others anymore.

So, dissociation is important in this investigation because trauma(tic experience) is an experience of alienation and otherness.⁷⁷ As we learned in the previous section — trauma must be discharged and integrated somatically through and with others. And this affectedness must be lived out because the overwhelming emotions of the traumatic experience must be discharged in order to be integrated. Hence, the medium between the mind and experience — the body — takes a central role in our understanding of trauma.

Considering trauma philosophically, then, means, to be concerned with Otherness — as, in fact, Lévinas was in his ethics. His conception of Otherness is spelled out in *Totality and Infinity*, saying that “alterity is only possible starting from me,”⁷⁸ but then also that “the Other introduces into me that which is not me.”⁷⁹ What must be encountered is that which has become ‘Other’ in order to heal: in oneself and in others. What is this ‘Otherness’ that is introduced? What does Otherness in oneself and in others’ mean?

⁷⁶ Sigurdson, 2019, p. 91.

⁷⁷ Here it is not capitalised because it does not refer to Lévinas conception of Otherness (yet).

⁷⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 40.

⁷⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 203.

Taking up the Lévinasian perspective in chapters (III–V): how can a relation be re-established to oneself and to others?, to that which is ‘Other’ in oneself and the other(s)?

- Trauma of/and Otherness
- Language of/and Otherness
- The Ethical Relation of/and Otherness

Once the Other and the Same have been better understood (chapter III) with regards to trauma and language (chapter IV), relation is considered, and in particular the ethical relation (chapter V). First, however, we start with an elucidation of Otherness and trauma from Lévinas’ perspective in *Totality and Infinity*. The traumatic effect — the effect that in our understanding of trauma so far leads to the loss of connection between mind and body — the *Shibboleth* within oneself, the inability to sense oneself due to dissociative reactions — and Otherness are considered.

III. The Lévinasian Conception of Otherness

III.1. The Other and The Same

Sur le marches de la mort
J'écris ton nom
Sur la santé revenue
Sur le risque disparu
Sur l'espoir sans souvenir
J'écris ton nom
Et par le pouvoir d'un mot
Je recommence ma vie
Je suis né pour te connaître
Pour te nommer
Liberté.

“Liberté”⁸⁰ by Paul Elouard⁸¹

Ontology, which reduces the other to the same, promotes freedom — the freedom that is the identification of the same, not allowing itself to be alienated by the other.⁸²

These quotes above serve as an indication that Lévinas' conception of Otherness is about freedom and allowing ourselves to be alienated by another. Lévinas writes that “sensation

⁸⁰ See: poetica.fr; transl. mikeandenglish.files.wordpress.com: “On the marches of death I write your name On the health that's regained On danger that's past On hope without memories I write your name By the power of the word I regain my life I was born to know you And to name you Liberty.”

⁸¹ From an exhibition in January 2023 at Albertina Modern, Vienna. The name of the Exhibition was: “Ways of Freedom.” See also: <https://www.albertina.at/en/albertina-modern/exhibitions/ways-of-freedom/>

⁸² Lévinas, 1969, p. 42.

breaks up every system.”⁸³ It is the system (totalitarian structures, totalitarian thinking) that is broken when one is traumatised,⁸⁴ a “new dimension”⁸⁵ is opened, in which one “understands (*entend*) the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other.”⁸⁶ What is this dimension? — It is “the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality.”⁸⁷ This is the ‘trauma’-tic effect (section III.II) that another person can have on one person. It is the Other and a relationship to that, to them, that is necessary in order to really acknowledge the Other(ness), to encounter it. One must be ‘alienated by another.’ Otherwise, it would be ‘*einverleibt*’.⁸⁸ there would be ‘an identification of the same.’

Rather than ontology then, Lévinas focuses on metaphysics — which for him is an existential ethics. As stated previously, in the existential moment in which “the rupture of death is embodied”⁸⁹ and i.e. Kierkegaard turns to the edge of a cliff, Lévinas turns to the Other which can be thought of as the body, the vis-à-vis, the separation/distance between the Other and the Same as well as the healing process (‘language’) that occurs through that distance. As he focuses on the encounter in the moment of most radical freedom — in which one becomes ‘conscious’ — the terms trauma, relation, and Otherness merge.⁹⁰

⁸³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 59.

⁸⁴ For further reading, this can be understood with Carl Jaspers. He writes about limit phenomena in *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (1925).

⁸⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 197.

⁸⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 34.

⁸⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 171.

⁸⁸ = ‘incorporated.’

⁸⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 56f.

⁹⁰ According to Dino Galetti (in: *The Grammar of Lévinas’ Other*, 2015), there are four different types of otherness that are addressed in *Totality and Infinity*: “other,” “Other,” “autrui,” and “Autrui,” which one finds here: Lévinas, 1969, p. 205f.

For, trauma is the experience that may bring forth absolute alienation. It is the “exemplary Other⁹¹” that ‘comes from somewhere else.’⁹² It is an ‘Other’ that did not belong to the Same (simplified: to the understanding of one’s reality and self before the moment of splitting Same and Other hence that which is familiar and that which is not⁹³). It is an-other that brings about the alienation of the Same and an-other Other; it separates that Same from the same and thus makes same and other from then on two separated entities: Same and Other in oneself. Here is important to note that Same and Other are understood as figures — and, if the Other is thought of as that which is traumatising, then it could also be understood as the vis-à-vis (another person). And, if one’s understanding of self is only that which is familiar (‘Same’), then the Same could also refer to a person. However, generally, Lévinas distinguishes between ‘oneself’ and ‘Same’ and ‘Other’ — and the Same and the Other are qualities that are in oneself and others, too.

This fundamental experience of being human, of being alienated from oneself, from this world and others, as well as being *in* this world and *with* others is considered as it is that which is the reality of the loneliness of trauma — a reality (as Peter Levine says) everyone has (to) face(d) one way or another.⁹⁴ The same is true for Lévinas, but he takes it one step further. With the understanding of trauma and Otherness so far, they can be thought together, and are both an inevitable part of life. It is summarised in the following quote:

⁹¹ Again: “Other” is capitalised all throughout the text when it refers to Lévinas conception of Otherness. Otherwise, it is not capitalised.

⁹² Staudigl, 2003, p. 80.

⁹³ Leaning on: Lévinas, 1969, p. 67.

⁹⁴ Levine, 2010, Introduction.

The absolutely other is the Other / L'absolument Autre, c'est Autrui [...]

Over him, I have no power. / je ne peux pouvoir [...]

We are the same and the other [...]⁹⁵

After the traumatic event (as it is commonly understood), relating is only possible — according to Lévinas — *if one turns to the Other*. With this, Lévinas focuses on the relationship — the in-between individuals, the bond, that which holds together. Or is it actually that which separates, the separation? This in itself is paradoxical because trauma is thought of differently: it is characterised as the experience of Otherness which is alienating (and potentially traumatising). So, why would one go back there? After all, it is trauma that leads to dissociation and trauma that requires association. How can the wounding quality of trauma (Otherness and alienation) also be the healing one?⁹⁶ A reminder: trauma must be discharged and integrated somatically. Could that be through the Other?

III.II. Trauma as the Other(ness): On Suffering and Meaning

For Lévinas, the reality of trauma, of the Other, is not (just) something that happens to everyone as Levine claims, but is something that *must* constantly happen. In a nutshell: Otherness is traumatic. Trauma is the Otherness. This traumatic Otherness is necessary to be fully alive.

⁹⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 39.

⁹⁶ Michael Staudigl in *Grenzen der Kulturkonzepte* asks something similar when finding that the Lévinasian ethics are traumatising. Although the Other has ethical priority, it is questionable whether an ethics born out of a traumatism can do justice to trauma. See: Staudigl, 2003, p. 86f.

But, there are two different types of Otherness hence two different ways of thinking trauma for Lévinas. In fact, there are (many) different forms that this Otherness takes on.⁹⁷ Through Lévinas' conception of Otherness, trauma (and with it, the therapeutic responsibility in trauma therapy) can be rethought. In the following chapter, concepts in order to provoke a different conceptualisation of trauma are introduced. What trauma, language, and relation have to do with Otherness⁹⁸, is explored in this chapter, too.

As said, part of the task is to (first) disassemble: Otherness in the form of the traumatic, Otherness as language, Otherness as the vis-a-vis — and all of this being the constitutive element for relating to one another — infinitely; as “the infinite is the absolutely other.”⁹⁹ Before we get to infinity, there is “the primordial sphere” “which corresponds to what we call the same” and it “turns to the absolutely other.”¹⁰⁰ That is exactly the baseline situation for our further investigation: the Same turning to the Other: An encounter. But,

the Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appears to me breaks with the world that can be

⁹⁷ Let it be mentioned that the English translator Lingis questions if we are ever actually concerned with interactions in Lévinas' work — which might prove to be challenging to use it for orientation in trauma therapy if we remember the argument based on Hermann's thought about recovery lying in relationality. Lingis' concern is addressed later with the meta-analysis. For now, we remain focused on the claim that ‘the relationship between the same and the other is language.’ Out of which the research question is derived: When Levinas claims that “the relationship between the Same and the Other is language” (Lévinas, 1969, p. 39); What is meant by the Same, what is meant by the Other, what is meant by language, what is meant by relationship? If all of this actually entails the “traumatism of astonishment” (Lévinas, 1969, p. 73)?

⁹⁸ “other” and “Other” are “autre” in French, which is ‘God’ and the ‘human other.’ Lévinas, 1969, p. 205f.; as well as Lingis, 1969.

⁹⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 49. More on that in chapter (V).

¹⁰⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 67.

common to us, whose virtualities are inscribed in our nature and developed by our existence,¹⁰¹ it makes a space arise specifically as a void.¹⁰²

Remember *Shibboleth*. Let's keep *Shibboleth* in mind when moving into the investigation of Otherness and trauma¹⁰³ with Lévinas:

In *Totality and Infinity*, trauma is mentioned as “traumatism of astonishment.”¹⁰⁴ This moment takes one by surprise; the moment where one stands wrapped in awe, when “the present is broken open (opened to the event, to the future) by that which it cannot grasp or anticipate.”¹⁰⁵ This is where the wound and the healing lie. This ‘traumatism of astonishment’ is explored in section (III.II.ii.) with *Shibboleth* in mind. First:

III.II.i. Two Types of Trauma: Useless Suffering

One can differentiate between two different types of trauma with Lévinas. There is a trauma which causes ‘useless suffering’ and another kind of trauma that occurs in the meaningful¹⁰⁶ encounter between the Same and the Other. One has a political connotation, the other an ethical one.

The first type of trauma is in accordance with the common understanding of the concept. It is or causes ‘useless suffering.’ Lévinas says that “the least one can say about

¹⁰¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 194. It is of course not just ‘his’ face that matters in considering the Other as the vis-à-vis. Quite the contrary: It is also ‘her’ face, ‘their’ face, ‘an-other’ face. The gender issues with Lévinas’ writing are not gone into any further than this mention of inclusion.

¹⁰² Lévinas, 1969, p. 189.

¹⁰³ Let it be mentioned here that some of the concepts that are relevant in later chapters are also introduced here.

¹⁰⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 73.

¹⁰⁵ Newman, 2009, p. 107.

¹⁰⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 206: “Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language.” I will pick up this quote up later on in the text.

suffering is that in its own phenomenality, intrinsically, it is useless, for nothing.”¹⁰⁷ ‘Useless suffering’ is characterised by “extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment, solitude.”¹⁰⁸ ‘Useless Suffering’¹⁰⁹ describes pain that one is left to live through after experiencing trauma that is unnecessary, avoidable; ‘pointless.’¹¹⁰ Also, “in suffering sensibility is a vulnerability, more passive than receptivity; it is an ordeal more passive than experience.”¹¹¹ This sounds similar to the common understanding of trauma, the understanding that trauma therapies build on; the helplessness of the subject. The subject is stuck. There is no movement, no emotion. In this helplessness from the overwhelm of the event, one becomes a victim of the bodily stress responses. This is survival mode.

There are parallels to how the trauma(tic experience) is psychosomatically understood: There is dissociation from both the body and the mind as a consequence of trauma, meaning that the relationship schemas amongst others are split off, as is the connection or relation of (sensations in) the body. Sigurdson says that the body is the “prerequisite for experienced suffering.”¹¹² And, it is through the body that we relate to ourselves as well as to others. There is a focus on the (relational) body in thinking about trauma and pointless suffering: for example in Behnke’s phenomenology (2002) and Bourdieu’s thought (2005), claiming that psychosomatic illnesses are due to socio-somatics of societal power structures that allow for “the very phenomenon of suffering, which, in its uselessness, is in principle, the pain of the other.”¹¹³ The ‘Other’ here is understood as our

¹⁰⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 158.

¹⁰⁸ Lévinas, 1981, p. 158.

¹⁰⁹ Lévinas, 1981.

¹¹⁰ Samuelson, 2018.

¹¹¹ Lévinas, 1981, p. 158.

¹¹² Sigurdson, 2019, p. 90.

¹¹³ Lévinas, 1981, p. 162.

fellow human beings.¹¹⁴ This is what politics and totalitarian structures allow for, which Lévinas mentions, too:

This is the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century which is drawing to a close in the haunting memory of the return of everything signified by these barbaric names: suffering and evil and deliberately imposed, yet no reason sets limits to the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.¹¹⁵

In events that cause ‘useless suffering,’ violence is deliberately and implicitly imposed on others, and the ethical is not considered. This also — but of course not solely — causes psychological trauma as it is commonly understood. It affects — remembering chapter (II) — the limbic system, the mind-body-connection, as well as our ability, and way of remembering hence our time-perception. If that traumatisation is not resolved, one suffers on and on, trying to go back to that moment, feeling threatened in the present, too.

Lévinas seems to be concerned with relational trauma because he writes about ‘useless suffering’ being caused not only by totalitarian structures (politics) but also by “totalitarian thinking” — which, of course, could be caused by totalitarian structures/politics. This kind of thinking “accepts vision rather than language as its model.”¹¹⁶ If ‘totalitarian

¹¹⁴ Lévinas, 2016, p. 95.

Let’s keep this in mind. The moment that trauma is thought of from the body, all others become the vis-à-vis to encounter ethically in order for the healing of the political to occur. And this makes trauma work both social and political and not exclusive in any way. More on this in *Outlook* later.

¹¹⁵ Lévinas, 1981, p. 162.

¹¹⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 15.

thinking' through 'vision' is what causes 'useless suffering' hence 'trauma' in the sense explored in chapter (I), what about the kind of thinking that 'accepts language as its model'?

III.II.ii. Two Types of Trauma: the Meaningful Encounter

There is also the "traumatism of astonishment."¹¹⁷ From now on, this is called the Lévinasian trauma, a kind of trauma that it is much more subtle — the other type of 'trauma' that this thesis is about. It is a 'surprise,' an "overflowing"¹¹⁸ of sensation,¹¹⁹ or also an "overwhelm."¹²⁰ But since "infinity overflows the thought that thinks it,"¹²¹ the understanding can only be thus far. Lévinas writes that "sensation breaks up every system"¹²² It is the system (totalitarian structures, totalitarian thinking) that is broken when one is traumatised,¹²³ a "new dimension"¹²⁴ is opened,¹²⁵ in which one "understands (*entend*) the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other."¹²⁶ What is this dimension? — It is

¹¹⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 73.

¹¹⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 25.

¹¹⁹ Elaborated quote: "infinity overflows the thought that thinks it." See: Lévinas, 1969, p. 25.

¹²⁰ Full quote: "where events other than that of the presentation of the original being come to overwhelm or sublimate the pure sincerity of this presentation," see p. 202 in TI. Which presentation is meant here, however? — the presentation of the face as described in TI on p. 203f: "the face of the other — the absolutely Other — the presentation is preeminently nonviolence, far instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it." This is later also discussed later in this thesis.

¹²¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 25.

¹²² Lévinas, 1969, p. 59.

¹²³ For further reading, this can be understood with Carl Jaspers. He writes about limit phenomena in *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen*. (1925)

¹²⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 197.

¹²⁵ This is not just the case when there occurs traumatising in this subtle and gentle sense. This is also the case when the initial 'trauma of astonishment' which occurs through the sensible is replaced by the ethical relation. This will be further elucidated and differentiated in the following sections.

¹²⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 34.

“the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality.”¹²⁷ This is the ‘trauma’-tic effect that another person can have on one person, or must have in order for that person to — taken literally (see example in section III.II.iii.) — live. A presence of infinity.

However, “the idea of Infinity implies the separation of the same with regard to the other.”¹²⁸ The starting point for the ethical relation.¹²⁹ The Same and the Other remain two separate entities, the Other is not ‘*einverleibt*.’¹³⁰ After all, the finite mind cannot think the Infinite. And, the infinite essence of another could not even be touched (or could it? — this is explored in section III.III. and onwards). There remains a separation. But, Lévinas writes that “as nonviolence it nevertheless maintains the plurality of the same and the other. It is peace.”¹³¹ That implies then that the Lévinasian ‘trauma’ serves as the antidote to ‘useless suffering’ as equivalent to the common understanding of ‘trauma.’ For, how could trauma be peaceful?

It is about “a relationship that does not result in a divine or human totality, that is not a totalisation of history, but the idea of infinity.”¹³² Lévinas writes that “meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language.”¹³³ And, for Lévinas, language and the (ethical) relationship are closely connected. In this ‘face-to-face’ a “meaningful”¹³⁴ one, “a relationship that does not result in

¹²⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 171.

¹²⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 53.

¹²⁹ The ethical relation and infinity will be considered in chapter (V).

¹³⁰ Arguably, it is that which happens during the common traumatisation: something is ‘*einverleibt*’ — the other, the cause of the trauma or the trauma itself — and it becomes part of oneself yet remains strange and other in oneself. The trick here is to keep it at a distance, to acknowledge the otherness.

¹³¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 203f.

¹³² Lévinas, 1969, p. 52.

¹³³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 206.

¹³⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 206.

a divine or human totality, that is not a totalisation of history, but the idea of infinity”¹³⁵ is possible. For, Lévinas writes, “meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language.”¹³⁶

What kind of ‘language’ or communication does this entail? He says that “discourse is thus the experience of something absolutely foreign, a pure ‘knowledge’ or ‘experience,’ a traumatism of astonishment.”¹³⁷ Before delving into the different kinds of language, the ‘traumatism of astonishment’ is explored a bit further. Is this ‘discourse,’ ‘language’?

III.III. Touch and ‘Traumatism of Astonishment’: Vulnerability

Touch¹³⁸ is the first “traumatism of astonishment”¹³⁹ that is experienced through the Other in Lévinasian terms. To illustrate this: Everything in the world, everything after the event of birth, is firstly astonishing and ‘traumatising.’ The baby is completely at the mercy of its surroundings, of which everything is new. This part in each of us remains. The sensible, reliant, astonished part that needs care, the part that is utterly helpless and prone for hurt (hence: vulnerable).

This can be underlined with a psychological experiment (1994) carried out in Romania by child-development specialist Joseph Sparling, neurobiologist Mary Carlson, and psychiatrist Felton Earls. During the experiment, they found out that, if children are not able

¹³⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 52.

¹³⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 206.

¹³⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 73.

¹³⁸ Start of excerpt from B.A. thesis. Also: Consider Dino Galetti, Dan Zahavi, James Mensch and Richard Kearney’s recent works on trauma and touch. But of course also note that Karl Jaspers, Michael Staudigl and other philosophers have worked with the concept already twenty years ago.

¹³⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 73.

to develop their sense of touch by being caressed, held, or touched by another living being, they are sensorily deprived. This has effects that may even lead to the death of the baby. Neuroscientist David Linden calls this the “essential touch” that newborns need in order to thrive.¹⁴⁰ A touch, in fact, that all human beings are in need of, children as adults. Later on, however, adults are also emotionally touched otherwise. Words can be touching, for example. Lévinas writes that *anything that meaning is awarded to can be touching*.

And, meaning is found in responding, in sensing a demand.¹⁴¹ Since in any discourse there must be a call and answer, a dialogue, meaning could be attributed to any relationship.¹⁴² And, since we put ourselves in relation to subjects and objects in order to distinguish ourselves from them, meaning is relational (which is a statement that Lévinas makes, too¹⁴³). This describes the cognitive maps and models that Piaget has called ‘schemas.’ Touch is the first meaning that is attributed to us, when we can only be touched but not initiate it (yet).¹⁴⁴ By being touched, meaning is awarded. This allows the one touched to award meaning, to others, too. After a traumatic event as commonly understood, one is in that exact place again, one needs exactly a kind of sensible¹⁴⁵ touch again to not only survive, but *live* (because adults are also emotionally touched otherwise).

¹⁴⁰ Konnikova, 2015.

¹⁴¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 171.

¹⁴² “Every human experience carries meaning as an outset.” (Bergo, 2023, 2.1.).

¹⁴³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 171.

¹⁴⁴ End of excerpt.

¹⁴⁵ Unfortunately, it is not possible to go into the different nuances of the concept of sensibility. Let it be mentioned however that there is a distinction between sensibility and consciousness for Lévinas. Sensibility is an openness while consciousness is ‘consciousness of,’ which implies an understanding that in a sensible encounter is not necessary or even possible. And it is in sensibility that the ethical (transcendence) occurs. (Newman, 2009, 99f.) More on that in chapter (IV).

But, because the human sensibility becomes a vulnerability, for ‘in suffering sensibility is a vulnerability,’ ‘more passive than experience’ (section III.II.ii), one has to relearn a sensibility with others, to sense interconnectedness; feel intersubjectivity. But, because of the wound, this is painful. One suffers.

Bernet does point to the sense of vulnerability¹⁴⁶ that comes with a lived trauma which ties in with Lévinasian philosophy. It indicates an awareness of the connection between trauma, the mind-body-organism, and others; the “anthropological vulnerability”¹⁴⁷ of human beings. It is about the potential to be (further) hurt. Sigurdson writes that “only Vulnerable Creatures Suffer.”¹⁴⁸

In Lévinasian philosophy, it is the awareness of this vulnerability that allows for meeting another person in a shared sensibility, ethically.¹⁴⁹ It is interesting that he says that there is first the trauma in sensibility that shows in being-taken-by-surprise through the Other, an “overflow of sensation”¹⁵⁰ — and then, through and because of that traumatisation, an awareness of the vulnerability. Then, one can gain an understanding of oneself again through connection (association), through sensing (one) another. After all, this is lost when one is dissociated. Again: Lévinas characterised ‘useless suffering’ as “in suffering sensibility is a vulnerability, more passive than receptivity; it is an ordeal more passive than experience,”¹⁵¹ and Bernet pointed towards the ‘vulnerability’ in, after, and through a trauma(tic experience). Martin Endress writes about the sociology of trauma, saying that even after such a

¹⁴⁶ Bernet 2000, p. 252.

¹⁴⁷ Dornberg, 2006; Merleau-Ponty.

¹⁴⁸ Sigurdson, 2019, p. 90.

¹⁴⁹ Newman, 2009, p. 99.

¹⁵⁰ Newman, 2009, p. 99.

¹⁵¹ Lévinas, 1981, p. 158.

traumatisation as the holocaust, the survivors and their witnesses can use their vulnerability as a resource of sensibility (“*Sensibilitätsresource*”).¹⁵² How can sensibility that ‘is more passive than experience’ and ‘useless for nothing’ become a resource then?

Arguably, this is exactly what the Lévinasian trauma does: it is a different kind of experience than the one that is ‘useless’ and passive. After all, it is a meaningful encounter that requires a ‘discourse.’ That which has been explored as the Lévinasian and a necessary ‘traumatisation’ in the last section is physical touch and touching in a sensible manner through the awareness of the — remember Bernet on *The traumatised subject* — vulnerability; a wounded sensibility.

From the perspective just elucidated, the Lévinasian ‘trauma’ is inevitable as being touched by and connected to others is vital for survival. Remember: The Lévinasian ethics of alterity in *Totality and Infinity* and his conception of Otherness that is central to his conception of the ethical can be useful for trauma therapy. His ethics of alterity and his conception of Otherness is about an effect that affects. *And, as with all emotions, this affectedness must be lived out.* Such an affectedness happens via touch (see the example just now), and, if it is a specific way of touching, it is life-giving. It is this kind of language and communication that newborns and the vulnerable can understand and that is original (and essential) since through trauma, one goes back to this part that must be attended to: the sensible, reliant, astonished one — and perhaps even all the more because it has become vulnerable, too. This part must be attended to, relies on others, and needs care (of oneself and others). This requires a somatic dialogue.

¹⁵² Endress, 2006, p. 8.

An example from Richard Kearney's book on *Touch: Recovering our most vital sense (No Limits)* that actually is about 'healing touch' as in the Lévinasian 'traumatism of astonishment':

[...] the testimony of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a founder of the antiapartheid movement in Capetown, who tells the story of touching a hand of one of the most criminal executioners of the apartheid regime, Eugene de Kock.¹⁵³ Her testimony is all the more remarkable for the fact that she happened to touch his 'trigger hand'¹⁵⁴ used for shooting his victims. It was her totally unpredictable gesture of touch, she realized, that sparked a moment of 'impossible forgiveness.'¹⁵⁵

An 'unpredictable gesture of touch,' 'sparked a moment.' This sounds similar to the 'traumatism of astonishment' that is a 'surprise,' an "overflowing"¹⁵⁶ of sensation,¹⁵⁷ or also an 'overwhelm.' Touch in its many forms is in a specific sense traumatising, and it is that which opens us up for being in relation.

But, as said, adults are also touched otherwise (which also means that traumata can happen on multiple levels, too — remember that in the Psychosomatics of Trauma, emotional anxiety as opposed to physical illness was mentioned; adults are also emotionally touched otherwise). In this case above it was physical touch is what works "in truth and reconciliation projects in postconflict societies"¹⁵⁸ but does it suffice for the Lévinasian 'traumatism of astonishment' between the Same and the Other that allows for the meaningful encounter

¹⁵³ Gobodo-Madikizela, 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Kearney, 2020.

¹⁵⁵ Kearney, 2020, p. 11.

¹⁵⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 25.

¹⁵⁷ Elaborated quote: "infinity overflows the thought that thinks it," see Lévinas, 1969, p. 25.

¹⁵⁸ Examples are: South Africa, Rwanda, and Northern Ireland (Kearney, 2020, p. 11).

hence for a relationship? Is physical touch hence body language that which is what he means by ‘language’ that is constitutive of relationship? He writes that “meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language.”¹⁵⁹ Here — as the body is in Lévinas existential phenomenology — the face is understood as “phenomenon.”¹⁶⁰ It is an experience that — since ‘meaning is the face of the Other’ — carries meaning. So, it seems, that the meaningful encounter does not require words or ‘logic.’¹⁶¹ It happens in the ‘face-to-face’ encounter. This is a language that Newman calls “a language of trauma in order to evoke the way in which sensibility is always already affected by the Other.”¹⁶² In suffering sensibility an encounter occurs that speaks to one’s vulnerability hence it affects. If the face is a phenomenon, this encounter would mean that a “discourse is thus the experience of something absolutely foreign, a pure ‘knowledge’ or ‘experience,’ a traumatism of astonishment.”¹⁶³ Discourse would be the face-to-face hence both acknowledging each other’s faces. And then?

A reminder of the quote from the research inquiry: ‘the relationship between the same and the other is language.’ What does the face-to-face actually entail? Is language merely an experience of Otherness as (the) trauma(tic experience) is?

Now: There are four nuances of ‘language’ that are explored in the next chapter in order to understand this constitutive aspect of relation in *Totality and Infinity*:

First, Lévinas’ conceptualisation of the body is considered to answer the question if the face-to-face encounter is something that occurs as bodily language. Then, ‘expression,’

¹⁵⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 206.

¹⁶⁰ Waldenfels, 2006, p. 67.

¹⁶¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 172f.

¹⁶² Newman, 2009, p. 92.

¹⁶³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 73.

and 'speech' as part of the face-to-face are explored. The fourth has to do with the response to the Other in the ethical relation, the others are assertions of Otherness. These are explored in chapter (IV).

IV. (Lévinasian) Language(s) of Trauma

language (n.)

late 13c., *langage* “words, what is said, conversation, talk,”
from Old French *langage* “speech, words, oratory; a tribe,
people, nation” (12c.), from Vulgar Latin **linguaticum*,
from Latin *lingua* “tongue,” also “speech, language”¹⁶⁴

Lévinas writes: “Language does not belong among the relations that could appear through the structures of formal logic.”¹⁶⁵ In the same paragraph he writes that it is relation across a divide: “it is contact across a distance, relation with the non-touchable, across a void.”¹⁶⁶ One is always already affected if there is contact. This is not something logical, it is something that just so happens. Is this passive? — Perhaps before it becomes contact ‘across a distance’ hence it is not mere physical contact/touch — as was explored in the previous section — that which is vital for survival and living (‘foregiveness’). ‘Contact across a distance’ could entail both something active and something passive. But, if Newman writes that language for Lévinas is about being “always already affected by another”¹⁶⁷ in the — so Lévinas — “primordial face to face of language,”¹⁶⁸ then it is something that happens. After all, “meaning is the face of the Other.”¹⁶⁹ With that there is the “presence of infinity”¹⁷⁰ which

¹⁶⁴ *Etymology Dictionary*, 2022.

¹⁶⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 172f.

¹⁶⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 172f.

¹⁶⁷ Newman, 2009, p. 92.

¹⁶⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 206.

¹⁶⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 206.

¹⁷⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 171.

“implies the separation of the same with regard to the other.”¹⁷¹ Infinity is explored in chapter (V) on the ethical relation. For now, we remain with what can happen in the face-to-face encounter, the touch that is a ‘traumatism of astonishment’ (section IV.I), the answer to which, must be active (sections IV.II and IV.III).

The following section is the beginning of exploration of a psychosomatics of philosophy; it opens with the idea that *The body speaks a language beyond words*.¹⁷² It could be connected to Peter Levine’s method of *Somatic Experiencing (SE)*; which is focused on increasing awareness of bodily sentiments by listening to and sharing what the body tries to tell us, first and foremost. It is a therapeutical method that aims at learning to have a dialogue with the Other. This includes the body, too (or even is about a dialogue with it).

There is explicit mention of ‘expression’ and ‘speech’ with respect to the face-to-face encounter in *Totality and Infinity*. With the face-to-face, both have at their core a kind of ‘language’ that occurs between two people — and affecting each other in a way that must be lived out — also without touching each other physically.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 53.

¹⁷² Amongst others, this can be found in Nancy, 2000, p. 111.

¹⁷³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 197: “The relation with the Other alone introduces a dimension of transcendence, and leads us to a relation totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term, relative-egoist.”

IV.1. Relating via (an-other) Body Language

“Corpus.”¹⁷⁴

Lévinas conceptualises the body this way:

To be a body is on the one hand to stand (*se tenir*), to be master of oneself, — and on the other hand, to stand on the earth, to be in the other, and thus to be encumbered by one’s body [...] to be at home with oneself in something other than oneself, to be oneself while living from something other than oneself, to live from[...] is concretized in corporeal existence.¹⁷⁵

So, being a body is ‘to be in the other,’ ‘to be at home in something other,’ ‘to be oneself’ while ‘living from something other.’ With this Other as the body, there must be a dialogue, too. For, ‘the relationship between the Same and the Other is language.’

The alienation (dissociation) from the body is what happens in trauma, and trauma remains stored in the body. This makes the bodily experience for the traumatised a twofold experience of Otherness; one is the simple condition of being a body and consciousness, the other is the experience of the trauma being inscribed in the body but not being conscious of it. *Somatic Experiencing (SE)* builds on this fact, and also the therapeutical relation in *SE*. It is

¹⁷⁴ Nancy, 2000, pp. 111, 121f. Nancy’s understanding of the body will accompany us into the last section on therapeutical writing/reading. For now: it is interesting that he thinks the body as ‘expression beyond language’ (or that which one commonly understands as ‘language’). For, the body is constantly changing, an open entity. With that, it is open and infinite. This is how Lévinas characterises the ethical relation, too. This being said, both the body and relating with the body may later play a role in defining ‘a common language.’ The body and its language is considered a ‘resource’ in *SE* therapy for example.

¹⁷⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 164.

based on the assumption that bodies communicate with each other, regardless of the persons inhabiting these bodies.¹⁷⁶

Here, the ‘felt sense’¹⁷⁷ that some trauma therapies work with comes into play which is the method that was mentioned before the Lévinasian quote in which one feels into the body, is re-learning to communicate with one’s body (which will be explored in chapter VI). This happens with another person being physically present to facilitate this ‘felt sense’ that the trauma patient may be disconnected (and with that, dissociated) from their body due to their trauma(tic experience). Since the body is an-Other, just as the vis-à-vis is, finding a dialogue with one of them can help facilitate a connection to the respective other, too: For — considering psychological trauma — it is clear that one is exposed to something that is emotionally overwhelming and cannot be processed, which leaves the psyche damaged (in ways that has been considered already, as well as ways beyond). It happens without one’s doing, it happens by itself — as do the bodily reactions. So: The psyche and the body are closely connected and then become disconnected. This opens one up, it leaves — to return to this image once again — a crack between the Same and the Other — both the Other in myself (the body and the experience of trauma in the body) as well as the other (person) outside of oneself.¹⁷⁸

When two persons are with each other, they communicate at first via body language — not through physical touch, but through sensing each other. This on its own is touching (which may also be disturbing or frightening at times). It is not about words. It is about that which is felt with the other person: the (Levinasian) ‘traumatism’ through the body language.

¹⁷⁶ Manual “Somatic Experiencing, Beginner I-II.”

¹⁷⁷ Somatic Experiencing Introductory Manual by *SE Greece*.

¹⁷⁸ *Die Weltenseele* (“soul of the world”) as Paulo Coelho would say.

This is the *vulnerability* (‘sensitivity is a vulnerability’ after trauma, as we learned earlier from Bernet): the wound is sensible, is felt. This “constitutes the very significance of language” in signifying how one is opened and “exposed like a bleeding wound,”¹⁷⁹ before “language scatters into words.”¹⁸⁰ This kind of ‘touch’ would be a ‘sensible experience.’ ‘Language,’ then, is understood here as *being in a (somatic) dialogue with one’s own and another’s body and is taken to be* constitutive of relationship between the Same and the Other, or between oneself and another person.

However, there may be more to language than this. Perhaps, it is not language as understood here (as a bodily dialogue with one another) that *constitutes* relationship, but rather that it is the two people that *enter into* the *possibility* of a relationship (when they encounter each other by just being physically present with each other). After all, a sensible experience may be more. And, the face-to-face as something ‘primordial’ may imply more as well. So, what exactly is experienced, or, how can the experience of the encounter and the (possibility of) relationship be described? — Lévinas writes that “the relation between the Other and me which dawns forth in its expression.”¹⁸¹ What is meant by ‘expression’ if it is that which the relation ‘dawns forth’ in?

IV.II. The ‘Face-to-Face’: Expression. Truth and ‘Things’

The second nuance to the Levinasian ‘language’ is concerned with ‘expression.’

¹⁷⁹ Levinas, 1998b, p. 151.

¹⁸⁰ Michelsen, 2015, pp. 51, 94.

¹⁸¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 194.

Expression manifests the presence of being [...] It is of itself presence of a fate, and hence appeal and teaching, entry into relation with me — the ethical relation.¹⁸²

If ‘relationship’ lights up in expression, it is accentuated through expression, and, as it says here, it begins with expression — it is not constituted. It is merely accentuated, or initiated. Then, it would be within the face-to-face encounter, ‘the primordial face to face of language,’ ‘before language scatters into words.’

According to the findings of the previous section, the face-to-face is the moment in which the (vulnerability of the) face shows. This is the simple ‘presence of a fate,’ ‘a ‘presence of being.’ It is that which is firstly shown and felt in any encounter: the presence of an-other Being, for “Being, the thing in itself, is not, with respect to the phenomenon, the hidden.” As opposed to the face which is understood as a phenomenon, expression hides this phenomenon. Through the face, then, the ‘truth’ is revealed, authenticity and the person *per se* is expressed — through expression it is the “possibility of appearance.”¹⁸³ For, “to be in oneself is to express oneself, that is, already to serve the Other.”¹⁸⁴ The focus in expression then is not oneself, but is the Other. Lévinas writes:

And expression does not manifest the presence of being by referring from the sign to the signified; it presents the signifier. The signifier, he who gives a sign, is not signified. It is necessary to have already been in the society of signifiers for the sign

¹⁸² Lévinas, 1969, p. 181.

¹⁸³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 200: “Expression does not impose itself as a true representation or as an action. The being offered in true representation remains a possibility of appearance.”

¹⁸⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 183.

to be able to appear as a sign. Hence the signifier must present himself before every sign, by himself — present a face.¹⁸⁵

So, the signifier presents themselves; presents their face. It accesses one's vulnerability; the "traumatism of astonishment."¹⁸⁶ Then, "expression manifests itself in the presence of being, but not by simply drawing aside the veil of the phenomenon," but by presenting a face, staying with the phenomenon: the shared sensibility. Otherwise, expression becomes a sign that may describe the signified, and "the truth of the thing in itself is not disclosed," and "the thing in itself expresses itself."¹⁸⁷ But, "not only verbal signs but all signs can serve as language."¹⁸⁸ This — as opposed to the face — is a "language, which does not touch the other"¹⁸⁹ ('touch' also in a non-physical but an 'original' sense). When signs are involved in the face-to-face, hence, when "expression manifests the presence of Being,"¹⁹⁰ then the distance between the Same and the Other remains. This is important before we get into 'speech.'

Let us return to the image: The Same and the Other stand across from each other. And, 'a being separated from the other,' 'speaks.' Now, here is "the event proper to expression," it "consists in bearing witness to oneself, and guaranteeing the witness. This attestation of oneself is possible only as a face, that is, as speech."¹⁹¹ For, "speech proceeds from absolute difference."¹⁹² So: as an answer to expression in which the thing (signified) is

¹⁸⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 181.

¹⁸⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 73.

¹⁸⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 181.

¹⁸⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 181f.

¹⁸⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 85.

¹⁹⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 181.

¹⁹¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 201.

¹⁹² Lévinas, 1969, p. 194.

expressed (sign), the signifier (the being in the face, the truth) must answer once more. In order to remain with the (vulnerability of) the face, the truth 'of being' must be experienced.¹⁹³

IV.III. The 'Face-To-Face': Speech. Transcendence and Thought

Speech is an incomparable manifestation: it does not accomplish the movement from the sign to the signifier to the signified; it unlocks what every sign closes up at the very moment it opens the passage that leads to the signified, by making the signifier attend this manifestation of the signified.¹⁹⁴

So, as opposed to expression which does not show the truth (signifier), speech brings the signifier and the signified together. In that case, if one opens up to the Other, they may become a '*Sensibilitätsresource*' (resource of sensibility) that affects oneself, that speaks to the vulnerable part (with)in.

This would be 'truly' seeing the Other. It is about "the face to face."¹⁹⁵ Lévinas says that "the idea of the other in me we name here face," and "the face brings a notion of truth."¹⁹⁶ This already is 'language.' But,

the 'vision' of the face is inseparable from this offering language is. To see the face is to speak to the world. Transcendence is not an optics, then, but the first ethical gesture.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹³ Peperzak, 1993, 39f.

¹⁹⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 85.

¹⁹⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 295.

¹⁹⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 50.

¹⁹⁷ Levinas, 1969, p. 174.

‘Seeing’ here is a kind of vision. And, we remember that this is *d’accord* with totalitarian structures and thinking. Or, does thinking need to be totalitarian?

— If it is ‘the first ethical gesture,’ how could it? It is what Lévinas calls ‘speech,’ the first ethical gesture. Seeing (recognising) is also part of his understanding of language, of establishing a relationship. Lévinas seems to be claiming here that ‘seeing’ implies ‘speaking.’ Or, that ‘seeing’ is in fact ‘speaking’?, meaning that speaking would be sensing¹⁹⁸ (or something even more ‘original’)? It would be about recognising the Other in their Otherness (and truth), in their alterity. And, with it, my inability to fully grasp or understand hence adequately respond to their ‘presence of being.’ It is then an experience of ‘language,’ that which happens between two people in the meaningful encounter.

As a reminder: It has been shown in chapter (II) that there is a type of ‘trauma’ that may cause the potential of ‘useless suffering’ but is in fact a meaningful encounter. The metaphor that has been used is the newborn that is being held, that needs the ‘traumatising’ touch in order to survive. This is a metaphor for a ‘traumatised’ subject, and for their needs about meaning, for ‘in suffering sensibility is a vulnerability.’ Working with trauma requires a sensibility that I have been trying to convey through the text so as to not cause ‘useless suffering’ which is caused by totalitarian structures and totalitarian thinking. It is these structures that rely on what Lévinas calls ‘vision’ rather than ‘language.’ That is why language in the face-to-face — and with it, the relation that helps the dissociated traumatised subject — must be established. And, indeed,

¹⁹⁸ As seeing something, in the literal meaning, is about bodily sensing.

Speech refuses vision, because the speaker does not deliver images of himself only, but is personally present in his speech, absolutely exterior to every image he would leave.¹⁹⁹

So, speech would be different from the ‘presence of being’ yet one is ‘personally present.’ This implies a more active kind of ‘expression’ than ‘expression’ itself because in speech, ‘the speaker does not deliver images [...] only.’ It is not just signs:

In language, exteriority is exercised, deployed, brought about [...] Language is the incessant surpassing the *Sinngebung* by the signification. This presence whose format exceeds the measure of the I is not reabsorbed into my vision.

In speech, if one is ‘personally present,’ one can also transport the ‘primordial face-to-face of language’: the truth of being; the individual person. This (experience of the Otherness of the) person exceeds my capacity to fully grasp or understand. The finite mind cannot think the infinite. So, there is an “overflowing of exteriority” which “precisely constitutes the dimension of height or the divinity of exteriority. Divinity keeps its distances.”²⁰⁰ This is transcendence.

Two things are relevant: *there is a distance in relation*. Shibboleth *remains*. And: an overflowing of exteriority comes before this; as the type of trauma that touches us lightly, based on the body language, in spite of expression, through speech:

¹⁹⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 296f.

²⁰⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 296f.

The presence of the Other, or expression, source of all signification, is not contemplated as an intelligible essence, but is heard as language, and thereby is effectuated exteriority.²⁰¹

This exteriority is ‘overflowing’ (as is the trauma of astonishment). This is language. It breaks through totalitarian structures and thinking. Yet,

Language thus conditions the functioning of rational thought: it gives it a commencement in being, a primary identity of signification in the face of him who speaks, that is, who presents himself.²⁰²

So, ‘Being’ is (but also is not) expressed, and ‘the face’ speaks. And this is the beginning of rational thought which makes ‘speech’ the ‘first ethical gesture.’

Now, this is the critical turning point: There are two parties involved in ‘speaking the same language,’ in communicating on common ground: speaking and listening, coming on and receiving, feeling and thinking. For, if it is only about ‘seeing the face,’ if it is about ‘vision,’ then the Other is not truly ‘seen’ and violence happens which can cause useless suffering. What is needed now is ‘truly’ seeing the Other. It is about “the face to face.”²⁰³ This acknowledgement of the face calls the Same to respond and be(come) responsible.

To recognise the Other is therefore to come to him across the world of possessed things, but at the same time to establish, by gift, community and universality [...] To speak is to make the world common, to create commonplaces. Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundations for a possession in

²⁰¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 297.

²⁰² Lévinas, 1969, p. 204.

²⁰³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 295.

common [...] The world in discourse is no longer what it is in separation, in the being at home with oneself where everything is given to me; it is what I give: the communicable, the thought, the universal.²⁰⁴

The focus then is on the in-between, on ‘commonplaces.’ One has jumped into the abyss, one is not separate anymore from the one who presents themselves, but is *with them*. In dialogue; a ‘discourse.’ Lévinas says that there is no other way than responding because to speak is to ‘make the world common, to create commonplaces,’²⁰⁵ since ‘the world in discourse is no longer what it is in separation, in the being at home with oneself where everything is given to me; it is what I give: the communicable, the thought, the universal.’ And, in thinking lies the ethical responsibility for the Other: “this ethical condition or essence of language.”²⁰⁶

Lévinas says that “the exteriority of being” does not “fill the abyss of separation.”²⁰⁷ Rather, it allows for a consciousness of it, from the Other, from the exterior. It is a language that is ‘produced’ only in the face to face as a ‘presence’ and a ‘personal response.’ It is a ‘discourse’ hence ‘the experience of something absolutely foreign, a pure ‘knowledge’ or ‘experience,’ a ‘traumatism of astonishment.’ That which gives meaning to the (language of the) Other, to that which is being said or communicated nonverbally (as ‘language’ of the face) is call. Then, the response of the Same to the Other is sharing one’s thoughts, is speaking. One is touched and thus touches, too.²⁰⁸ It is a discourse that opens up over and over.

²⁰⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 76.

²⁰⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 76.

²⁰⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 200.

²⁰⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 295.

²⁰⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 204.

IV.IV. 'The Ethical Condition or Essence of Language'

But, there is a distance that is “untraversable, and at the same time traversed.”²⁰⁹ *Shibboleth*. The point is exactly that the Other cannot be possessed, is free. And that, in turn, keeps one ‘free’ as well, keeps one with oneself. It is this Otherness that allows for the *encounter* that is at the basis for Lévinas’ existential ethics: one in which two separated entities meet as such and relate to each other through a reciprocal being with each other in spite of but also through their ‘expression’ and in spite but also through ‘speech.’ These are the conditions, the first gestures of the ethical relation that constitute it through this reciprocity. It is not within, but without. It is not interior, but exterior. There is an exchange. This is a common place of humanity. Is this ‘to know’ or ‘to be conscious’? Yes and no. For, that which is expressed is never ‘being’ itself but being in spite of expression and through speech — language is

not enacted within a consciousness; it comes from me from the Other and reverberates in consciousness by putting it in question. This event is irreducible to consciousness, where everything comes about from within — even the strangeness of suffering. To regard language as an attitude of mind does not amount to disincarnating it, but is precisely to account for its incarnate essence.²¹⁰

There is a connection then between thought and the ethical — Lévinas is pointing on the very essence of psychosomatics: that language, if it is considered something in the mind, is still — or all the more — something in the body and the mind as well as in between.

²⁰⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 85.

²¹⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 295.

If we take ‘attitude’ in i.e. German which is ‘*Haltung*,’²¹¹ then language (and thinking) determine the how of the encounter. And, since language is ascribed to thought, there is a language that Lévinas is ascribing to something else: a — perhaps — state of mind: an awareness of the Other(ness). This occurs because in exteriority everything is otherness and expression and speech and constantly put in question — the Same (and perhaps also the self) is constantly questioned because the Other (the face of the vis-à-vis) ‘overflows’ my consciousness. It is a ‘traumatism of astonishment,’ a being touched without being touched. There is *Shibboleth*. And in this lies the possibility of relating, over and over. A quote for orientation:

The Exteriority of being does not, in fact, mean that multiplicity is without relation. However, the relation that binds this multiplicity does not fill the abyss of separation; it confirms it. In this relation we have recognised language, produced only in the face to face.²¹²

So, ‘language’ is both ‘expression’ and ‘speech’ that are presented and already demand or ask for a response, but are also a response themselves. The first ethical act happens with the Other expressing itself to the Same. The Other speaking and the Same is called upon to *respond* to that which they see: the face. This “*offering* of contents which answers to the face of the Other or which questions him, and first opens the perspective of the meaningful.”²¹³ This dialogue opens the perspective that allows for the ethical relation to be established: a truly meaningful one.

²¹¹ In other languages as well: the etymology from French ‘attitude,’ from Italian ‘attitudine’ (“attitude, aptness”), from Medieval Latin ‘aptitūdō’ (“aptitude”) and ‘actitūdō’ (“acting, posture”).

²¹² Lévinas, 1969, p. 295.

²¹³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 174.

This perspective is a rational one, a perspective of the mind rather than the body, rather than the sensible encounter. It is the first ethical act that ‘calls for thinking’ that *acknowledges the void in-between and the impossibility of meeting the responsibility that comes with it*. This acknowledgement allows for meaning. It is where we move from the sensible and vulnerable to expression, to speech, to ethics: It is “this bond between expression and responsibility, this ethical condition or essence of language, this function of language prior to all discourse of being,”²¹⁴ noticed through thinking. ‘This bond,’ which is at the same time the void (*Shibboleth*), is explored in chapter (V) with the ethical relation. For, now that ‘language’ has established a relation, it must be(come) ethical.

²¹⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 200.

V. The Ethical (Non-)Relation and Infinity

Relation (n.) c. 1300 *relacioun*, “relationship, connection, correspondence;” “act of telling or relating in words,” from Anglo-French *relacioun*, Old French *relacion* “report, connection” (14c.) and directly from Latin *relationem* (nominative *relatio*) “a bringing back, restoring; a report, proposition,” from *relatus*.²¹⁵

relationship: “quality, condition; act, power, skill; office, position; relation between”²¹⁶

How can people gain control over the residues of past trauma and return to being masters of their own ship?²¹⁷

The content of this chapter builds on the findings of Otherness and language from chapter (IV). For Lévinas, it is about the relation between the Same and the Other, it is the in-between that must be focused on in order for the ethical to be. In this chapter, the pillars of the ethical relation are considered with a quote from *Totality and Infinity*, namely that

language, that is, a response to the being who in a face speaks to the subject and tolerates only a personal response, that is, an ethical act.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ *Etymology Dictionary*, 2022.

²¹⁶ *Etymology Dictionary*, 2022.

²¹⁷ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 4.

²¹⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 219.

This ethical act happens through language which calls for thinking and puts the interior consciousness in question by turning to the exteriority of being — one's own and that of the Other. Then, an ethical relationship through language can be established.

V.I. On *Shibboleth* and Language: Distance

It is the existential moment when one becomes truly conscious of the human condition (as mentioned earlier) and the abyss in-between the Same and the Other. This is the moment of the most radical freedom, and it opens up what Lévinas calls 'Infinity.' Before the response (and with it the ethical responsibility) can be considered *en detail*, the Infinite must be mentioned, because here the core of this investigation is revealed, and a connection to chapter (III) on Lévinas conception of Otherness is drawn: "Infinity is the absolutely other."²¹⁹ After all, we are concerned with relation and the ethical relation because of the separation between the Same and the Other in the first place — learning, with Lévinas, to focus on the Other and the void in order to establish a relationship. It is the fact of the void, that which cannot be bridged, filled, understood, or become common ground that requires relation. Could then the void be the common ground, the — so to speak other 'Other' — that which is Other for both the Same and the Other?

This opens up another idea of the Other, namely the void between two that is Other for both, but because of that also a connecting element, a 'bond.' So far, 'trauma' as Otherness as well as 'language' as Otherness or through the Other (as a vis-à-vis) has been considered (namely that which is infinite, which reveals Infinity). Now, *Shibboleth*. That, which cannot be bridged, cannot be understood. Why can't it be understood?

²¹⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 49.

V.I.i. *The Other and Divinity*

Lévinas says that “the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face,”²²⁰ which makes clear that Lévinas is actually not saying that the other person is in fact God, but he is saying that the divine can manifest between two people. It is that which is in between: when both look directly at each other, when they ‘see’ each other in the Lévinasian sense when there is ‘expression’ and ‘speech,’ then the Other introduces me to that which I can only see through the Other.²²¹ He writes:

There can be no ‘knowledge’ of God separated from relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God. He does not play the role of a mediator. The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.²²²

If the Other as the vis-à-vis can reveal something divine, and is ‘infinity’ as it is that which is ‘the absolutely other,’ what is this understanding of Otherness? What is at the core of Lévinas’ ethics of alterity?

V.II. On Shibboleth and Language: (The Idea of) Infinity

Seeing the face and offering language, expressing oneself, is constitutive of relating to another. The possibilities of expression are infinite. There is a response — or an invitation —

²²⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 78.

²²¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 78.

²²² Lévinas, 1969, p. 78f.

that is required first, however. The ethical relation makes possible expression, makes possible not ‘just’ a relationship with one another, but recognising the other in its subjectivity and valuing the individual expression, the individual in spite of the expression. And it is:

The idea of infinity, the overflowing of finite thought by its content, effectuates the relation of thought with what exceeds its capacity, with what at each moment it learns without suffering shock. This is the situation we call welcome of the face. The idea of infinity is produced in the opposition of conversation, in sociality. The relation with the face, with the other absolutely other which I can not contain, the other in this sense infinite [...] the relation is maintained without violence, in peace with its absolute alterity. The “resistance” of the other does not do violence to me, does not act negatively; it has a positive structure: ethical.²²³

The relation here ‘exceeds its capacity’ because it cannot be grasped in its Otherness, the Other cannot be contained. Then, it is ethical. It is not just about an ethical act, but about an ethical relation. The ‘primordial face to face of language,’ before the conversation takes place as language (speech and thought), there is the sociality²²⁴ that takes place as language (through the ‘incarnate essence’ that reveals itself in spite of expression but through thought in speech in an exterior encounter) and demands the ‘welcoming of the face.’

In the ethical structure of relating, there is no violence. And, “as nonviolence it nonetheless maintains the plurality between the same and the other.”²²⁵ This means welcoming the space in between the Other and Infinity if one is to act ethically. That,

²²³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 197.

²²⁴ Lévinas says that “A relation with the transcendent free from all captivation by the Transcendent is a social relation.” (1969, p. 78).

²²⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 197.

however, already describes the absolute impotency and failure of nonviolence because in the unknown, anything is possible. If we are in the space of the unknown, how could we know it if remains peaceful? If we touch one another, then there is (the potential) for hurt. Then, what is left is only 'to know and to be conscious' of that very fact, of:

The face in which the other — the absolutely other — presents himself does not negate the same, does not do violence to it as do opinion or authority or the thaumaturgic supernatural. It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is preeminently nonviolence, for, instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As nonviolence it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the same and the other. It is peace.²²⁶

But this peace only exists in that moment that one sees the face, only when the vulnerability is recognised, and:

The idea of infinity is the mode of being, the infinition, of infinity. Infinity does not first exist, and then reveal itself. Its infinition is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in me. It is produced in the improbable feat whereby a separated being fixed in its identity, the same, the I, nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity. [...] This book will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality; in it the idea of infinity is consummated. Hence intentionality, where thought remains an adequation with the object, does not define consciousness at its fundamental level. All knowing qua

²²⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 203.

intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinity, which is preeminently non-adequation.²²⁷

This idea of non-adequation, of a consciousness that is not thought *proper*, then, is reflected in the way that Lévinas describes the ‘welcoming of the face.’ This must occur in an infinite and not in a totalitarian sense — meaning the understanding that the face cannot be grasped, cannot be understood. *Shibboleth* must remain, that which is ‘other’ in between. This ‘breaks up every system.’ It is after all ‘sensation.’ For,

Infinity is produced by withstanding the invasion of totality, in a contradiction that leaves a place for a separated being. Thus relationships that open up a way outside of being take form. An infinity that does not close itself in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a place for a separated being exists divinely [...] The relations that are established between the separated being and Infinity redeem what diminution there was in the contraction creative of Infinity [...] Multiplicity and the limitation of the creative Infinite are compatible with the perfection of the Infinite; they articulate the meaning of this perfection.²²⁸

What determines, then, the ‘creative Infinite’ and ‘the meaning’ of the infinite void?

Arguably, it is the ethical. Meaning, the responsibility for the Other which is distant. The responsibility lies not in trying to mend, undo, or bridge the crack, but to recognise the Other — language, the vis-à-vis, the abyss of the ‘trauma,’ the relationship — as ‘stranger.’ In that Otherness lie infinite possibilities of who the vis-à-vis and the relation could be. Infinity overflows one’s consciousness — one is touched, moved, and called upon. That which affects

²²⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 197.

²²⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 104.

us is the “movement of the soul”²²⁹ — which can become a dance of two if it becomes a response. This requires a space of freedom, a ‘sphere’ in which the Same and the Other can meet. And, “instead of offending my freedom, it calls it to responsibility and founds it,”²³⁰ it is the possibility of the “Infinite”²³¹ which allows for ‘expression,’ ‘speech,’ ‘language’ — with the awareness of the ‘untraversable’ distance, and the responsibility for the Other. The ethical relation is what makes possible this expression, makes justice possible, and not ‘just’ relating with one another, but a recognition and honouring of the subjective. This is what Lévinas calls ‘Transcendence.’

V.II.i. Transcendence and Distance

Transcendence designates a relation with a reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this distance, as would happen with relations within the same; this relation does not come an implantation in the other and a confusion with him, does not affect the very identity of the same.²³²

Lévinas says that “A relation with the transcendent free from all captivation by the Transcendent is a social relation.”²³³ The transcendent remains a “stranger.”²³⁴ ‘Free from all captivation’ means that it is truly recognised for what or who one is: Other. To the Other, there is a distance.

²²⁹ Goodman/Grover, 2008, p. 249.

²³⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 203.

²³¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 104.

²³² Lévinas, 1969, p. 41f.

²³³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 78.

²³⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 78.

The distance is the in-between, the relation, the way of relating non-violently. This distance is what allows for recognising one another as Other, for “alterity be produced in being,” “a thought is needed and an I is needed”²³⁵ — and “speaking rather than ‘letting be’ solicits the other.”²³⁶ Expression calls for speaking which then allows for the relation to unfold, and for responsibility to arise. This responsibility shows in thinking hence “to know or to be conscious” which “is to have time to avoid and forestall the instant of inhumanity.”²³⁷ It means understanding that the Other is a Stranger, which “also means the free one. Over him I have no power.”²³⁸ This respects the dignity of the other person. If that which is transcendent is the stranger, then one must all-the-more be conscious of Otherness and that there is neither power nor possession over the other — but to encounter them with infinite wonderment. It is about being fully human, and allowing especially the alienating aspects in. And that means — we go back to the introductory quote — to allow for otherness, to stay with the alienation, to open up to the Other. That which Lévinas calls ‘the divine,’ then, is the dignity of the Other that must be recognised at all costs.

The ethical relation, the face-to-face, also cuts across every relation one could call mystical [...] Here resides the rational character of the ethical relation and of language. No fear, no trembling could alter the straight-forwardness of this relationship, which preserves the discontinuity of relationship [...] ²³⁹

²³⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 32.

²³⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 195.

²³⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 35.

²³⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 39.

²³⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 202.

So, the ethical relation is a non-relation: it is a relationship while also ‘preserving’ the discontinuity of a relationship. Since there is a ‘straightforwardness’ in expressing a relation, or the need for a relation, the ethical relation is truthful — and for this reason not ‘mystical.’ In the mystical, when there is no consciousness of the potential of the ‘instant of inhumanity,’ we do not recognise the other as stranger.²⁴⁰ Once there is the recognition, the Other can be met with clarity; truthfully, with the ‘rational character.’ It means, then, that the responsibility lies in exactly not trying to mend, undo, or bridge the crack, but to acknowledge it.

This is the understanding of ‘language’ that invites the rational component in — the mind, and the understanding and taking on of the responsibility for the Other and the relation with the Other. It is a particularly (because of the rational component) straightforward way of relating: it resides in the face-to-face, in the seeing hence recognising and then answering to the face. The first part is characteristic of the ethical relation, the second is the rational aspect of it. Lévinas writes that

the work of language is entirely different and it consists in entering into relationship with a nudity disengaged from every form, but having meaning by itself [...] Such a nudity is the face. The nakedness of the face is not what is presented to me because I disclose it [...] The face has turned to me — and this is its very nudity.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Lévinas writes that “faceless gods” are “impersonal gods to whom one does speak.” (Lévinas, 1969, p. 142.)

²⁴¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 74f.

This responsibility comes from sensing a demand, a vulnerability, a need in the face that — once seen — must be voiced, and responded to.²⁴² *How*, exactly? How can this responsibility be lived out? This is of particular interest with respect to the hypothesis of this thesis, namely, that the affectedness — here, the call for a response — must be lived out. If there is a of one person on another, then the responsibility for the Other in the ethical relation arises.

V.III. Responsibility and ‘Openness of Being’

If the Other is that which is infinite²⁴³ — or at least opens up the void — with the responsibility comes the awareness that one cannot mend, undo, or bridge the crack hence the wound that one has suffered (from the ‘traumatic’ event). But rather to acknowledge it, *and the possibility of deepening it* (remember: in sensibility lies vulnerability). With that awareness of the distance, and the responsibility for the Other, the relationship is interrupted, and requires an effort, an (at)tending to: a “perpetual here I am (*me voici*).”²⁴⁴ This is called *hineni*. It is how the effect must be lived out. This quote describes a concept — *hineni* — that summarises the Lévinasian conception of responsibility and also illustrates how his ideas of the religious and the political are brought together in the ethical as understood here. This is

²⁴² We remember: “*Die Idee des Unendlichen offenbart sich im starken Sinne des Wortes,*” “*die Idee des Unendlichen im Bewusstsein ist ein Überfließen im Bewusstsein.*” (In English: “The Idea of the Infinite manifests itself in the Infintiy of consciousness, it is an overflowing of consciousness”). This ‘consciousness overflowing’ once more indicates a physiological reaction to a traumatic event. It is an overflow, indicating a re-traumatisation meaning that the system is reminded of the trauma because the stress reaction in the body is similar to that of the trauma itself. Here, we can find an indication to Lévinas’ traumatised body: him writing about ‘fear’ and ‘trembling’ as bodily (stress) reactions to the encounter, to the face-to-face.

²⁴³ We are facing the impossibility of a total grasp or final comprehension of the Other/the trauma(tised).

²⁴⁴ Goodman/Grover, 2008, p. 562.

vital to keep in mind for the therapeutical practice and the question about Lévinas' value for the profession. It demonstrates that the ethical relation is fundamental.²⁴⁵ What is *Hineni*?

Hineni is a term from the Jewish tradition, translated from Hebrew as “Here I am”; fully present, letting go of my own needs, fully and completely open to the Other and to the present moment; meeting the Other in the present moment. Lévinas writes that the concept of *hineni* is grounded in a sense of responsibility that has a pre-cognitive character; he argues that “responsibility [...] has no cognitive character.”²⁴⁶ For him, “Responsibility is not an esoteric knowledge or capacity but an embodied memory of the other.”²⁴⁷ A memory of my own vulnerability and need that is reflected through the Other; a recognition of the human condition and that sensible part in each of us remains. *Hineni* requires us to have “a psyche oriented toward the Other, the very configuration or shape of their selves being lived out as *hineni*, a perpetual Here I am (*me voici*).”²⁴⁸ *Hineni* grants this right out of a felt responsibility before it is conscious, before it is cognitive and rational and thus ethical. *Hineni* is the space that is not political — see the example — but rather an ethical position in the face of a totalitarian politics. It is the politics of the infinite. In this memory of the experience of Otherness (the ‘traumatism of astonishment’), I become responsible for the Other (the trauma, the wound) hence the experience of vulnerability in the Other and the Same. Interestingly, this shows that the responsibility actually has a bodily component; the bodily memory of vulnerability.

²⁴⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 98.

²⁴⁶ Levinas, 2000, p. 186.

²⁴⁷ Lévinas, 2000, p. 186.

²⁴⁸ Goodman/Grover, 2008, p. 562.

This openness is the consequence of the realisation that “the relationship to the Other suggests traumatic repetition,”²⁴⁹ says Lévinas, as well as “without some kind of relation there would be no ethics, only the traumatic repetition of non-relation.”²⁵⁰ Non-relation — as we explored it above — is where two people are not conscious of each other, but one way or another, in contact; able to touch — either hold or hurt another (of course it is always also both). They are either in a totalitarian *cogito*, or a blind *sentio* — either in totalitarian structures of thinking that attempt to grasp the Other and their woundedness instead of ‘letting be,’²⁵¹ or a blind ‘feeling’ of the Other, melting or merging with the Other that does not recognise them in their individuality. It requires “compassionate action” that must be “coupled to moral commitments, and translated into action.”²⁵² Goodman and Grover use the example of the inhabitants of a French village called le Chambon-sur-Lignon that took in Jews during the Shoah without hesitation.²⁵³ They were open to them, met them in a place that was not bound by law or totalitarian conceptions or else: the totality of war was ‘broken,’ and relation established; Infinity found. Justice is the space that allows for speech, for expression of truth (as could the Jewish in Chambon-sur-Lignon). Only in the second instant a ‘thing’ is expressed and answered to. At first, it is the ‘primordial face to face of language.’ It is the right that is granted by another, by the Same. It serves as the fundament in the face of the infinite void in which ‘the totality of war can be broken,’²⁵⁴ for: “justice is the right to speak.”²⁵⁵ Further,

²⁴⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 108.

²⁵⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 122.

²⁵¹ Reference to the Introduction.

²⁵² Kirmayer, 2008, p. 461.

²⁵³ Goodman/Grover, 2008, p. 562.

²⁵⁴ Runge, 2015, p. 2.

²⁵⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 298.

In political life, taken unrebuked, humanity is understood from its works — a humanity of interchangeable men, of reciprocal relations. The substitution of men for one another, the primal disrespect, makes possible exploitation itself. In history — the history of States — the human being appears as the sum of his works; even while he lives he is his own heritage. Justice consists in again making possible expression, in which in non-reciprocity the person presents himself as unique. Justice is the right to speak.²⁵⁶

This right is the foundation of Lévinas' ethical relation. The right granted and the right recognised are what constitute it. There is an example that Goodman and Grover use to elucidate it when thinking about *Totality and Infinity*; a book about “modes of presence”²⁵⁷ of which *hineni* is one.

At this point, we are in the position to draw some conclusions which answer (part of) the research questions. What does reading Lévinas' account of the ethical relation in *Totality and Infinity* tell us about the needs of the traumatised? *It requires 'language' that 'calls for thinking' if one has been 'touched by the truth.'* That is: With another person comes a responsibility that must be taken seriously if we (have) see(n) their vulnerability in the traumatising moment; if we have seen the truth (and by ‘seeing’ is meant sensing, feeling — or *remembering*²⁵⁸). This being touched is a memory of the first ‘traumatism of astonishment.’ An awareness of this traumatism — or the potential of this traumatism to cause ‘useless suffering,’ leads to the ethical relation. It is an awareness of the pain that could

²⁵⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 298.

²⁵⁷ Newman, 2009, p. 92. There he also writes that “*Totality and Infinity* is a book about the modes of Alterity and the relation to the Other and the Same.”

²⁵⁸ See Lévinas, 2000, p. 186.

be caused. The void, *Shibboleth* must be acknowledged, as well as the possibility of deepening it. This Otherness or *Shibboleth* is where the ethical lies; *for, in the memory of the experience of Otherness (the 'traumatism of astonishment'), I become responsible for the Other (the trauma) in the Other and the Same*. And then? — it is my task to not re-traumatise, but simply being here and being open to the present moment. As embodied rationality with vulnerability and responsibility. As truthful as possible; transcendent(ly). This is absolutely impossible. It is too much, too grave. But, that is 'responsibility.'

The next chapter (VI) explores trauma therapy as such. Following that, in chapter (VII), Lévinas' connection and contribution to trauma therapy is investigated.

VI. Trauma Therapy

VI.1. The Affective Witness in Trauma Therapy

Wounded by a foreign body (a common trope of trauma), we become a nobody, that requires connection with another body (healing) in order to become somebody again (recovery). Moving thus from traumatised nobody to reintegrated somebody is an empathetic opening to everybody who has suffered pain. This sense is ultimately embodied sense. A commons of the body.²⁵⁹

The task of trauma therapy lies in an attempt to resolve trauma, somehow.²⁶⁰ In *The Body keeps the Score*, van der Kolk writes, “Therapists have an undying faith in the capacity of talk to resolve trauma [...] unfortunately, it is not so simple. Traumatic events are almost impossible to put into words.”²⁶¹ This goes for a philosophy of trauma as well, as Anna Westin points out in her research as she says that “the abstractions and generalisations of phenomenology cannot yield the fine-grained texture of lived experience” in *Embodied Trauma and Healing*.²⁶²

²⁵⁹ Kearney, 2010, p. 12. Before this, he writes that “In sum, one might describe the healing arc of trauma therapy — at both personal and communal levels — as movement through different somatic stages. One could put it like this:”

²⁶⁰ Kearney, 2010, p. 12.

²⁶¹ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 231.

²⁶² Westin, 2022, p. 464.

The structure of this chapter: First, therapy is defined in section (VI.I.i). In section (VI.I.iii) some methods are elucidated. This is done after the philosophical ground for them is offered in section (VI.I.ii).

VI.I.i. Definition of Therapy

Etymologically, therapy (from Ancient Greek *therapeia*) means “curing, healing, service done to the sick; a waiting on, service,” from *therapeuein* “to cure, treat medically,” literally “attend, do service, take care of.”²⁶³ Trauma therapy would therefore have to attend to the trauma(tised), and offer ways of healing. The consequences of trauma on the body and the mind are dissociative states (“the essence of trauma,”²⁶⁴ according to van der Kolk) in which mind and body are disconnected, and the subject is alienated from their inner world, or at least parts of their inner world that are too painful to process. Trauma must be discharged and integrated somatically, as we learned from Peter Levine. For that, it needs an “affective witness”²⁶⁵ to “establish a sense of trust and containment” in order to share the experience.²⁶⁶ How is this done?

VI.I.ii. Witnessing Affectively: Philosophical Considerations

To illustrate trauma work, let us have a look at an account of a trauma therapist. Helen Bamber wrote about working in several refugee camps and other contexts where trauma is

²⁶³ *Cambridge Dictionary*, 2022.

²⁶⁴ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 44.

²⁶⁵ Kearney, 2020, p. 3.

²⁶⁶ Kearney, 2020, p. 4.

ever-present. She emphasises “being physically present”²⁶⁷ with the pain of the traumatised. Being physically present is about bearing bodily witness, about the ability to receive and “hold”²⁶⁸ the suffering. She calls this the “affective witness”²⁶⁹ that a traumatised human needs. To give us a broader understanding of the conceptualisation of witnessing — another holocaust-survivor — let us turn to Jaques Rancière. He writes about the “sense-perceptual dimension”²⁷⁰ of being with one another. This is in accordance with Levinas’ *hineni* as well as Helen Bamber’s findings on physical presence in trauma work.

What do I mean when I say ‘I bear witness’ (for one only bears witness in the first person)? I do not mean ‘I prove,’ but ‘I swear that I saw, I heard, I touched, I felt, I was present.’ That is the irreducible sense-perceptual dimension of presence and past presence, of what can be meant by ‘being present’ and especially by ‘having been present,’ and of what that means in bearing witness. ‘I bear witness’ — that means: ‘I affirm (rightly or wrongly, but in all good faith, sincerely) that that was or is present to me, in space and time (thus, sense-perceptible)’²⁷¹

Interestingly enough, Rancière conceptualises himself here as the witness to the traumatic experience itself. So, he himself is the witness that again is witnessed by another (the reader of his writings, for example). This is where Lévinas’ understanding of the ethical face to face encounter comes into play, too.²⁷²

Rancière’s conceptualisation will pave us the way deeper to Lévinas’ theory:

²⁶⁷ Westin, 2022, p. 88; Bamber, 1998, p. 228.

²⁶⁸ Westin, 2022, p. 88; Bamber, 1998, p. 228.

²⁶⁹ Westin, 2022, p. 88.

²⁷⁰ Rancière, 2006, p. 75.

²⁷¹ Rancière, 2006, p. 75.

²⁷² Rancière, 2006, p. 75f.

‘I bear witness’ — that means: ‘I affirm (rightly or wrongly, but in all good faith, sincerely) that that was or is present to me, in space and time (thus, sense-perceptible).’²⁷³

With this he implies that there is a physical dimension of being with a traumatised subject since the traumatisation itself is physical (“sense-perceptible”). In order to draw nearer to them and their traumatisation (and thus accompany the healing process). However, — and the therapist must be aware of this —:

The addressee of the testimony, the witness of the witness, does not see what the first witness says she or he saw; the addressee did not see it and never will see it. This direct or immediate non-access of the addressee to the object of the testimony is what marks the absence of this ‘witness of the witness’ to the thing itself.²⁷⁴

So, after Rancière’s and Bamber’s accounts, we know that one can witness both in person as well as through a ‘thing itself.’ This becomes relevant in chapter (VII). What is true for both and is that ‘the witness of the witness’ (hence, the person that is ‘holding the pain’ with the other person) ‘does not see’ what ‘he or she saw.’ Here, we encounter the figure of *Shibboleth* once more, the brokenness that cannot be mended, or even grasped. One can only be present with it and acknowledge the pain. Does that suffice?

²⁷³ Rancière, 2006, p. 75f.

²⁷⁴ Rancière, 2006, p. 75f.

VI.II. *Somatic Experiencing*²⁷⁵ in Trauma Therapy

VI.II.i. *Foundations*

An image from *Somatic Experiencing* (SE) may help to illustrate: the concept of the triune brain and of traumatisation. It is a metaphor that conceptualises the brain as being threefold: with an instinctual, an emotional, and a rational part.²⁷⁶ The instinctual part is linked to the nervous system while the emotional part is attributed to the limbic system and the rational to the neocortex. All three parts process a traumatic experience as they are all part of our sense of self in the world and regulate our relationship to and with others. However, the instinctual and the emotional part are tendentially inhibited and regulated by the rational one — the neocortex.²⁷⁷ According to research on trauma, if one is to process the traumatic experience, the body must get involved.²⁷⁸

VI.II.ii. *Methods*

The Methods that are currently used in trauma therapy are bottom up approaches that move from the body to the mind. That is because when it comes to trauma, “the body keeps the score.”²⁷⁹ For van der Kolk, the body has the capacity to store memory in a way that is not

²⁷⁵ This does not only refer to *Somatic Experiencing* (SE), but to somatic-based trauma-therapeutical practices more generally.

²⁷⁶ The philosopher may be reminded Plato here.

²⁷⁷ It is the part of the brain that is only fully developed at the age of 21.

²⁷⁸ In fact, it often is the body that is the cause for violence: a body of colour, the body of a woman,... For reference see Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).

²⁷⁹ To speak with the aptly titled book *The Body keeps the Score* of Bessel van der Kolk book on the somatic dimension(s) of trauma.

available to the communicative faculties of the body. It is stored way beyond the brain's usual language pathways, at the limbic level. The limbic system is pre-cognitive and connected to instincts, intuition, memory, feeling (as elucidated in chapter II).²⁸⁰ Antonio Damasio in the *Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (2000) also calls these the “primordial feelings” that are our basic ones, responsible for our survival and communication.²⁸¹ Hence, it is this which must be accessed when working with trauma.

Van der Kolk, for example, writes about the effectiveness of yoga, EDMR (“Eye Movement and Desensitization Reprocessing”), and other body-based-practices that are bottom up approaches, too. They start with (the focus on) the body and move to the mind from there. The body becomes the medium and bridge between the subjective and the social, and many of these practices are also done in groups. He and David Emmerson have developed and conducted research on the practice of ‘trauma-sensitive-yoga.’²⁸² Apart from yoga, there are movement, dance, and art therapies offered at *EZRA*, the Trauma Center in Vienna for holocaust victims and their families.²⁸³ This focus on the body is amongst others found in Behnke's (2002) phenomenology and Bourdieu's thought (2005), claiming that psychosomatic illnesses are due to sociosomatics of societal power structures where much trauma lies or is caused.

Remember Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela's account used to illustrate the connection between trauma and touch. With the Lévinasian ‘trauma’ in mind, it is community and body contact that seems effective in healing, too. Going off the wounds that have hurt — in this case it is social injustice, discrimination etc. to heal through other ‘peaceful,’ ‘positive’ (in the

²⁸⁰ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 65f.

²⁸¹ Kearney, 2020, p. 9.

²⁸² Emmerson, 2015.

²⁸³ See: <https://esra.at/>

Lévinasian sense) experiences. This happens through others (as seen in the examples). In *Somatic Experiencing (SE)*, people are considered ‘resources.’

In another trauma-therapeutical method — that has been mentioned several times since chapter (I) —the practitioner moves gently between resources (ideas, sensations, people — that which is stabilising for the patient) such that the patient can focus on being in the present as well as a reliving (through the “Felt Sense” of the body) the traumatic experience in order to integrate it. This is called the ‘Flow Modell and Pendulation between Vortexes’ in *Somatic Experiencing (SE)*.²⁸⁴ This is similar to EDMR therapy where the patient is asked to describe the traumatic experience, hence, relive it. When the system becomes active again, the attention is diverted to a movement that the therapist is doing which calms the arousal. This happens while the therapist moves their finger from right to left, a movement that the patient can focus on while narrating and being in distress — which also reminds them that they are not alone because they are with someone else and are “feeling listened to.”²⁸⁵ It brings the patient into a state of extreme vulnerability but then allows them to focus on the shared sensibility²⁸⁶ in that process — on an-other body.

These methods work with the access to one’s body by diverting the focus of the trauma from past to present. This happens in the therapeutical setting, which the patient leaves again after some time. What if one is actually surrounded by resources²⁸⁷ (i.e. people that feel safe) or in an environment that is resourceful for this person, hence, continuously in

²⁸⁴ It was provided by *SE Greece* in “The Introductory Workshop to Somatic Experiencing.”

²⁸⁵ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 278.

²⁸⁶ Francine Shapiro who coined EMDR is also one of the leading thinkers on ‘sensibility’ (2011), alongside Drabinski (2001) and Doyon/Breyer (2015). See: Bergo, 2019, Footnote 2.

²⁸⁷ This is what Steven Porges (2017) would call ‘neocortical social engagement.’

a setting that has therapeutical value? What if that is part of what the therapist helps the patient to establish?

VI.II.iii. The Condition for Trauma Therapy

It is the ‘ground’ that must be established anew for a traumatised person — and with this also the common ground between the traumatised and others.

So, without considering Lévinas at this point, it has been established that active witnessing, and being ‘physically present’ are trauma therapeutical methods that work as well as body and community work. The first and most important part of therapy, however, is the beginning²⁸⁸ as a therapeutic effect; namely, embedding the traumatised in a safe context as well as building a safe relationship to begin the process of associating, building a container for association. Only then can the work even continue.

This happens by being fully present, and by being open to the other person and what they bring into the setting. Therapy is about holding the pain together to gain the strength again to do so on one’s own: with a focus on the body, on the present, on others in the community in a safe space.

In line with the research question, what remains to be investigated is this: how does the Lévinasian trauma and an awareness of it provide a useful perspective regarding trauma therapy? How can the trauma be lived or spoken (of)?

²⁸⁸ What is meant by that? — It is the original encounter, this vulnerable part in each one of us.

VII. The Lévinasian Contribution: Response(ability)²⁸⁹

“Surprise Yourself.”

— Vincent Cassel²⁹⁰

The following chapter summarises what has so far been learned from Levinas. Then, this is connected and applied to trauma work.

VII.1. Content: ‘to know’ or ‘to be conscious’

In *Totality and Infinity*, the traumatic encounter with the Other is converted to an ethical relation where the Same meets its responsibility towards the Other.²⁹¹ This happens by addressing and acknowledging the Other as such — and with it, accepting that Otherness remains the Other. And with that, trauma remains ever-present, too. These three steps involve ‘language’ which is ‘the relationship between the Same and the Other’ according to Lévinas.

²⁸⁹ Alternative and longer title: “A Psychotraumatheapeutical Process/Method with or following from Lévinas’ (Body of) Thought”

²⁹⁰ This was Vincent Cassel as Thomas Leroy in the film “Black Swan” by Darren Aronofsky, 2010.

²⁹¹ Newman, 2009, p. 91.

VII.I.i. *Language and Addressing and Acknowledging the Other*

So, in Lévinas' text, therapy and ethics are reduced to the essential: the 'original' or 'essential' encounter. And it is the *possibility*²⁹² of such an encounter that is highlighted, and the *possibilities that lie within* such an encounter. For, "in the trace of this absence" "is infinity." The only true transcendence for Lévinas is ethical transcendence: the transcendence toward the Other.²⁹³

As we have considered Lévinas' understanding of Otherness and trauma, we have encountered a twofold meaning of traumatising. The first is 'useless suffering,' the other, perhaps, 'necessary' or 'meaningful' suffering. We also learned about the consequence of Lévinas' traumatising moment: the encounter that so happens ('saying') and the conscious encounter ('said') through signs/language by the signifier. Similar to the 'suffering,' Language also has various different meanings: With Lévinas, communication happens (a) via body language (or so we understand the Levinasian 'expression' here), which refers to something more primordial, namely, one's sensibility — and (b) explicit language (Levinasian 'speech'), which invites the rational aspect into the relation — but also points to the non-relation that is implied in relating, for "speaking rather than letting-be solicits the

²⁹² The idea for this thesis came up in 2020, while writing the Bachelor theses (one of which, this one builds upon: "A Plea for a Politics of Hope: Potentiality, Actuality, Natality") written in the course of a seminar on the potential of violence of unconditional claims. See the course syllabus: <https://ufind.univie.ac.at/en/course.html?lv=180121&semester=2019W>. Because, in a time during the Covid-19 Pandemic, where personal encounter is rare because of lockdowns, even the *possibility* of encounter is taken away. The possibility of the encounter entails violence, too — so Lévinas. But it also entails the opposite and everything in between — and it is necessary for all of us. These issues are explored in this section.

²⁹³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 102.

other.”²⁹⁴ Both, (a) and (b), come together and a third aspect opens up: It is an awareness of the Other and the Same in all honesty, in the shared sensibility and their vulnerability.

VII.I.ii. Language and Answering to the Other

Although sensibility or even vulnerability is shared, still the relation “does not fill the abyss of separation; it confirms it. In this relation we have recognised language, produced only in the face to face.”²⁹⁵ In relation we recognise ‘language,’ and it is the face that is “original language” “before words.”²⁹⁶ It is the relation that is established through exactly that recognition by *answering to* the face, by showing one’s own vulnerability, one’s own helplessness or insufficiency. Then, the ‘face-to-face’ is honest.²⁹⁷

Thus, language

consists in entering into relationship with a nudity disengaged from every form, but having meaning by itself [...] The face has turned to me — and this is its very nudity. It is by itself and not by reference to a system.²⁹⁸

So, the face is not ‘serving the Other’ already, not an entering into the relationship, but it has meaning by itself so of course it touches one. It does not belong to a system of signs that could also be a totalitarian system that is about ‘vision’ rather than ‘language.’ If it would be about ‘vision’ rather than language, then the Other is not truly ‘seen’ and forms of violence occur. For this reason, there must be a distance, *Shibboleth*. This remains when there is an

²⁹⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 195.

²⁹⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 295.

²⁹⁶ Lévinas, 1981, p. 178.

²⁹⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 291.

²⁹⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 74f.

ethical response to the face that speaks before anything else can; in the ethical, ‘seeing’ the face implies ‘speaking.’

VII.I.iii. Responding and (the Impossibility of Meeting) Responsibility

‘Speaking’ rather than ‘letting be’ solicits — and we have to speak but could never do justice to the Other; their demand and expression, could never do justice to their Being. For this reason the right to speak must be granted. Lévinas writes that “justice is the right to speak.”²⁹⁹ It is the face that speaks before anything else can; and it is seeing the face that implies speaking. This acknowledgement of the face calls the Same to respond and be(come) responsible. Because of this, “there must be a rupture of continuity, and continuation across this rupture”³⁰⁰ hence a continuous work on the relationship,³⁰¹ a looking-out-for the other. And so “the calling in question of the I, coextensive with the manifestation of the Other in the face, we call language.”³⁰² And it is language that is or constitutes the relation.

It is the “becoming-conscious”³⁰³ of this that already implies language and relation because in the moment one becomes conscious one is also responsible. But, if responsibility lies in Infinity, we could never even come close to our responsibility, to the vulnerability of the Other. There is only a shared sensibility, and the meaningful encounter in vulnerability.

²⁹⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 298.

³⁰⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 284.

³⁰¹ Lévinas 1969, p. 80: “the same and the other cannot enter into a cognition that would encompass them; the relations that the separated being maintains with what transcends it are not produced on the ground of totality, do not crystallise into a system.”

³⁰² Lévinas, 1969, p. 171.

³⁰³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 305.

An awareness so as to not deepen the wound, but letting it open further and further — being there with it, holding the pain, the trauma.

The responsibility is exactly not in trying to mend, undo, or bridge the crack (the wound that has been suffered from the traumatic event), but to acknowledge the wound, and the responsibility in not being able to mend the crack, but holding space for it. That is possible with this consciousness. This is “distance and truth” and “results from an elementary gesture of the being that refuses totalisation. This refusal is produced as a relation with the non-encompassable, as the welcoming of alterity — concretely, as presentation of the face. The face arrests totalisation. The welcoming of alterity hence conditions consciousness and time.”³⁰⁴ What does this mean? — It seems to imply presence (*hineni*). But at the same time *also already a rupture of this presence*. Because, through the Other, “the present is broken open (opened to the event, to the future) by that which it cannot grasp or anticipate”³⁰⁵ — by the responsibility for the Other.

So, “the distance is untraversable, but at the same time traversed.” And, “separation and interiority, truth and language constitute the categories of the idea of infinity.”³⁰⁶ For one, this idea of infinity arguably is useful for therapy. Arguably, also Lévinas’ understanding of the impossibility of responsibility: It gives a newfound meaning to therapy and that which is therapeutical.

³⁰⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 281.

³⁰⁵ Newman, 2009, p. 107.

³⁰⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 62.

VII.II. Parallels between Trauma-Therapeutical Methods and Lévinas' Otherness

VII.II.i. *Trauma and Touch*

Seeing the face hence speaking must both encompass the traumatic moment and the healing quality — which, physically, is also what happened in Pumla Gobodo Madikizela's experience. Because there is a traumatising, there must be a relation because the trauma(tic experience) speaks through the person — and that requires a response. This then establishes a relation — and, in turn, calls to responsibility for the Other (in-between), for that relation(al 'bond'). It must be the trauma that is touched upon diligently; the shooting hand that is held. It is the immediate encounter that traumatises and leaves the trace of responsibility. This is a bodily encounter, potentially that which can be read to be the encounter with our reptilian brain. Information goes from there to the limbic system and only then gets digested in the prefrontal cortex which rationalises experiences hence is concerned with rationalising an experience hence also verbalising it.³⁰⁷

In chapter (I), it has been clarified — and this has been proven effective in trauma therapies as we have seen in chapter (VI) — that trauma must be discharged or integrated somatically if one is to re-arrive in the body (the body that has been identified — alongside the trauma itself and the vis-à-vis as 'Other'). And, with Lévinas, the second type of trauma — the meaningful encounter — has been illustrated with holding a newborn in one's hands; touching and holding the sensible and already (as holding already implies touch and trauma).

³⁰⁷ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 66f.

Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language.³⁰⁸

VII.II.ii. Presence

This would be in accordance with the bottom-up-approaches of trauma therapies: first, the body must be attended to, then everything else (because trauma is such a somatic experience and thus must be dealt with somatically, too). The face-to-face has been explored as that which is language that is constitutive of relation: expression, speech, thinking — the whole of the person. If that is the case, then what matters is ‘the embodied memory of the Other’; *hineni*. Lévinas claims that the Other addresses me from beyond history.³⁰⁹ Behind the face is a “pre-original, anarchic” identity, “older than every beginning.”³¹⁰ This, refers to something ‘beyond the body’ that must be taken seriously. It however, is also a way to describe the *co-regulation* that is used in *Somatic Experiencing (SE)* where two systems are present with each other, ‘holding’ as Helen Bamber would say, ‘the pain together.’ This and other methods (as discussed earlier) in *Somatic Experiencing (SE)* allow the patient to arrive in their body in the present.

Then, there is this vulnerable quality that is found in oneself again, too — the vulnerable quality requires presence and care, and that allows for relation. In the therapeutical setting itself, then, it is *hineni* that can be valuable in trauma work so that the patient can gain access to their vulnerability (their ‘suffering sensibility’) and transform it into a *source of sensibility* (“*Sensibilitätsresource*”).

³⁰⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 206.

³⁰⁹ Levinas, 1969, p. 23.

³¹⁰ Levinas, 1981/1998, p. 145.

This, however, requires the therapeutic ‘openness of being’ and an understanding of the infinity in between the Same and the Other. And that is a responsibility that the therapist must carry but in fact has already failed to. Because, when the ethical is attempted — which it must because ‘language calls for thinking’ — one is ‘speaking’ rather than ‘letting be.’ And this ‘solicits the other.’ Then, one cannot encompass them, cannot keep them in a safe space (as this is done with *SE* in pendulation or with *EDMR* with moving the fingers), where the therapist is comfortable and is of course also trying to make the patient comfortable.

However, arguably this only serves as a survival strategy. In order to gain a quality of life again, the focus on the work of ‘language’ is necessary. Now that the content of *Totality and Infinity* has been considered, the form follows to develop this thought further.

VII.III. Form: ‘Psychosomatic Experiencing’ of Lévinas

In the last section(s), it has been considered what ‘language’ means for Lévinas in *Totality and Infinity* and how that can be connected to the few trauma therapeutical examples that were given in chapter (VI). Now, although Lévinas writes of “spoken language over written language”³¹¹ speech happens both in the face-to-face as well as the answer to/of the face. Now, a question arises: Could the ‘nakedness of the face’ also be transported through writing? After all, what has not been considered is “the language of the inaudible, the language of the unheard of [...] Scripture!”³¹² Could it also be an encounter, can Lévinas’ ethics be experienced by reading about it?

³¹¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 85.

³¹² Lévinas, 1981, p. 178.

VII.III.i. A Case Study

For one, Lévinas can serve as a case study for a trauma patient. The reader witnesses a traumatised subject, and the inner processes of traumatising.³¹³ After trauma as commonly understood, there follows dissociation and an inability to express oneself in the usual ways. When considering the way that Lévinas writes about relation, then a dissociated trauma patient that longs for but is unable (yet aware of his and the human default) to connect with others — or rather, sees the effort to do so — could be identified. The ethical relation and its connection to the political especially makes clear that he writes from his experiences from WWII, that he, too, is verbalising something that cannot be put in words; the trauma of the Shoah. This would also explain why Otherness is written into his writing for, it may be the expression of an “inner representation of the invisible and inaudible physical reality”³¹⁴ that he was living with which found its way into writing. The perspective that his philosophy is formulated from is ambivalent: Although he writes about touch, he also writes about the impossibility to touch another human being. There seems to be a longing for a somatic-social aspect that he may not have been able to live if he was dissociated. As well as a resistance against totalitarian structures in politics (and an awareness how that can come between humans).

Arguably, since, as Bessel van der Kolk says: “writing helps as we are listening to ourselves while we do,”³¹⁵ Lévinas may have overcome or at least dealt with his trauma through (implicitly) writing about it. Although Lévinas writes of “spoken language over

³¹³ Please note that this is merely the perspective of a philosopher, and not of a qualified (trauma) therapist.

³¹⁴ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 280.

³¹⁵ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 284.

written language,”³¹⁶ speech happens both in the face and the recognition or answer thereof. And, could the ‘nakedness of the face’ not also be transported through writing which is a reflection of something ‘rational’ that Lévinas also attributes to language? — the Otherness that he writes about would then also be his own to discover.

How does the reader come to ‘bear witness’ in the sense that was elucidated in the previous chapters? Is it possible that one could bear witness to Lévinas in the Lévinasian and a trauma-therapeutical sense that has been discussed; ethico-somatically (as well as Lévinas witnessing himself)?

If Lévinas says that in the face-to-face what is seen or recognised is ‘undone over and over’³¹⁷ — and verbal signs are undone by “the face of him who speaks,”³¹⁸ how could writing or reading be a witnessing of an-other and their traumat(tic experience) in the Lévinasian sense?

VII.III.ii. Embodied Cognition

As can be witnessed in Lévinas’ writing, “our physiology provides the concepts for our philosophy.”³¹⁹ Marianna Bolognesi, a linguist at the International Center for Intercultural Exchange in Siena, Italy, puts it this way:

The classical view of cognition is that language is an independent system made with abstract symbols that work independently from our bodies. This view has been

³¹⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 85.

³¹⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 204.

³¹⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 204.

³¹⁹ As Lakoff wrote in his introduction to Benjamin Bergen’s book *Louder than words: The New Science of How the Mind Makes Meaning* (2012).

challenged by the embodied account of cognition which states that language is tightly connected to our experience. Our bodily experience.³²⁰

So, we must look closely at the body (of thought) in this investigation; it allows the reader to access their Otherness, one 'is affected' because the experience is (implicitly) shared, and one does get to know Lévinas somatically. This can be located in the limbic brain that is responsible for emotion as well as memory and imagination.³²¹ It even explains how poetry and abstract writing have a trauma-therapeutical effect. It also explains why trauma therapies are mostly art and movement based; they are all concerned with a kind of expression; what Lévinas might call the "creative Infinite"³²² (which the therapist must take responsibility for).

But, embodied cognition suffice to be compared to the face-to-face? — for the ethical encounter and the responsibility that comes with it? After all, "the abstractions and generalisations of phenomenology cannot yield the fine-grained texture of lived experience"³²³ and "nothing psychological would correspond to the simplicity of the physiological sensation."³²⁴ What if we are not (merely) somatically, but psychosomatically witnessing Lévinas' process?

VII.III.iii. Psychotraumatheapeutical Writing/Reading

Now, of course there is a difference in reading Lévinas and considering the relation between therapist and patient, between subject and traumatised subject. One of these differences is

³²⁰ Chorost, 2014, p. 2.

³²¹ Bosnak, 2007.

³²² Lévinas, 1969, p. 104.

³²³ Westin, 2022, p. 464.

³²⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 187.

that, although Lévinas somatic state may fall under a sensible encounter by reading him, it is impossible to be present with his whole person, only with a medium. Or is that the only way with which the traumatised can be present anyway? Never fully, but through a medium? — Also when we are physically with another person, there is a medium that the trauma is processed through; the body. And whether we read from a traumatised subject about a bodily encounter or do encounter a traumatised subject bodily, the trauma is implicit(ly present), and we are affected. This would then mean that reading Lévinas differs in content and form in the sense that the content is about the encounter that can happen through the face-to-face which is about Otherness as the vis-à-vis and trauma as Otherness, while witnessing his process by reading and engaging with it as a case study is about Otherness as the body, and in the mind. What they share however, is the individual expression. So, the trauma is not expressed by the works of art or writing, it is not the piece that reflects the therapeutical value, not whatever is produced in the process. The question is if the person was able to really express themselves, if it was a work of *language*. If it was, what is the consequence?

Arguably, it is the soul (or psyche) that can be felt because one is not encompassed by the physiological response to the person or the being together. Then, the psyche (or ‘soul’) of the person becomes tangible through ‘the things.’ If that is the case, then what matters is ‘the embodied memory of the Other;’ *hineni*. Lévinas claims that the Other addresses me from beyond history.³²⁵ Behind the face is a “pre-original, anarchic” identity, “older than every beginning.”³²⁶ If it is the language of the soul that is transported, then ‘language conditions thought’ — and this calls the reader to responsibility.

³²⁵ Levinas, 1969, p. 23.

³²⁶ Levinas, 1981/1998, p. 145.

If I go off embodied cognition, reading Lévinas changes the physiology of our body as the mind is so intertwined with it. So, simply engaging with his thought may raise an awareness of a traumatised body and its needs. Namely: the longing for relation in a peace-, and respectful way by changing our perspective and understanding of what trauma actually breaks: the connection between bodily symptoms and our body of thought.

It turns out that language is both bodily language and somatic expression as well as verbal language as expressed through words. It seems that the bodily and somatic aspect are closely connected to the cognitive and verbal aspect in Lévinas' philosophy as language is vision, expression, speech, thought, written word, and 'resonance,' or 'co-regulation.' This even works when I attribute his writing with embodied cognition as one is touched without being touched physically yet somatically and cognitively affected by his theory. It is perhaps this dimension that he tries to break and keep open when he considers language and relation in *Totality and Infinity*. It is the physical boundaries that are broken apart through that which is not physical but physically sensed. It is that which must simply be lived out and experienced — with others, *and because of others*. This is the Lévinasian effect that affects due to Embodied Cognition. This must be lived out if therapy is to be ethical.

So, what is the take-home from Lévinas' writing (body) for trauma therapy? — Although it has been stated that therapy is about building a safe container, it is also true that, for Lévinas, therapy (if ethical) is actually about freedom — and the impossibility of responsibility. But, if “the things are naked, by metaphor”³²⁷ — if the vulnerability of the face, if the language of the Other “addresses me from beyond history,”³²⁸ (as is the case with

³²⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 74f.

³²⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 23.

therapeutical work in the face-to-face or in the sense of art/writing/movement) in our shared humanity hence vulnerability — then one must take on that impossibility, infinitely.

VIII. Conclusion

Vis-à-vis

Towards

Toward

with respect to

across from³²⁹

I have attempted to answer three questions. The first — and main one — ‘When Lévinas claims that the relationship between the Same and the Other is language in *Totality and Infinity*, what is meant by the Same, what is meant by the Other, what is meant by language, what is meant by relationship?’ — was answered in order to explore the connection, contribution, and enhancement of *Totality and Infinity* to trauma therapy.

None of the concepts (Same, Other, language, relationship) could be understood if one does not concern themselves with the “traumatism of astonishment”³³⁰ discussed in section (II.I.) “The Same and the Other” in the part on “Discourse and Ethics.” It is the “experience of something absolutely foreign,”³³¹ a “pure knowledge”³³² or “experience.”³³³ That, for Lévinas, however, does not (or must not) have the negative connotation that ‘trauma’ always has. The ‘experience of something absolutely foreign’ is, in fact, the

³²⁹ These are translations of the German word “*Gegenüber*” (noun) or “*gegenüber*” (adverb) in response to a thought that Armin Pixner shared: “*Wir sind nicht alle Therapeut:innen, aber alle stehen einander gegenüber.*” (Translated as: “Not all of us are therapists, but we all stand across from each other.”)

³³⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 73.

³³¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 73.

³³² Lévinas, 1969, p. 73.

³³³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 73.

experience of life in all its rawness. This describes the traumatic experience, too — but also has a different connotation.

The traumatic experience was elucidated: Due to their anthropological vulnerability, however, grown humans as opposed to other animals have less of a natural way of dealing with the ‘absolutely foreign’ (also due to their idea of the familiar), and are prone to physical and psychological pain, because it is not discharged and integrated somatically. There is a ‘problematic separation between same and other that belong together,’ an alienation from oneself and others: a dissociation. If this vulnerability is not attended to in the face of alterity, of Otherness, of something ‘foreign,’ then the traumatic experience leaves a “psychic wound” due to an “experience which causes abnormal stress,” in turn due to a “vital discrepancy between threatening factors and individual coping abilities.”³³⁴

To illustrate ‘trauma’ throughout the text, I have used the metaphor of a broken surface, of a crack, a partition in the ground: “*Shibboleth*.” This illustrates ‘dissociation’ which I have identified as the ‘essence of trauma’ (in this thesis) with Bessel van der Kolk. Dissociation is the separation between the body and the mind hence between two entities that, amongst others, make up one’s sense of self. It is an internal separation, an alienation from or within oneself. Due to this separation, this *Shibboleth*, the inability to cope with the traumatic experience remains; a helplessness. In order for the traumatised to “gain control over their own ship”³³⁵ again it needs a vulnerable Other that exposes their whole Being to the possibility of pain, and with that the possibility of re-traumatisation. Herein lies the different connotation of trauma, the ‘traumatism of astonishment.’ It is an encounter with the Other in which one’s vulnerable ‘Otherness’ (due to these other traumata) is met in reciprocity. For,

³³⁴ Fischer/Riedesser, 2009, p. 84.

³³⁵ van der Kolk, 2014, p. 4,

the exposure of one to the possibility of pain, invites the other to do so, too. This is association. In the awareness of this potential re-traumatisation due to the exposure of the vulnerability of the face, the Same is “physically present with one’s pain.”³³⁶ A (re-)traumatisation would be violence by the Same. Such violence causes “useless suffering,”³³⁷ which Lévinas defines as “the pain of the other”³³⁸ through “extreme passivity, impotence, abandonment, solitude.”³³⁹

Instead of ‘passivity’ and ‘solitude,’ trauma therapy — and this ‘traumatism of astonishment that I have called the Lévinasian trauma — must be about an active relation. Herein lies a connection to (*SE*) trauma therapy or other types of trauma work (i.e. movement, dance, art therapies) that rely on physical presence in order to “hold”³⁴⁰ the pain together — and anything that can or must be felt. Then, in spite the difference through traumat(tic experience), the lived experience of the body is shared and rediscovered.

This situation of exposure requires what Lévinas calls ‘language,’ facilitated through the reciprocal “openness of being.”³⁴¹ This ‘openness of being’ reveals the ‘common’ space of freedom in which the potential of violence, or re-traumatisation as well as infinitely many other actions and occurrences lie. For this situation, the image of the partition in the ground, *Shibboleth*, is useful, because, in this exposure, both Same and Other stand across that partition in the ground. There is a distance in between. In this moment or this situation, one becomes aware that anything is possible. And one must ‘know’ or ‘be conscious’ in order to

³³⁶ Bamber, 1998, p. 298.

³³⁷ Lévinas, 1981.

³³⁸ Lévinas, 1981, p. 158.

³³⁹ Lévinas, 1981, p. 158.

³⁴⁰ Bamber, 1998, p. 298.

³⁴¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 44.

‘avoid the instant of inhumanity’ (i.e. re-traumatisation). ‘Language’ then, describes the moments in which the distance is bridged. These are the moments in which the vulnerability and truthfulness of the face hence of the essence of the other Being is visible and recognised or shows itself. The ethical relation is characterised through “the formal structure of language” — a “straightforwardness”³⁴² that is due to “speaking, rather than ‘letting be’”³⁴³ (the latter being the first type of encounter with the face: a mere bodily or even more primordial one). Here, the truth of the other Being is recognised. In the ethical relation, then, one speaks in response to the face. Here, the face *shows itself*. This response or ‘language’ is always a meeting of responsibility which implies that the Same and the Other are then in the ethical relation. The face calls the Other to responsibility which means to be present (*hineni*) but also to speak to the Other, to address it. In the moment of the encounter — when the ethical responsibility is called upon by the face and met through showing the face — lies the awareness of one’s common humanity, or “a commons of the body.”³⁴⁴ If the response is personal, then also that which is spoken (‘all signs can serve as language’) allows for this common understanding of one another’s humanity. In expressions of ‘things’ however, the truth of the face remains hidden. This truth (and with it the vulnerability) can only be kept if the awareness of the Otherness remains. Then, a ‘traumatism of astonishment’ is possible continuously.

In this situation — which can be the therapeutical setting — “the presence of a being not entering into, but overflowing, the sphere of the same determines its ‘status’ as infinite.”³⁴⁵ And it is the ‘idea of infinity’ that maintains the ethical relation, and that must

³⁴² Lévinas, 1969, p. 85.

³⁴³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 195.

³⁴⁴ Kearney, 2020, p. 8.

³⁴⁵ Lévinas, 1969, p. 196.

define trauma work. This “openness of being”³⁴⁶ could provide a basis for trauma therapies. That is how ‘language’ can be understood, and also the condition under which it can be expressed. It is a sensing of the space of freedom, of absolute uncertainty, thus of alterity and Otherness. In trauma therapies this space is particularly relevant because it serves as the container for individual self expression (in Lévinasian terms this is ‘speech’). Lévinas’ text is asking for meeting that which is Other in oneself and others hence a being present with the pain of the other, for facing the distance between one another; facing Otherness together. This ‘together’ is the language that must be spoken, established, found through the “face to face.”³⁴⁷

The ‘vulnerability of the face’ can also be transported through text which makes Lévinas (and also this thesis) a case study for trauma work. If one is open as a reader, one encounters Lévinas’ trauma, and witnesses its potential transformation. The transformation happens through the witness themselves (in this case it is you): through this shared experience of an-other language (which is possible according to embodied cognition), there is a (kind of) relation. And it is “this relation that does not fill the abyss of separation, but confirms it.”³⁴⁸ The point is: It is about figuring out one’s language with the ‘idea of infinity’ in mind and body. This is what trauma therapy can facilitate with an ‘openness of being.’ In that sense,

How can the findings (psychosomatics of Lévinas’ ethics be connected/applied to enhance the therapeutical relationship) in trauma therapy? What does reading

³⁴⁶ Lévinas, 1969, p. 44.

³⁴⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 295.

³⁴⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 295.

Lévinas account of the ethical relation in *Totality and Infinity* tell us about the needs of the traumatised? What is the therapeutic relevance and take-home from Lévinas?

I will summarise our conclusion with Jacques Derrida's *Adieu*:

We must not despair of philosophy. In Emmanuel Lévinas' book (*Totality and Infinity*) — where, it seems to me, philosophy in our time has never spoken in more sober manner, putting back into question, as we must, our ways of thinking [...] — we are called upon to become responsible for what philosophy essentially is, by welcoming [...] the idea of the Other [...] the relation with *autrui*.³⁴⁹

I hope that this piece serves as an example of what philosophy can do — beyond rational thinking and verbal language; on a sensory-, and psychosomatic level. Hopefully, it offers a perspective on the top-down (mind to body) approaches, challenging the one-sided (bottom-up) approach, currently used in trauma-therapies.

Further, I hope that it could emphasise the necessity of openness and presence as the qualities that the therapist must cultivate for an ethical relationship with the patient. In turn, the patient may be able to use this openness to deal with the part of themselves that still holds their trauma in the present. It can only be held together — which requires the 'openness of being' (*hineni*).

The hypothesis I investigated in this thesis was this: The Levinasian ideas of Otherness and the ethical relation turn out fruitful for trauma therapy. The Lévinasian ethics of alterity and the conception of Otherness is about an effect that affects. So, the Lévinasian ethics in is about a traumatic effect that affects. This affectedness must be lived out.

³⁴⁹ Derrida, 1999, p. 8f.

The findings of this thesis can give more details to this hypothesis: How can this affectedness be lived out? In order to heal, trauma must be discharged and integrated somatically through and with others. How, is for each one of us to figure out. For, therapy is about holding the pain together — being present with it — in order for the patient to learn to hold it on their own; owning that vulnerable part; speaking to, with, and from this ‘Other.’

This vulnerability is ‘more passive than experience’ when there is ‘useless’ suffering. It can become a meaningful resource if this ‘Other’(ness) becomes ‘conscious’ and is must be expressed somatically and socially, in order to experience (the Other’s³⁵⁰) Infinity *actively*. Then, suffering and trauma become a ‘discourse’: through the response to the ‘traumatism of astonishment.’ This is what therapy must facilitate. This vulnerable part might be the lightest one in all of us — *yet the key to being fully alive*. ‘You will know it by its graveness.’

Take my hand.

³⁵⁰ One’s own and that of others.

*

“Corona” by Paul Celan, translated. Pierre Joris

Autumn eats its leaf out of my hand: we are friends.

We shell time from the nuts and teach it to walk:

time returns to the shell.

In the mirror is Sunday,

in the dream we sleep,

the mouth speaks true.

...

it is time, for this to be known!

It is time that the stone took the trouble to bloom,

that unrest's heart started to beat.

It's time for it to be time.

It is time.

Epilogue

To speak with Celan: ‘Es ist Zeit’:

Es ist Zeit, dass der Stein sich zu blühen
bequemt,

He writes: It is time that stone took the trouble to bloom. A reminder of the Preface: *Shibboleth*, a partition in the ground, a crack: In trauma — metaphorically — the ground parts, and one falls into the gaping void. Now, if we take the Lévinasian conception of trauma (therapy) — his ethics of alterity — seriously, then the aim of dealing with trauma is not to close or bridge this void but to learn to live with it. In it. Down below, in the depth. It is ‘too deep’ to adequately express, and it is too grave to fully hold it. But, maybe, if one tries responsibly — if one responds to the trauma adequately, ethically — then *the crack becomes ever more wide*. If that part is encountered in an ethical way — in oneself and others — with “openness,”³⁵¹ then there are no structures that are seemingly grounding but in fact at risk of breaking over and over. There is in fact a newfound ‘ground’ in this openness. A grounding within one’s vulnerable part. This is a grounding in the *psyche* or soul oriented toward the Other. This allows for the “movement of the soul”³⁵² “without fear or trembling,”³⁵³ in full awareness that there is so much yet to be discovered with fluidity, movement (e-motion),

³⁵¹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 44.

³⁵² Goodman/Grover, 2008, p. 249.

³⁵³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 85.

lightness. If you “let everything happen to you,”³⁵⁴ then you might recognise that the stone is no longer. What remains?

— *the blossom.*

*

³⁵⁴ Rilke, *The Book of Hours*.

Outlook³⁵⁵

I would like to end with a plea for therapy to be fostered by the state, to become more accessible — and to rethink that which is therapeutic, namely “an interactional process between two people able to allow mutual influence. This depends on a larger political context that allows for dialogue in situations of unequal power.”³⁵⁶ As Lévinas says: “justice is the right to speak.”³⁵⁷ And this shall be facilitated with the mind’s “openness”³⁵⁸ upon the true (that has been identified as the main or most valuable therapeutic quality) hence “the welcoming of the face and the work of justice — which condition the birth of truth itself.”³⁵⁹ And, once conditioned, “the aspiration to radical exteriority [...] which, above all, we must ‘let be,’ constitutes truth.”³⁶⁰ Often, radical exteriority is difficult for those who feel especially much³⁶¹, who hurt especially deeply and/or those that are particularly vulnerable (i.e. due to experiences of violence). *And that could be each and every one of us.* But due to societal structures — economic inequality, patriarchy, white supremacy, colonialism etc. — some believe themselves to be more safe than others (and are in fact within those structures). *But, healing occurs* where those structures are rethought, refought, redone: *through and with others.* So, since it is societal structures that allow or even facilitate such pain, it is there that

³⁵⁵ An attempt to go beyond the self-referentiality of philosophy.

³⁵⁶ Kirmayer, 2008, p. 457.

³⁵⁷ Lévinas, 1969, p. 298.

³⁵⁸ Lévinas, 1969, p. 44.

³⁵⁹ Lévinas, 1969, p. 28.

³⁶⁰ Lévinas, 1969, p. 29.

³⁶¹ See, for example: Wager, 2020.

therapeia (“to cure,” “to heal,” “service done to the sick”³⁶²) must be implemented. The “openness of being”³⁶³ — love? — could turn political, into “a politics that is not politics.”³⁶⁴ This connection between the therapeutic — and especially trauma-therapeutic — work, and political activism ought to be explored further in research and practice. And here — perhaps — is the most valuable aspect of Lévinas’ contribution to trauma work (that is in essence any type of social work, any type of work ‘Doing’ that is with and about Being): his philosophy is not about the love for wisdom, but *the wisdom of love* — and *its political power*. And this power lies precisely in *an awareness of one’s own powerlessness, of one’s vulnerability to life* — and *one’s responsibility for, within, and because of the Infinite*.³⁶⁵

³⁶² *Etymology Dictionary*, 2022.

³⁶³ Lévinas, 1969, p. 44.

³⁶⁴ Lévinas, 1969, p. 21f.

³⁶⁵ Touch as well as vulnerability and sensibility, trauma from dissociation through ongoing ‘useless suffering’ as well as the meaningful encounter could be explored further, too. This is not the end. It is the beginning.



etwas

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Abstract (en.)

‘The abstractions and generalisations of phenomenology cannot yield the fine-grained nuances of lived experience,’ says Anna Westin. This thesis defies this statement and attempts to do exactly that; testing the limits and limitlessness of Philosophy and in Lévinasian phenomenology. It is a reflection on trauma. It is an exploration of the psychosomatic and therapeutical value and with that, healing potential of Lévinas’ conception of Otherness (that is central to his Ethics of Alterity). Since trauma is about relationlessness, the question of how to relate is specifically relevant in this thesis (and in trauma work.)

The thesis asks what it is that defines an ethical relation (which is ‘language’ according to Emmanuel Lévinas) with trauma therapy in mind. It is this focus on that which is ‘Other’ as opposed to the familiar (the Same) as it is this estrangement that defines the trauma(tic experience). This entails the body as an Other, the mind as an Other (breaking out of totalitarian thinking and structures), the vis-à-vis as an Other, the trauma(tic experience) and the healing process as Other, too. The key is the face-to-face encounter and ‘language’ for Lévinas. The face-to-face-encounter occurs through recognising the vulnerability of the face and responding to the vulnerability through signs such as words.

The trauma(tic experience) is thought as that which alienates oneself from everything, where Otherness becomes encompassing. The Levinasian ‘traumatic effect’ is an encounter between two persons that allows for meaningful experience. Trauma, however, does not allow for a meaningful experience. It cannot be grasped or classified — Instead it is followed by ‘useless’ suffering. This, again from a psychosomatic perspective of (the) trauma(tic experience) and its consequences, shows amongst other disorders (i.e.

depersonalization, detemporalisation) dissociation. In dissociation as well as in ‘useless suffering,’ the subject does not sense themselves and others anymore, has lost their connection to the body and the mind, cannot regulate their behaviour any longer. Lévinas describes ‘useless suffering’ as extreme ‘passivity, abandonment, solitude.’ And, in ‘suffering, sensibility becomes a vulnerability.’ This is where trauma therapy can be enhanced by Lévinas: this awareness of vulnerability and the responsibility that comes with it calls for radical openness and presence with the patient and their process so as to support them in their fragile steps into the world again.

As can be said with Lévinas, anything — after all, ‘infinity’ is the ‘absolutely other’ — can happen when this Otherness is explored in ‘trauma.’ Without totalitarian structures or thinking of how this process ought to be done, without a restriction on a certain method or school. The awareness of this responsibility toward vulnerability also means that the therapist could never do justice to the patient in their ‘naked face,’ their needs in this vulnerability. But, since one has recognised this vulnerability — which in trauma therapy (and care professions generally) is a given — since the patient *needs something*; their ‘face’ has ‘turned to me,’ the one that is addressed must respond and there is responsible, so as to not violate the Other in any way, but support (‘witness’) them with clarity (a ‘straightforwardness’). This requires a radical openness with (oneself and for) the patient, which then becomes a reciprocal openness. In order to be in relation, explicit language is necessary for Lévinas. However, since language is connected to thinking (too), it has its limits. Thinking cannot contain infinity. Because of this, a distance (or an awareness of the distance) must remain. This makes a space of freedom and individual unfolding possible while still experiencing (and facilitating) relational moments of touch.

This thesis serves as a reminder that therapeutic work requires a lot of self experience and that that which has therapeutic value cannot be acquired by a specific school or method. Honesty as sensibility — ‘Truth’ as Lévinas says (which is sought in the Other) — can again become a ‘resource of sensibility’ (“stabilising factors,” as they are called in Levine’s *Somatic Experiencing Therapy*). This reciprocal openness and communication is what therapy must facilitate.

Healing trauma works often through the body. Another way of thinking healing is psychosomatic writing: a text that contains both the body and soul (*psyche*) of the writer. If one is open as a reader, this may have an effect that affects (in vulnerability) which calls for a response, hence, for responsibility.

Abstract (dt.)

Diese Arbeit ist ein Versuch Emmanuel Lévinas' Ethik der Alterität (im spezifischen seine Konzeptionalisierung von Andersheit in der zwischenmenschlichen Begegnung und die daraus resultierende ethische Verantwortung für den Anderen) für den trauma-therapeutischen Diskurs fruchtbar zu machen. Diese Ethik der Alterität baut auf der Idee von trauma(tischen Erfahrung) als einer Erfahrung von Andersheit (Anders-Sein und Fremd-Sein) auf, die mit dem Moment der Begegnung ('Trauma des Staunens') bei Lévinas verglichen wird. Allerdings unterscheidet sich das Trauma mit dem therapeutisch gearbeitet wird, und das Lévinassche 'Trauma'. Trauma wird durch Gewalterfahrungen davongetragen, die schwerwiegende beeinträchtigende Folgen wie Dissoziation, Depersonalisation und Detemporalisation haben können. Wohingegen das Lévinassche Trauma das *Potential* für Gewalt birgt, nicht aber Gewalt ausübt.

In diesem Potential für Gewalt liegt allerdings schon die Unmöglichkeit einer ethischen Beziehung, da das, wofür man im Moment, in dem man die Verletzlichkeit des Anderen erkennt (da sie einem als 'Antlitz' gezeigt wird), verantwortlich wird — für deren Verwundbarkeit und den eigenen Umgang damit — überwältigend ist. Dieser Moment ruft zu einem verantwortlichen Dialog auf, der immer auch in einer Form verstörend sein kann, da es in Lévinas' Sprache um Klarheit als auch um Offenheit geht, um Denken als auch Fühlen.

Dissoziation ist als Beispiel einer der Folgen aus der traumatische Erfahrung angegeben, um die Wichtigkeit und Notwendigkeit der therapeutischen Beziehung darzustellen. In der Dissoziation spaltet sich die Patient:in von den zu schmerzhaften Erfahrungsanteilen ab. Das resultiert in einer Unfähigkeit sich körperlich und geistig zu

spüren (sprich, in Beziehung und im Dialog mit dem eigenen Körper und zu sein), als auch — bzw. dadurch auch — in der Unfähigkeit in Beziehung mit Anderen zu treten. Dafür braucht es den therapeutischen Berührungspunkt, das Lévinassche ‘Trauma des Staunens.’ Dies ist eine Erfahrung von Andersheit, die verschiedene Formen der ‘Andersheit’ birgt, von denen einige in der Arbeit besprochen werden: der Körper (und dessen phänomenologische Situiertheit) als Anderer, die damit einhergehenden unbewussten Prozesse, die Begegnung mit einer anderen Person als Andere, der Ausdruck (‘Sprache’) als Anderer insbesondere im Gesichte einer traumatischen Erfahrung, als auch die gemeinsame Beziehung als Andere.

Genau in der Verletzlichkeit, in der ‘Wunde,’ in dem ‘Trauma’, liegt die ethische Beziehung, oder der notwendige Versuch eine solche aufzubauen trotz der eigenen Hilflosigkeit. Der Fokus auf die Wunde (die als *Shibboleth* — als unüberbrückbarer Riss im Boden veranschaulicht ist) ist unausweichlich. Denn, dadurch wird die radikale Offenheit für die ‘Unendlichkeit’ als das ‘absolut Andere’ und somit die Begegnung mit dem Anderen als absolut Anderem bedingt. Das eröffnet den Patient:innen den Freiraum der Wunde Ausdruck zu verleihen (und die Unmöglichkeit dafür Verantwortung zu übernehmen, diese als Therapeut:in als auch Mensch aber trotzdem zu haben). Statt sich also an totalitären Denkstrukturen, wie eine Behandlung zu sein hat, festzuhalten (das würde dem Anderen Gewalt antun), muss man als Gegenüber selbst in der Verwundbarkeit, in der Selbsterfahrung bleiben, um den Patienten in einer Weise (dieser Weise) zu begegnen, die es ihnen — laut Lévinas — möglich macht, ihre eigene Wunde und Verwundbarkeit zu erkennen und daraus zu schöpfen. Dies kann auch durch ‘Dinge’ ermöglicht sein, die aus einer Verwundbarkeit heraus entstanden sind — durch Text, Bewegung, allerlei Kunstwerke und Selbstausdruck, etc. die im therapeutischen Kontext gestaltet werden, um die Erfahrung auszuleben, der Erfahrung psychosomatisch Ausdruck zu verleihen. Traumatherapien wie *Somatic*

Experiencing arbeiten meist über den Körper, d.h., sie sind *Bottom-Up-Approches*. Diese These dient also außerdem dazu, zu zeigen, dass auch *Top-Down-Approaches* wertvoll sind — wie der Versuch, trotz der Sprachlosigkeit einer traumatischen Erfahrung und deren Folgen eine Sprache zu finden. Eine Sprache, die der ‘Wahrheit’, wie Lévinas sagen würde, d.h. der eigenen Verwundbarkeit oder auch ‘Wunde’, dem Trauma, entspricht. Um in Beziehung zu sein ist explizite Sprache für Lévinas unausweichlich. Dies kann allerdings zu einer (Re-)Traumatisierung führen, da die Sprache mit dem Denken verbunden ist. Das Denken ist immer auch begrenzt, es kann die Unendlichkeit (des Anderen) nicht fassen. Dadurch muss immer eine Distanz zu dem Anderen bestehen bleiben (oder ein Bewusstsein der Distanz). Dieses Bewusstsein kann sowohl den Freiraum ermöglichen, als auch Momente der Berührung (und somit: Beziehung).

Text (sowohl schreibend als auch lesend) wird somit als eine Begegnung mit dieser Andersheit gedacht und dessen psychosomatisch-therapeutisches Potential erläutert. Das wiederum stellt die philosophische Arbeit für andere — zum Beispiel therapeutische Diskurse — in ein neues Licht, da auch das Denken fühlt und Bewegungen des *Soma* (des Körpers) als auch der *Psyche* (der Seele) darin reflektiert sind. Das affiziert und ruft zur Antwort und Verantwortung (in der Verwundbarkeit).