

## BEYOND CONCEPT: DERRIDA AND LEVINAS ON METAPHOR

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The aim of this paper is to examine Levinas's and Derrida's concept of metaphor. The paper compares their account on metaphor that shows well their position toward religion. Both authors agree that metaphor is connected to the realm of "beyond concept" but Levinas identifies the metaphor, in *Carnets de Captivité*, with monotheistic divinity. Derrida does not. The conclusion is that Derrida cannot be considered negative theologian nor religious thinker.

**Keywords:** Levinas – Metaphor – Discourse – Beyond Being – Derrida

### 1. Introduction

In the first part of this paper, I aim to define Levinas's notion of language. I then offer a detailed examination of his notion of metaphor. My interest in this topic stems from the discussion on Levinas's relationship with literature.<sup>1</sup> I will compare this with Derrida's concept of metaphor. In *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida also highlights Levinas's ambiguous relationship with literature and the importance of the monotheistic God in Levinas's concept of metaphor (Derrida 2001, 97 – 192). My position in this paper may appear to be quite close to that held by Dominique Janicaud (1991), who claims that there was a theological turn in French philosophy. However, Janicaud includes Derrida in this theological turn, together with Levinas and Marion, although Derrida's position was never theological. I will show this with reference to their different approaches to metaphor.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There have been a number of books and texts published on this subject. Cf. Cohen (2016), Gritz (2004), Fagenblat and Cools (2020), Wehrs (2013), Gibson (1999), and Robins (1999).

<sup>2</sup> For the literature on Derrida's relation to religion, see Hart (1989), Taylor (1987a), Taylor (1987b), Sherwood and Hart (2005), and De Vries (1999). See also the issue of the journal *Eidos* dedicated to the analysis of Derrida's text *Faith and Knowledge* under the title *Toward Postsecular Culture* (Volume 5, No. 3, 2021).

## 2. Levinas's Concept of Language

Let us first turn to Levinas's concept of language. Levinas characterizes language as based on *speaking* and *discourse*, in relation to the *Other* and situated beyond the concept that is representing objectivity: "[...] language institutes a relation irreducible to the subject-object relation: the *revelation* of the other. In this revelation only can language as a system of signs be constituted" (1979, 73). *Discourse* as language is not a transfer of shared meaning, of concepts; rather, it is a pre-original *speaking* as a condition of the possibility of language. This speaking happens in the face of the *Other* that calls upon us. This speaking is a condition of the possibility not only of language but also of ethics. Language as speaking is therefore ethical and infinite, in its capacity to surpass the *conceptual*. More precisely, language is ethical in my response to the *Other*, who calls upon me and is always antecedent to me.

But how can we get beyond concepts? We might be surprised by the answer Levinas gives in his unpublished notes on metaphor, insofar as he says that the possibility of surpassing the conceptual is a matter of the metaphorical. My aim will be to understand the notion of metaphor in Levinas and why he views metaphor as playing a major role in the experience of going "beyond the concept" – where this movement "beyond the concept" is the ethical experience *par excellence* and, as Derrida claims, the very origin of ethics. In the next section, I will explain Derrida's interpretation of Levinas's theory of metaphor.

## 3. Derrida's Critique of Levinas

Derrida criticizes Levinas on several occasions (in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, *Violence and Metaphysics*, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, and *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*), but he also draws inspiration from Levinas's thought. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, for example, Derrida takes Levinas's concept of otherness and applies it to animals while criticizing the fact that Levinas attributes otherness only to humans. He claims that alterity in Levinas is always deduced from the alterity of the Most High. I claim that this is true of some texts, especially later ones, but there are, of course, some texts where this is not so clear (*Existence and Existents*, *Le temps et l'autre*), which Derrida fails to appreciate.<sup>3</sup> In this article, I will examine a) Levinas's hypothesis as it is developed in his very early writing *Carnets de Captivité* and b) whether Derrida's critique still applies.

In *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida claims that in Levinas's thinking the concept of otherness does not have any positive value and that from this it follows that

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<sup>3</sup> See my other texts on this topic, for example Kuchtová (2021).

neither literature nor metaphor has any positive value as well. According to Derrida, Levinas describes otherness metaphor as merely rhetorical and proves it to be wrong:

What, then, is this encounter with the absolutely-other? Neither representation, nor limitation, nor conceptual relation to the same. The ego and the other do not permit themselves to be dominated or made into totalities by a concept of relationship. And first of all because the concept (material of language), which is always given to the other, cannot encompass the other, cannot include the other (Derrida 2001, 117).

Rhetoric may amount to the violence of theory, which reduces the other when it leads the other, whether through psychology, demagoguery, or even pedagogy which is not instruction (Derrida 2001, 132).

He therefore claims that in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas associates rhetoric (metaphors) and concepts with the opposite of the ethical, with totality. Totality represents a type of thinking that is situated within a system of concepts and meanings that is accessible to a third party. Totality is composed of concepts. The aim of *Totality and Infinity* is to show that it is possible to breach a domain of totality in order to access the ethical domain of the *Other*. Even if Levinas admits that a breach of totality is possible, he insists that this breach must happen in the domain of the *Other*, which is the only ethical domain of alterity. The breach cannot happen in the domain of totality, in the domain of concepts.

Derrida's claim is that, for Levinas, it is not enough to use metaphors to reach beyond concepts. He seems to suggest that in *Totality and Infinity*, metaphor does not sufficiently breach the transfer of meaning and cannot reveal genuine alterity. Moreover, metaphor is composed of words, which are supposed to always be in the domain of totality. Derrida interprets Levinas's position on metaphor in such a way that the absolute alterity is conceived of by Levinas as an encounter absolutely purified of concepts, purified of the third party that would transfer meanings – without metaphor. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas explicitly says that the real encounter with the other should be “immediate, face to face without intermediary, without any metaphor” (Levinas 1979, 112).

In his later works – more precisely, in *Otherwise than Being* – Levinas changes this terminology, and with it his position. Firstly, he no longer relies on the distinction between *Same* and *Other* from *Totality and Infinity* and instead draws a distinction between *Saying* and *Said*. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas says that *Saying* needs to be betrayed in *Said* – here, he is referring to the fact that the conceptual pervades the non-conceptual. These two domains are interlaced only to some extent, and for Levinas,

*Said* – or as we might say, *concept* or *word* – is still somehow negative. As a consequence, metaphor is as well. *Said* amounts to a betrayal of *speaking* as *discourse*. Levinas admits that this betrayal is inevitable, but it still has a negative value. *Saying* therefore remains the key domain of alterity, even if alterity is now communicated through *Said*, by words and concepts or metaphors. *Saying* represents a nonviolent language. According to Derrida, as Levinas aims to surpass concepts and words, he also wants to surpass metaphor insofar as the domain of alterity must be free of all literary figures, all concepts, all words – except, perhaps, the proper name of the other.

Derrida's interpretation relies on the presupposition that Levinas identifies the conceptual (or words) with the metaphorical. Derrida's own conception of metaphor is that metaphor surpasses but remains in the domain of the conceptual. According to Derrida, metaphor cannot be completely outside the domain of the conceptual. In Derrida, the conceptual and the non-conceptual are interlaced: it is not as though there is one domain that is the conceptual and another that is the non-conceptual. He does not share this presupposition with Levinas. For Derrida, the conceptual surpasses the conceptual from within. As Cristina de Peretti claims, Derrida deconstructs the conceptual:

[...] so it is possible to enrich it and to renew it, to reinvent it and to transform it; he uses the lucidity with which he undermines it; he tortures it constantly; he uses strange phrases in the sentences that appear very banal at first sight; he has a specific interest in a graphic reinscription of words (greffe) and in paleonymy; he has talent for discovering or inventing undecidable words with multiple meanings that resist conceptualization and any appropriation [...] (Peretti 2020, 1).

#### 4. Levinas's Concept of Metaphor in *Carnets de Captivité*

Yet indeed, Levinas aims to abandon metaphor only insofar as it is based on a sharing of concepts by words. If we take into consideration Levinas's unpublished writings on metaphor,<sup>4</sup> we can see that what he is looking for is metaphor *par excellence*: "Metaphor – the transfer that allows us to apprehend a meaning beyond the ability of the thinker – implies another type of *meaning* than that of meanings that can be translated into words" (Levinas 2011, 343).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Levinas's unpublished writings on metaphor can be found in Levinas (2009). As Howard Caygill observes, *Carnets de captivité* contains more thoughts on literature than Levinas's other writings (Caygill 2010, 27 – 35).

<sup>5</sup> In the original French: "La métaphore – le transport qui permet d'appréhender un sens dépassant la capacité du penseur – suppose un autre ordre de signification que celui de significations se traduisant en mots."

However, as Levinas also says: “The Alterity of I that takes itself for another may strike the imagination of the poet precisely because it is but the play of the same [...]” (Levinas 1979, 37). My claim is that Levinas rejects poetic experience because it is central to Heidegger’s later philosophy. Pagan poetic experience as the manifestation of being is, according to Levinas, a contemporary substitute for spirituality:

Culture and artistic creation are part of the ontological order itself. They are ontological par excellence; they make it possible to comprehend being. So it is no accident that the exaltation of the culture and of cultures, the exaltation of the artistic aspect of the culture, guides contemporary spiritual life (Levinas 2003, 17).

This is the first reason why Levinas seems to distrust poetry – i.e., because the later Heidegger gives it a central place, and Levinas’s aim is to dissociate himself from Heidegger’s philosophy. Therefore, Levinas dissociates himself from the way Heidegger conceives of poetry. He considers Heidegger’s philosophy overly ontological, and he is convinced that philosophy should not dwell in but rather surpass being, going beyond being. We should also note that Derrida comes very close to Heidegger in *Violence and Metaphysics*, and in his later works he also tries to disassociate himself from Heidegger due to the latter’s political position, which was unacceptable (Derrida 1992, 3 – 23). We may nevertheless wonder what counts as a “bad” concept of poetry, or a “bad” metaphor, according to Levinas. Are there any “good” metaphors or “good theories” of poetry, or of art?

Is a metaphor “bad” insofar as it is based on comparison, or insofar as it represents a mere transfer of meaning or figure of the experience of being? Is a good metaphor therefore one that makes it possible to reach beyond concepts and beyond being? A so-called “bad” metaphor is one that compares objects or situations, one that translates one reality into another so it can serve as an element of cultural activities, to be used in a poem, for example (Levinas 2009, 228). By refusing to attribute a major role to poetry, the later Levinas aims to reject ontology and to underscore that the ethical is situated beyond being and beyond concepts. Ethics cannot be a question of truth and poetic experience, springing from Greek *poiesis*.

Another reason why the later Levinas seems to reject poetry is that he recognizes poetic activity as an expression of a poetic self. This is what he means by poetic or artistic experience guided by the self: it is a creation, a production, an expression of oneself and of one’s thinking, without being exposed to the other (Levinas 2009, 301).

Michael Oppenheim expresses this idea in the following way in his article *Loving the Neighbor: Some Reflections on Narcissism*:

Pieced together from his major philosophical works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, Levinas sees a fundamental tension between one's elemental egoism and that call of the other that resounds in the Torah. He characterizes one polarity of the I as being essentially turned back upon itself or being self-absorbed (Oppenheim 2007, 55).

Oppenheim developed the theory that modern Jewish philosophers such as Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas shared similar discourses on otherness that contrasted with the narcissism of Western culture. Levinas relates poetic production to the concept of anamnesis, represented by Plato as Socrates' notion of knowledge. All thinking is a mere recollection of innate ideas that are already present in our consciousness, in the ego. However, metaphor should not be based on the expression of ego rediscovering itself in thinking – in poetic production, the self returns home in a circular movement, as in the *Odyssey*, where passing by exteriority is but a means of return. If thinking were merely perpetual rediscovery of the self, nothing new could ever be brought to thinking. What is more, this would also imply a lack of responsibility for the other. The power of the metaphorical is therefore not hidden in narcissistic art or culture – metaphor seeks the meanings that are antecedent to cultural and poetic expressions of the narcissistic self. And it is precisely the idea of infinity that brings with it some novelty. Metaphor involves surpassing the concept or the idea, which is necessary in order to achieve novelty of thinking. Metaphor must therefore be accompanied by novelty, something from outside consciousness (self), from outside the concept. The point is to “refresh” the system of signs and meanings by introducing a new intentionality.

In his earlier works, and in *Carnets de Captivité* in particular, Levinas claims that although metaphor is a part of the system of meanings, its function is not to search for correlations between words or to compare analogous objects and situations. The role of metaphor is not to clarify or to substitute one idea with another, or to name something, but rather to sublimate, to elevate or to transmute our perception of objects and our thinking itself. Metaphorical experience therefore represents the possibility of reaching beyond concept; more than that, however, it also represents the possibility of surpassing our own perception of objects, and even our use of these objects. For Levinas this implies that metaphor makes it possible to “exit the experience, to think beyond what is given to us in our world” (2009, 231).<sup>6</sup> Metaphor thus guarantees

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<sup>6</sup> In the original French: “sortir de l'expérience, de penser plus loin que les données de notre monde.”

the ethical character of spirituality, according to the early Levinas (2009, 234). Thus we can see that Levinas in fact accentuates the role of metaphor. Nevertheless, he does not understand metaphor as something that is composed of concepts, as we learn from his unpublished writings.

Put simply, metaphor must breach the structures of the representation of objects in order to describe objects and qualities that are otherwise inaccessible by means of concepts (ibidem, 229). In this metaphorical experience beyond concepts, objects are associated with innumerable meanings. In *Carnets de captivité*, Levinas calls this experience “poetic abstraction” (ibidem). Poetic abstraction consists in pushing meanings and concepts to the limit by means of a superlative interrupting of the system of shared meanings. The superlative is a transcendence that makes it possible to exceed simplifying the denotation of objects. However, this does not mean that a word can reproduce or copy the material qualities of objects in order to penetrate them in a direct manner, reaching objects in their being, situated beyond consciousness. Rather, metaphor enables free associations of meanings that are based not on concepts but on a “trope”, defined as the creation of one singularity by another, with all this leading to an infinite multiplicity of meanings. The core of the metaphorical is defined by the fact that every meaning is associated with another meaning, with the other. Levinas calls this a “germination” of meanings. The aim of language constituted by the metaphorical aspect of words is not an effort to get to things in themselves or to Being as such. Levinas says that metaphor, on the contrary, is the participation of the object in something other than itself as an object. But what is this other thing? Is it another meaning? Another object that reveals itself as the other?

Levinas may seem to suggest that metaphor opens some kind of infinite germination of meanings, and this would indeed be very close to the Derridean notion of infinite dissemination. However, in other texts (*Language and Proximity* 1987, 126), and also in *Carnets de captivité*, Levinas makes it very clear that this Other Thing represents the monotheistic God: “The wonder of wonders, the metaphor, is the possibility of exiting experience, of thinking beyond the things of this world. What does it mean to exit experience? To think of God”<sup>7</sup> (Levinas 2009, 231).

For Levinas, metaphor is an elevation of the self and an experience of closeness to divinity. In short, to surpass the concept or being or its thinking is to think of the infinity of God. God is the very core of the metaphorical, and metaphor can ensure the immediacy of the presence of divinity insofar as it can help us to surpass the realm of being or concepts by reaching the elevation of the Superlative. Metaphor is, according to

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<sup>7</sup> Translation mine. The original reads as follows: “La merveille des merveilles de la métaphore, c’est la possibilité de sortir de l’expérience, de penser plus loin que les données de notre monde. Qu’est-ce que sortir de l’expérience ? Penser Dieu.”

Levinas, not a substitute but rather a surpassing of the self, aiming at the other and at the same time being enabled by that other. Therefore, for Levinas, the conceptual and the non-conceptual (defined as the experience of what is beyond concept) are not intertwined at all – there is a sphere of the non-conceptual that is purified of all concepts. However, the concept of germination of meanings may imply the opposite, even if Levinas does not acknowledge this. As he claims: “The bracketing of experience is possible only because of the pre-reflexive act directed towards the Most High” (ibidem).<sup>8</sup> This sphere is the sphere of the Absolute Other (the monotheistic God), which constitutes pure, absolute Otherness.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined writings by Levinas that remained unpublished during his lifetime in order to better understand his concept of metaphor. I also compared this concept with Derrida’s concept of metaphor and described their different relations to what is beyond concept (the non-conceptual), which appears thanks to the metaphorical, as both authors agree. I explained Levinas’s ambivalent relation to literature, drawing on these writings. Literature is generally not completely devalued in Levinas’s philosophy, as *Carnets de Captivité* shows, even if he may sometimes seem to distance himself from the occidental concept of literature in his later works. As Leslie Hill points out in his “*Distrust of Poetry*”: *Levinas, Blanchot, Celan*, Levinas also admired Paul Celan’s poetry and was extremely close to the literary works of Maurice Blanchot (Hill 2005, 986 – 1008).

However, the difference between Derrida’s and Levinas’s accounts of metaphor is clear: Derrida admits that the conceptual and the non-conceptual are interlaced, whereas Levinas rejects this. This leads Levinas to identify absolute alterity, appearing in the metaphorical, with the monotheistic God. Levinas’s conception of literature and metaphor is based on religious experience and is situated within the Hebraic tradition. We cannot separate his religious writings from his philosophical writings, as some authors suggest,<sup>9</sup> and as Derrida implies in *Adieu*.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is difficult to understand his notion of metaphor without attending to the Hebraic tradition that it entails. Finally, it was Derrida himself who emphasized that a “good” metaphor, for Levinas, can only be an absolute metaphor (referring to the Hebraic monotheistic God).

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<sup>8</sup> Translation mine. The original reads as follows: “La mise entre guillemets de l’expérience n’est possible que parce que l’acte droit préreflexif, va vers le Haut.”

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Chalier (2007, 17 – 30).

<sup>10</sup> On the political relevance of the connection between religious experience and philosophy, see Caygill (2007).



Derrida, on the contrary, does not limit the sphere beyond concept to the religious sphere, and his solution to the problem would seem to get things right (in Derrida, the conceptual and the non-conceptual are intertwined). This is what defines him as a non-theological and non-religious thinker, contrary to what Janicaud (1991), Caputo (1997), and Agata Bielik-Robson (2021) have suggested. Even if his writing is inspired by Jewish culture and religion, and often refers to it, it is not based on it. The Other in Derrida is not only God; it could be anything: an animal, a plant, a stranger, the refugee whom I greet. I can feel the weight of Abraham's dilemma on my own shoulders, no matter what my religious origins may be (Derrida 2010).

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