Beyond the Betrayal of Language

On the Role of Scepticism in Otherwise than Being

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1. Introduction

In the history of Western philosophy, sceptical claims have often been interpreted as indications of a possible failure of philosophical practice by its opponents, sometimes called ‘dogmatists’. Scepticism, in its various forms, does arguably play a central role in philosophy. Emmanuel Levinas was, at least as I will argue here, involved in the discussion about scepticism and the limits of philosophy in *Otherwise than Being* (‘OTB’), although he never claimed to have established what the skepticism he was referring to was. This essay will, through textual analysis, focus on a certain sceptical problem in that work.

The Western tradition of thinking about and questioning certainty and the possibility of a philosophical discipline has ancient roots in Greek scepticism. The typical “negative dogmatic” or sceptical concern regarding philosophical practice is that both reason and experience, the sources of knowledge available to philosophy, are unreliable. Philosophy, being interested in making claims about what is non-empirical or “transcendent”, must claim that it is possible to acquire such knowledge. Since there is no ultimate criterion for philosophical knowledge, sceptics have argued for doubting that philosophical practice is successful/meaningful. Sceptics could therefore question the possibility of philosophy to achieve its own goals. Scepticism regarding the very possibility of philosophy is one of the questions up for discussion.

Since these sceptical claims concern the successfulness or meaningfulness of philosophical practice, they pose a possible threat to the philosophical body of work, as a potential collapse of the philosophical discourse. In Western tradition, philosophical discourse can be understood as a constructive project aiming to find the ultimate meaning and a system for its elucidation. Examples of the search of ultimate meaning are then how modern metaphysics search for ground, how phenomenology historically has looked for pure Being, the desire to find a logical coherent system, ideas of the absolute One in the history of philosophy, etcetera.

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1 In contrast to what the historical backdrop in this introduction might imply, the essay will not contrast Levinas’ scepticism to ancient scepticism and it is beyond of scope of the essay to elaborate on the closeness and difference. However, the essay might invoke some important questions on how one could analyse scepticism in OTB, if it is interpreted to be a pyrrhonian account. For a comparative study, see for instance Lamarche’s chapter *Of a Non-Saying that Says Nothing: Levinas and Pyrrhonism in Levinas and the Ancients.*


3 As for instance, in the discussion of Sosa, *Can there be a Discipline of Philosophy? and can it be Founded on Intuitions?*, 453-467.
In this picture, some philosophers construct systems (provide meaning) and some sceptics criticize the meaningfulness of such construction. If we consider the history of Western philosophy as a continuum, scepticism regarding the philosophical discipline has in retrospective then given rise to irritating moments where the sceptic questioning the meaningfulness of establishing philosophical discourse has had to be fended off. In this sense, sceptical statements have often been perceived as something de-constructive. There is arguably a tendency to paint up scepticism and reaction to scepticism as a dialectic couple in philosophical dialogue.

Levinas, however, proposed in OTB that scepticism is the “legitimate child of philosophy”. In this Levinasian sense, scepticism could be said to be always already a part of the philosophical practice, of its “family”. Scepticism is already found in every philosopher, as something ready to break out at any moment. Scepticism is not an attitude but – according to Levinas - an essential part of language itself. So the return of scepticism is not a returning movement in the dialectical sense of a historical narrative of a progress of reason. Rather, it is an instant recoil of philosophy. Scepticism emerges because philosophy makes use of language. In fact, according to Levinas, as soon as a philosopher arrives to work, to a discussion, scepticism arrives as “a shadow”.

Hence, not all philosophical efforts and results of philosophical practice are to be found in discourse, or in “ontology” as Levinas called it, but also in the action of discussing and prior to dialogue, in the concrete ethical meeting. The ethical meeting is understood as an asymmetry that comes about through an open self, subjectivity. For Levinas, ‘ontology’ stands for a much wider set of notions than it usually does, and so will it do in this essay. ‘Ontology’ is idealization as made by language and thus philosophical theory. The productive force of scepticism in OTB could therefore be interpreted to be that sceptical accounts break with the idealization of theories. Through that, it makes room for the alterity

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4 Correction of translation – translator Alphonso Lingis mistakenly translated it to ‘illegitimate’. Compare OTB, 7 with the original work in French.
5 We will get back to how this could be in our analysis of language in OTB.
6 “Philosophy is not separable from scepticism, which follows it like a shadow it drives off by refuting it again at once on its footsteps.” OTB, 168.
7 As opposed to Critchley’s often cited definition of Levinasian ‘ontology’, see Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas, 158. Critchley defines Levinas’ ‘ontology’ as “[…]a discourse that refuses transcendence and alterity through a desire for comprehension and totality.”. I interpret Levinas ‘ontology’ to be even wider in scope in OTB than Critchley’s definition suggests, since it not limited to discourse – a phenomenal subject is for instance ontological in Levinas’ terminology, see OTB, 78-80.
and complexity of the concrete ethical meeting with an other. Skepticism is in such way connected to what is beyond language, but still meaningful.

In summary, Levinas’ argumentation could be understood as a criticism regarding the possibility of a true and rational philosophical discourse free-floating from the concrete ethical meeting, hence what is beyond language. One could in this fashion read OTB as a lengthy argument to show that the return of scepticism is exactly what indicates philosophical progress. Skepticism, then, would be a philosophical practice that interrupts the idealizing force of language in the philosophical discourse, and then gets absorbed in this discourse once re-constructed. The philosophical discourse, in the Levinasian view, thus incorporates scepticism by refuting sceptical accounts.\(^8\)

1.1 The topic of the essay

The typical worry, as sketched in the introduction, is that scepticism somehow interrupts the progress of philosophy and its reason and that it thus needs to be refuted. In philosophical discussions, sceptical worries are often refuted by giving accounts that prove them to be self-refuting or inconsistent. But this may not be done in the same manner for all types of scepticism. My thesis in this essay will be that ‘skepticism’ in OTB stands for a criticism/denial of the claim that language could contain and be the origin of all meaning in philosophy. Scepticism is asserted concerning the limits of language itself. Already by refuting concerns about the insufficiency of language, one must possibly be committed to certain ideas of meaningful language.

This essay will examine what appears to be a contradiction of the role assigned to skepticism, as understood above. I will now present what to me appears to be the contradiction.

The ‘otherwise than being’ signifies the ethical before any theorizing, before ontology. Language, on the other hand, is the starting point of theory, as language is in Levinas’ own book, for instance. The problem of philosophy, then, according to Levinas, appears to be that “We have been seeking the otherwise than being from the beginning, and as soon as it is conveyed before us it is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it.”\(^9\)

\(^8\) I interpret this as an incorporation since Levinas suggested that which disturbs and breaks with the current state of meaning in discourse then is related to the discourse itself, thus gets incorporated in the body of discourse. This is arguably suggested in Levinas’ illustration of philosophical discourse as a thread: “Does not the discourse that suppresses the interruptions of discourse by relating them maintain the discontinuity under the knots with which the thread is tied again?” OTB, 170.

\(^9\) OTB, 7.
This means, in my view, that we, interpreted in the context as the philosophers, seeks to make justice to the concrete ethical meeting, the “otherwise than being”, but that the otherwise than being is not fully captured in language and, thus, always betrayed. We will later examine the notions of “Saying” and “Said”, whereas the former is understood as exposure of vulnerability, and the latter will be understood as connected to statements with truth-values. The quote above seems to imply that the stating of the otherwise than being in language is a betrayal of it. That, in turn, indicates a failure, if the target for philosophy is the otherwise than being, thus beyond language. If so, this failure would indicate that philosophical practice falls on its own limitations by language. In order for philosophy to reach what is otherwise than being, then, language must transcend itself. Bergo suggests that ‘transcendence’ in OTB stands for a signification beyond temporalization, representation and phenomenal intentionality necessarily by and through the immanent and finite. The Infinite and the very other is however not apt for the finite consciousness – it exceeds it. Thus, the infinite is understood as something other than a negation of the immanent and is rather to be defined as the exterior surplus which makes the finite possible. Levinas, then, arguably draws on the Cartesian idea of the infinite in the finite in formulating the idea of “transcendence in immanence” – exceedence - which is the possibility of the “other in the same”. Language is immanent and finite iff considered as a closed system, so it has to overcome itself from within to transcend. The overcoming thus appears to be what Levinas suggests to be a meaningful philosophical task and how philosophy could make justice to the ethical concrete meeting. I consider this to be the account presented in the quotation above. The conclusion seems to be that the philosophical practice is bound to fail since it cannot transcend language.

At the same time, in the chapter “Skepticism and Reason”, Levinas seemed to express that sceptical accounts, contrary to the conclusion made in the earlier passage, are able to overcome or transcend language by itself with an “invincible force”. Thus, it seems as if at least a sceptical statement could transcend the ontological betrayal of language. To make the

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10 The Levinasian position that the ethical relation to the other is never fully captured in language is often referred to as “Otherism” in the field of Levinas’ studies, see Aikin and Simmons, Levinasian Otherism, 29.
11 OTB, 7.
12 Found in Bergo, Ontology, Transcendence, and Immanence in Emmanuel Levinas’ Philosophy, 141-180.
13 Possibly, Levinas also echoes Kant’s fourth antinomy by making this claim.
14 Compare with Descartes: “For indeed, even if the idea of substance is in me as a result of the very fact that I am a substance, the idea of an infinite substance would not therefore be in me, since I am finite, unless it derived from some substance that is really infinite.” Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies, 88.
15 OTB, 169
ethical meeting justice appears to me to be a condition in OTB for the meaningfulness of philosophical practice as expressed in the chapter “From Saying to the Said, or the Wisdom of Love”.\textsuperscript{16} For philosophical practice to be meaningful, it must be able to pursue what it claims to be doing. If what it is claiming is beyond the betrayal of language, the philosophical practice must be able to transcend language. If the aim of philosophy in other words is to make the other justice, and the other is beyond language, then philosophy must be able to transcend language by language if it is to be successful. In that case, scepticism could be one meaningful philosophical practice, contrary to the earlier statement about the limitations of language. Seemingly paradoxically, scepticism seems to transcend the claustrophobic confines of language.

There remains what to me appears to be a tension in between the two accounts, a tension that echoes throughout OTB. Let us try to spell out the tension more clearly.

Presuppositions of the two accounts: For philosophical practice to be meaningful, it must overcome ontology. Language creates ontology. For philosophical practice to be meaningful, it must overcome language through language.

The first account in OTB seems to be: “Philosophical practice cannot overcome language through language. \textit{Therefore, philosophical practice is not meaningful}.”

The second account in OTB seems to be: “Sceptical claims are a part of philosophy. Sceptical claims could overcome how language creates ontology. We have a philosophical practice, scepticism, that can overcome language through language. \textit{Scepticism as a philosophical practice is meaningful}.”

This looks like a contradiction. The point of contradiction and tension seems to be related to if language could overcome itself. How is this to be interpreted? Should we be worried that scepticism is the only meaningful practice? Should we not care about this possible worry? The gravity of this concern about the role of scepticism in Levinas’ \textit{Otherwise than Being} ought to be made clear for the reader by quoting Cederberg’s worry: “Defeating skepticism must be the wrong way to justify philosophy; if philosophy can be given meaning only through the threat of skepticism, itself only a movement within philosophy, philosophy becomes a mere game.”\textsuperscript{17} What is at stake, on my interpretation, is the possibility of philosophical meaningfulness, according to Levinas’ conception of philosophy. I think that we therefore at

\textsuperscript{16} See especially the discussion on 160-162 in OTB.
\textsuperscript{17} Cederberg, \textit{Resaying the Human: Levinas Beyond Humanism and Antihumanism}, 178.
least need to consider if this is merely an apparent tension or an actual tension. The tension, when unaddressed, could be interpreted to create a worry that this sceptical attitude is the only actually rational philosophical attitude according to Levinas’ framework. If we take the tension seriously without questioning it, we would likely interpret Levinas to be presenting a contradiction in OTB. But one should not do a hasty reading of the, often metaphorical, prose of OTB. The confusion and apparent tension seems to be aggravated by the fact that Levinas didn’t define ‘scepticism’. There is a need to analyse what the Levinasian insight about scepticism is and how this ought to guide our understanding of scepticism. In fact, it is very hard to find analyses that deal exclusively with the sceptical problematic of OTB. Levinas’ account of scepticism in OTB is often mentioned alongside or compared to other philosophers’ ideas of the role of scepticism in philosophy. Philosophers have rarely scrutinized the account of skepticism of OTB. I therefore believe that there is still room and need for philosophical elaboration of the issue. The status of the role assigned to scepticism in relation to language will be the focus of this essay.

1.2 Aim

The aim is to analyse a seeming contradiction regarding the role of scepticism in OTB. Subsequently, I will argue that the threat of scepticism as the only meaningful philosophical practice can be understood differently if we examine Levinas’ criticism of idealist tendencies in Western philosophy of language. I will argue that there is no actual tension between the two accounts, only an apparent one, and that this interpretation possibly resurrects the meaningfulness of philosophy - as understood by Levinas.

1.3 Structure

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18 My interpretation of what could be understood by the ‘scepticism’ in OTB is thus one amongst possibly other interpretations that remain to be evaluated. By analysing Levinas’ language philosophy in OTB, I will try to support my interpretation.

19 The reader with knowledge of Levinas’ might find some similarities to research of the past. However, it appears to me that the similarity is only on the surface. Rosato is analysing the role of scepticism in OTB in relationship to Totality and Infinity in the article Levinas on Skepticism, Moral and Otherwise. Bernasconi is considering the possibility of sceptical discourse through theoretical discourse in OTB in the chapter Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy. Chanter is in examining scepticism on a descriptive level in the article The Betrayal of Philosophy: Emmanuel Levinas's Otherwise than being. Thus, it is still potentially fruitful to interpret scepticism in OTB.
I will in this essay focus on what I interpret to be the apparent contradiction regarding the role of scepticism as presented in OTB through a textual analysis. In my analysis of what I take to be the reasons for and extent of Levinas’ idea of scepticism, I will have to analyse how it can be understood. Following this interpretation and its consequences, I will analyse the contradiction about scepticism and transcendence. However, before I begin any analysis, I will have to say something about my starting point with respect to my methodology of textual interpretation. Since the subject requires a certain background knowledge, I will focus on describing the project of OTB and its terminology. For us to address the subject, we need to at least form a conceptual understanding of certain key terms and their place in OTB. As it will be shown, these terms are not apt for stable definitions. So, the interpretative work done by this essay must also contain some crucial Levinasian terminology.

Firstly, I will describe what I take to be the aim of OTB. It will be shown that Levinas’ philosophical account in OTB could be understood as a reaction against Western philosophy’s focus on ontology as the exposure of truth rather than the ethical concrete meeting.

Secondly, I will elaborate on how this locus affects his own understanding of the role of philosophy. In this analysis, we will see that the Levinasian understanding of scepticism is directly connected to the concern that language operates through a certain violence and, due to this, turns problematic in doing philosophy ethically responsibly.

Further, I will suggest that we have interpretative reasons to believe that Levinas’ main reason for skepticism will turn out to be the violence absorbed and executed in language. It will be shown that Levinas’ critique of - what he called - a naïve interpretation of the Aristotelian apophansis is crucial for understanding philosophical discourse and its limits. Apophansis – a proposition with a determined truth-value – is suggested by Levinas to be possible not because of ontology but because of an involuntarily responsibility. Drawing on the analysis of language, violence and philosophy, I will begin the analysis of the meaningfulness of the contradiction. My analysis is a hypothetical situation of refuting skepticism about meaning. I will try to show that both the one refuting a sceptical account and the one offering the

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20 The textual analysis will limit itself to Levinas’ OTB. Scepticism is a recurring theme also in later works by Levinas, but this essay will be focused on understanding what was meant with ‘scepticism’ in OTB since the analysis of interest is regarding a contradiction in OTB.
sceptical account are pursuing meaningful philosophical practice. In other words, I will suggest that the contradiction dissolves itself in practice.

In the conclusion, considering the critique Levinas proposed in OTB of violence caused by a tradition of naivety in philosophy of language, we have good reasons to believe that the contradiction is apparent based on my analysis. Subsequently, I will suggest why this contradiction was sketched out in OTB to begin with. I will suggest that it could be, considering my interpretation, an attempt by Levinas to demonstrate his claim that philosophical practice is always dependent on an overflow of meaning made possible through passive vulnerability for an other. The textual account of the contradiction is considered to be an attempt to evoke “transcendence in discourse” or “transcendence in immanence” or “the other in the same”, eg. philosophy dependent of an ethical “beyond” for expanding its area of meaningful discourse. I therefore suggest that the account of contradiction is in OTB an attempt to convey how the ethical puts the stability of a hermeneutical circle in question. With other words, that written language, and thus OTB, is not to be understood as a code for the ethical, but as something already ethical.

1.4 Theoretical approach

If language is indeed already bound to fail according to Levinas, how could we write about the philosophical practice of writing? How could we even read Levinas, and what is he writing about?21

In this section, I will first briefly address my approach to the prose of Levinas. Levinas’ works opens up for different types of readings and methodologies. I think we have good reason to hold OTB to be non-phenomenological, since Levinas gave priority to what is prior to experience and theory. His “subject” in OTB is not the subject of a phenomenology but concerned with the possibility of philosophy.22 Levinas did not present a phenomenological analysis.23 OTB is written in a poetic style with words fleeing definitions. For this reason, I

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21 Chanter answers this question by arguing that Levinas does not command a final interpretation of his work, but for endless interpretations. See Chanter, The Betrayal of Philosophy: Emmanuel Levinas’s Otherwise than being, 70.
22 I am in agreement with Bernasconi here, who argues that Levinas project of ethics is a meta-philosophical enterprise of investigating the possibility of a responsible philosophy, see Bernasconi, Emmanuel Levinas: The Phenomenology of Sociality and the Ethics of Alterity, 251.
23 Phenomenological studies of OTB, especially in relationship to Totality and Infinity, are dominating Levinas studies. This is a natural starting point of investigation, since Levinas was a student of Husserl. However, the question of scepticism seems to be more connected to internal questions of language within OTB. Furthermore, I am in agreement with Weimin, who argues that Levinasian philosophy is first and foremost anti-phenomenological.
consider it to be unsuitable to methodologically aim for definitive definitions. Insofar as Levinas often used different terms to signify during the writing, I am inclined to agree on the complexity of interpreting Levinas. 24 For the same reason, I believe that a textual analysis of the terminology is not only beneficial but necessary in order to answer the question posed in this essay. My method for approaching OTB as a piece of text is therefore based on interpretation. I have followed the hermeneutical method as proposed by Gadamer in Wahrheit und Methode, since I believe that both Levinas and Gadamer suggest that all reading is interpretation. 25 Furthermore, Rachlek argues that the philosophies of Gadamer and Levinas complement each other fruitfully. 26

According to Gadamer, a reader never has a neutral standpoint for the basis of interpretation, which is why one is forced to adapt one’s horizon of understanding to get closer to the object of understanding. ‘Understanding’ is in that sense not to grasp, as in finally declaring the right and final meaning of the text, since that strictly could not be possible according to Gadamer. 27 The problem of understanding is rather how a text becomes meaningful. 28 The minimum criteria in Gadamer’s hermeneutics for obtaining understanding is therefore to remain open to the meaning of the other in the text. 29 Moreover, this ‘other’ is not to be understood as an object of understanding, since the other is not fully graspable. 30 The text and the other appearing there must in other words be interpreted to make sense, and the interpreter must try to abandon opinions that makes the text incoherent in meaning. 31 A writer of a text, in this case Levinas, is also a reader of their own text, thus an interpreter. Consequently, whatever Levinas might have meant, as in intended, cannot be finalized or understood as the “right” interpretation. 32 For the purpose of this essay specifically, then, the chosen

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24 For instance, in TI, the ‘other’ is a universal other separated from a subject, the Same, whereas in OTB ‘other’ signifies the ethical and is already in the Same. A comparative discussion is found in Self and Multiplicity, chapter 3 in Rat’s Un-Common Sociality: Thinking Sociality with Levinas.
26 See Rachlek’s Das Gespräch mit dem Anderen: Perspektiven einer ethischen Hermeneutik.
27 “Kein Text und Buch spricht aber, wenn es nicht die Sprache spricht die den anderen erreicht. So muß die Auslegung die rechte Sprache finden, wenn sie wirklich den Text zur Sprache bringen will. Es kann daher keine richtige Auslegung, an sich geben, gerade weil es in jeder um den Text selbst geht.” Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, 375.
29 “Lediglich Offenheit für die Meinung des Anderen oder des Textes wird gefordert” Ibid, 253.
31 “Wenn wir einen Text zu verstehen suchen[…].so versetzen wir uns in der Perspektive, unter der der andere seine Meinung gewonnen hat. Das heißt aber nicht anderes, als daß wir das sachliche Recht dessen, was der andere sagt, gelten zu lassen suchten.” Gadamer, Wahrheit und Methode, 276.
methodology implies the possibility of the attempt to dissolve the contradiction since it enables a possible interpretation of the text that could show why the contradiction is meaningful.

In reacting to what Levinas took to be an unjustified priority of ontology in Western philosophy\(^{33}\), Levinas expressed a desire to formulate a philosophy with focus on what “is” “otherwise than Being”\(^{34}\), which for Levinas in OTB signified but never captured the concrete ethical meeting. A consequence of this project is that Levinas developed a terminology in order to disrupt and traverse the “ontologically charged” terminology of the philosophical tradition he opposed.\(^{35}\) I believe that in OTB a (seemingly) metaphorical language is developed in a radical attempt to prevent identity between terms and articulate the complete otherness of a concrete ethical meeting. In order to find an interpretation in which the contradiction is dissolved, we will nevertheless have to make some sense of the terminology that circumscribes its possibility. Due to that, I will start by interpreting the terms so that they possibly could make sense.

**2.1 Interpreting Levinasian terms: ‘The hither side’ and ‘vulnerability’**

**Infinite responsibility for the other – the hither side**

What is this ‘otherwise than being’? What is not a “what”, not a part of ontology, is the unorganized concreteness of the ethical meeting, which Levinas called “the hither side”. The hither side is unexplainable in terms of systems and principles and therefore never fully captured in language – it is out of place, “u-topia”. Thus, it can’t be understood as a negation of a negation, since that already would presuppose a relation and thus be in the wide scope of the Levinasian ontological realm. The hither side is described as an-archical, without

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\(^{33}\) "For the philosophical tradition of the West, all spirituality lies in consciousness, thematic expression of being, knowing.” OTB, 99.

\(^{34}\) The possibility of Levinas’ philosophical project has been interpreted in various ways, arguably because there is disagreement regarding if the approach is consistent. Much of the disagreement relates to the conventionalization of ‘the other’ in English translations of Levinas’ works. This discussion passes unnoticed in this essay, but my stance in the discussion is that we have good reasons to believe that Levinas was not trading on not knowing what the ‘other’ was signifying in OTB. A reason to believe this is that we could systematically organize the different ‘other’ to their meanings, as is done in Galetti, Of Levinas’ ‘structure’ in Address to His Four ‘others’, 509-532.

\(^{35}\) Arguably, OTB is a reaction to the criticism that Derrida launched against Totality and Infinity in the essay Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas. This is a heated debate in comparative studies of Derrida and Levinas. I will not enter this discussion since it is beyond the scope of this essay. In short, the criticism of Violence and Metaphysics is that philosophical discourse is inevitably in conversation with itself and its language. Derrida contested possibility to find an ethical language such that it does not appropriate the other through its discourse.
principles, outside intentional temporalization and ontology. As we mentioned in the introduction, a starting point for Levinas’ project in OTB is that language is betrayal. So, what is betrayed according to Levinas? It is the hither side, which signifies infinite responsibility for the other, that is betrayed through language. Responsibility is not exhausted in Being. Levinas claim is in other words that the hither side with the infinite responsibility cannot be fully contained in language. Nevertheless, from this it follows that the Infinite is partly expressible in the finite, that is, in language. It could be interpreted to have two important consequences: Language is betrayal of the hither side, an appropriation of the very other, but also the place where this infinite responsibility leaves a trace. The inexpressible do get through according to this account, although in an ambivalent manner. We could in other words not exhaust the meaning of an other in language. ‘Meaning’ is here therefore understood in its widest sense – it could for instance be meaningful to talk about sense and non-sense. Consequently, non-sense is potentially meaningful, if it makes sense to name it so by language for an other. This is one of Levinas’ arguments in OTB – ontology and truth-value is already dependent on ethics and meaning which is beyond the conscious realm of knowing and expression. Levinas’ notion of ‘meaning’ is arguably sometimes referring to phenomenological (intentional) meaning and another type of meaning which is described as a “surplus”, an overflow of intentional meaning, thus partly trading on a double reading. It might be interpreted as inconsistent, but also such that ‘meaning’ has a very wide scope. I suggest the second interpretation since I have already defined ‘transcendence’ as an excedence, an overflow. Moreover, we sketched out that this overflow is not withheld in a cogito, so it has to go beyond the thinking self. The I as an ‘I’ is only an I with an other, thus the possibility for meaning for the I is the possibility of the I being an other. Meaning is therefore defined in this essay as a directed direction, that is, for-the-other.

Vulnerability implies infinite responsibility

36 "But anarchy is not disorder as opposed to order, as the eclipse of themes is not, as is said, a return to a diffuse "field of consciousness" prior to attention. Disorder is but another order, and what is diffuse is thematizable. Anarchy troubles being over and beyond." OTB, 101.
37 "Responsibility goes beyond being." OTB, 15.
38 “The Infinite does not appear to him that bears witness to it.[…]No theme, no present, has a capacity for the Infinite.” OTB, 146.
39 “The Infinite passes in saying.” OTB, 147.
40 “The trace of infinity is this ambiguity in the subject, in turns beginning and makeshift, a diachronic ambivalence which ethics makes possible.” OTB, 149.
41 See OTB, 27.
According to Levinas, the condition of being human is an “original” vulnerability and sensibility to this unlimited demand of responsibility. Responsibility is thus irreducible to representation and not coming from a self.42 ‘Vulnerability’ could be understood as the passivity of being exposed and sensible to others - before thinking and words.43 In the Western philosophical tradition, whose priorities Levinas opposed, the hither side always runs the risk of being reduced to what is already same as Being, the responsibility for the other risks to be limited.44 One could discuss the validity of the premise, albeit I will not do so here since that is a grave questioning of Levinas’ philosophy to begin with. Levinas’ claim is that the other risks becoming appropriated. This is a risk, according to Levinas, since he claimed that philosophy tends to treat the ethical meeting as something subordinated to ontology through language. But Levinas’ point in OTB was that the hither side never could be subordinated or put in a reciprocal relationship, for the exposure for the other comes before any protection and theory about who the other is. The “relationship” to the other that is subjectivity is asymmetrical and before the thinking self. Therefore, we cannot annul subjectivity, our vulnerability, by thought. Doing so implies idealism according to Levinas.45

**Putting responsibility in question implies appropriation**

In subjectivity, understood as exposure, the other is alterity, not yet distant but in extreme proximity, not yet a “Thou”. It is claimed in OTB that the distance that enables us to talk about an I and a Thou is created when we appropriate the other by assigning a role of the idealized Other in relationship to an I, a self-conscious cogito.46 The idealization possibly could be interpreted to come to happen by what Levinas called “the entrance of a Third”. Thus, I believe that Bernasconi offers one suitable interpretation when he suggests that the Third could be understood as a perspective that interrupts and calls the responsibility for the other in question.47 The hither side is described in OTB in various ways; the Infinite,  

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42 “The responsibility for the other can not have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a “prior to every memory”, an “ulterior to every accomplishment”, from the non-present par excellence, the non-original, the an-archial, prior to or beyond essence.” OTB, 10.
43 OTB, 75.
44 “The sense of the approach [of the other] is goodness, without knowledge or blindness, beyond essence. Goodness will indeed show itself in ontology metamorphosed into essence, and to be reduced; but essence cannot contain it.” OTB, 137.
45 “The neighbor assigns me before I designate him. This is a modality not of a knowing, but of an obsession, a shuddering of the human quite different from cognition.[…]Through the suppression of the singular, through generalization, knowing is idealism.” OTB, 87.
46 OTB, 79.
47 The question about who, what or how the Third is is in itself a great area of discussion and analysis. For the sake of briefness, I will not enter that discussion. Bernasconi suggests in the article *The Third Party. Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political* that one possible interpretation is the one mentioned. I think this
unbound, overflow of alterity, without relationship and irreducible to a relationship. To put it in relationship through language is described as an impossible reduction – it is already to fail. Thus, trying to subordinate the ethical meeting is understood by Levinas an illegitimate reduction through the perverting and appropriating effect of language, that systematizes and ontologizes the an-archical. Everytime we think that philosophy is exhaustively capturing the meaning, we would according to Levinas already have had to neglect the fact that the very other, with its possible infinite meanings, is already misrepresented in the finitude of thought. The thought of the subject is understood as finite since Levinas opposed the idea that there is identity of time – no thought of a cogito actually follows another thought in the strict sense. The very other is understood as radical alterity and through that the radical resistance to a reciprocal relation. The very other is thus conditioned by Levinas in OTB to never be fully represented. Following the interpretation of ‘the Third’, this would imply that if the other appears to cognition, it appears as a “non-appearing”. The first step for Levinas was therefore always to treat the hither side as a highest priority, changing from the ontological interest of Being to the unconditional passivity and receptivity of the vulnerable human condition. This vulnerability to responsibility is prior to any moral philosophy with its formation of ethical imperatives, and according to Levinas not to be understood as an imperative “Sollen” or principles of commitment. Why? The subjectivity of the subject cannot be understood without the sensibility enabled by vulnerability, an impossibility to stop exposing oneself to the concrete world. Responsibility is in other words not a voluntary commitment of an I – it is before the entrance of a Third, before the “I think”. Responsibility thus foregoes dialogue and any dialectic. We have seen that there is a tension in between the ethical and the role of language in OTB. We have in the former section considered that this problematic is due to how language creates a distance, an idealization and a generalized

is one plausible interpretation, since a perspective could give some explanation to why there is a shift from the immediate closeness of an other, to creating a distance, getting self-conscious. Due to this, I will adopt this interpretation of the Third, which I will interpret to have the consequence that “the entrance of a Third” marks the start of self-consciousness. Nevertheless, I will not claim that I have explained what the Third is.

48 OTB, 100-101.
49 OTB, 89.
50 I interpret Levinas’ interest in OTB to be to examine what is not theoretical (the hither side) through the theoretical. My interpretation of this priority is in agreement with the interpretative standpoint which holds that “[…]ethics as first philosophy means both that ethical endeavors are first and that this ethical endeavor passes through theoretical inquiry.” as argued by Glass, Theoretical Responsibility: Levinas on Language and the Ethical Status of the Philosophical Question, 441-466.
51 OTB, 77.
52 “What is positive in responsibility, outside of essence, conveys the infinite. It inverses relationships and principles, reverses the order of interest: in the measure that responsibilities are taken on they multiply. This is not a Sollen commanding the infinite pursuit of an ideal.” OTB, 12.
53 “This responsibility is prior to dialogue, to the exchange of questions and answers[…]” OTB, 111.
Other. In the next section, we will offer an interpretation to how this affects Levinas’ concept of language in OTB.

### 2.2 Interpreting Levinasian terms: The notion of ‘the Saying’ and ‘the Said’ in OTB

Two crucial terms for understanding Levinas’ view of language are the ‘Saying’ and ‘the Said’. ‘Saying’ and the ‘Said’ do not refer to our everyday use of the terms, if the everyday use of the terms refers solely to the ‘utterance of words’ and the ‘uttered words’ respectively. Rather, the two notions are in OTB assigned a scope that go beyond the idea of a linguistic or even pragmatic definition. The two notions are arguably best understood by offering the context of Levinas’ criticism of a naïve interpretation of the Aristotelian apophansis.

**The ontological status of language and the Aristotelian apophansis**

In the section “The Exposition”, Levinas’ starting point for the discussion regarding the ontological status of language is his observation that we with language temporalize (sort in a temporal order) and identify (use verbs and proper nouns) and through that narrate, create a recallable and linear historicity. ‘Thematization’ signifies this temporalization and identification. Thematization enables us to re-construct a specific event or refer to something said. For Levinas, the ordering of time as duration (‘synchrony’) is expressed in (amongst other verbs) the verb “to be” since it signals temporalization (as in “It was…”, “There will be…”). A substantive is a limitation within what is already said that enables us to talk about identities, which could be interpreted as the very culmination of the idealizing notion of temporalization, of total simultaneousness - identity. Identity is hence understood to be idealization.

Arguably, the connection that Levinas described in between temporalization and designation is nearly analogue to the Aristotelian apophansis. The Aristotelian heritage has according to Levinas often been naïvely interpreted so that language is understood as code in that it reveals

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54 "The verb *to be* tells the flowing of time as though language were not unequivocally equivalent to denomination, as though in *to be* the verb first came to function as a verb, and as though this function refers to the teeming and mute itching of that modification without change that time operates. This time can, to be sure, be recuperated in retention, memory, “tales” and books.” OTB, 34.

55 See 17a8-17a26 in Aristoteles’ *De Interpretatione*.
modes of being, in truth and meaning, *at the same time.* Leve
inas’ competing claim is that apophansis is not conditioned to be an expression or appearance, as he claimed is the case in most Western philosophy, only as a proposition with determined truth-value. Being is according to Levinas’ interpretation of Aristoteles therefore not exposed in any way by apophansis, only represented. There is no underlying being in the world that “shows itself”, but we represent being by using language. We do not, according to Levinas, have access to an order or a meta-language, a grounding-like system of order that would inevitably be conditioned by language, which make our use of language simultaneous with being and truth. To claim that apophansis is indeed a revelation would therefore require a metalanguage of order that philosophy could not produce without turning to ideology. The modality of apophansis, he claimed, is instead rather to be understood as an ethical adjustment:

“For example, the content exposed in it – entities and relations between entities shown in the theme – the apophansis signifies as a modality of the approach to another.”

Levinas’ claim is in other words that apophansis is irreducible to a cognitive condition that always make truth and meaningfulness simultaneous. Levinas thus exemplified philosophy as idealism at its height in the naïve understanding of apophansis, since it reduces truth and meaning to the play of cognition. We could also interpret this to have the consequence of a critique for how we tend to treat ‘meaning’. If meaning is only a lending of meaning of the already meaningful to an “I think”, meaning is possibly only an intention of thought, an identifying. Then language would be a monological game of thought presentation in a philosophy of appearance. The naïve interpretation of apophansis is captured in the concept of the Said. Levinas’ own interpretation of apophansis is, in contrast, that truth-value is unintelligible without a prior concern for the other. The for-the-other is the inevitable direction (French: sens) of sense. Apophansis “[…]presupposes a language that answers with responsibility”. The possibility for truth thus lies in the sensibility for the other, its

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56 “Phenomenality, the exhibition of being’s essence in truth, is a permanent presupposition of the philosophical tradition of the West.” OTB, 132.
57 OTB, 39.
58 “The present is the privileged time of truth and being, of being in truth; it is contemporaneousness itself, and the manifestation of being is re-presentation.” OTB, 133.
59 Compare with Bernasconi’s discussion on Levinas’ questioning of philosophical order on p. 153 in *Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy*.
60 OTB, 47.
61 It would be idealism since the appearance of truth to cognition would be the condition for meaningfulness. Intentional meaning would determine actual meaning and truth be the recognition of its ontological appearance. See OTB, 45.
62 See OTB, 38-42.
63 OTB, 6.
meaning, consequently beyond intentional meaning and not exhaustively in exposure of ontology. Levinas’ concept of the Saying could be understood as a way to formulate this sensibility. In the following section, I will try to interpret what the two concepts ‘the Said’ and ‘the Saying’ could mean by relating them to this critique of the naïve interpretation of apophasis. The critique will be considered central in the analysis of skepticism.

The Said

The identities or kinds (as in “this as that”, “I and Thou”) provided by substantives supply meaning to what is already said and to how we experience it – it is intentional. Levinas claimed that “Identification is ascription of meaning.”, it is an idealization and thus limitation of alterity. 64 I am in agreement with Critchley’s interpretation, which holds that the Levinasian Said could be interpreted to be “[…]a statement, assertion or proposition of which the truth or falsity can be ascertained.” 65 Any language will generate a Said – parts that could be ascertained truth or falsity – but the meaning goes beyond this certainty, since identifying for Levinas implied choosing meaning. 66 I therefore reckon that Levinas is actually talking about meaning in two different senses in OTB: (1) as unlimited possible meaning(s) of the hither side before and beyond something has been limited/assigned in language (2) as a certain case of intentional meaning, of a specific statement/proposition assigned to an identified part of language with ascertained truth-value, a Said. 67 The area of meaningfulness is hence understood as ethical and goes beyond and comes before the conscious discourse of truth-values – the for-the-other is prior and remains.

Accordingly, I believe that the Said is not to be understood as an expression of meaning. It is rather to be interpreted as the very designation of it – the ascription and establishing of a certain case of intentional meaning made possible through the already said. 68 The Said is representation and formalization – limitation of possible meaning(s) of the hither side.

Intentional meaning is presented in the Said, but there is always meaning going beyond the

64 OTB, 36.
66 “Language would exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or logical concepts.” OTB, 169-170.
67 Identity since being, truth and meaning is maintained “in a present” intentionally. “To enter into being and truth is to enter the said – being is inseparable from its meaning!” OTB, 45.
68 One could therefore interpret Levinas to have a structuralist idea of the Said. “The said, the word, is not simply a sign of meaning, nor even only an expression of a meaning (contrary to Husserl’s analysis in the first Logical Investigation); the word at once proclaims and establishes an identification of this with that in the already said.” OTB, 37.
Said – the intentional present required by identity is too late. Consequently, it is according to this interpretation through the Said where we could speak about the meaningfulness of something said, but only as much as meaning has become something stable and limited – meaning as identity.  

In summary, language as Said could be understood as the systematization of language, signalizing thematization of experience (by the temporalization of verbs) and ontology (by the identification of substantives). In this systematization, we could talk about statements, propositions and their truth and meaningfulness in stable terms. The Said thus could be said to be analogous to the Aristotelian category of apophasis.

The Saying

The Levinasian Saying, on the other hand, is described in OTB as an exposure of exposure not yet formalized and temporalized, it is meaning before intention. In my subjectivity, I am unable to close myself up, unable to reason myself to immortality when mortal, to protect myself from death, become invulnerable when I am sensible, no matter how much “I think”. The Saying is thus an exposure for the other that comes to pass without an active “I think”. The Saying is claimed to be “pre-historical” in the sense that it is prior to the linear (“synchronous”) narration enabled by intentionality. It is claimed to be impossible to present. But it inevitably is sentenced to be ambiguous since it enables nominalizations of statements. Nevertheless, this transformation from a signifying for the other to something formalized and communicated is according to Levinas due to a prior passivity underlying, namely the concern for the other and the risk of its death. Communication thus is an attempt to make justice and respond to the other. The Saying signifies the ethical overflow of meaning before the establishment and simultaneous arrangement, before identity formed by cognition of truth and intentional meaning. Hence, the Saying and the Said do not occur simultaneously. One could understand the Saying in a less abstract way by considering of how we, when we meet someone, could lack words for it but feel an urge to express ourselves in language to show that we are prepared to respond for the other. For Levinas, the Saying is the ethical opening of language, it is beyond and, in a sense, before any fixed meaning, beyond

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69 “In the said, to have meaning is for an element to be in such a way as to turn into references to other elements, and for the others to be evoked by it.” OTB, 69.
70 OTB, 47.
71 OTB, 62.
72 “In the incomparable relationship of responsibility, the other no longer limits the same, it is supported by what it limits. Here the overdetermination of the ontological categories is visible, which transforms them into ethical terms.” OTB, 115.
identity, before the establishment of sense and nonsense - before the Said. It signals an overflow of meaning fit for the infinite demand of the other beyond intentionality and consciousness.  

One might object that the Saying is unintelligible and suggest that what Levinas is referring to seems to be a psychological idea, not suitable in a philosophical account. I suggest that a more plausible reading is that the Saying is a signification of vulnerability. The Saying is a sensibility for the command of a response. An interpretation of this is that ‘to be responsive’ and ‘to be responsible’ for the other are two coinciding notions in OTB.

2.3 The role of philosophy

The inevitable formalization of responsibility

One could therefore understand the Saying to be ethical. The task of philosophy as I understand it to be described in OTB is to convey the Saying through the Said and try to minimize the limitation of meaning, the betrayal in the Said. My interpretation is that this is important because it means limiting the suffering of the other. It is difficult according to Levinas since he claimed that the Saying both gives birth to statements and goes beyond them. What is described as a sort of ethical resistance of the Saying by Levinas is that it signals what is beyond limitation and what is kept inside the limitation – the infinite command for responsibility. I believe that this determines the philosophical task and that this is made apparent in the following quote:

“Everything is shown by indeed betraying its meaning, but philosophy is called upon to reduce that betrayal, by an abuse that justifies proximity itself in which the Infinite comes to pass.”

Consequently, I suggest that Levinas’ idea of a philosophical practice must consist in making justice of the Saying, since Levinas’ idea of the philosophical project in OTB seems to be that

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73 “In its saying, the said and being are stated, but also a witness, an inspiration of the same by the other, beyond essence, an overflowing of the said by a rhetoric which is not only a linguistic mirage, but a surplus of meaning of which consciousness all by itself would be incapable.” OTB, 152.

74 Holte suggests that the ethical “effect” of the Saying could be interpreted to be a questioning of consciousness. I want to modify this interpretation by narrowing it down and rather suggest that the practice done by Saying could be better understood as the opening of questioning of self-consciousness. since we have seen that the Saying according to Levinas breaks with the Said, and that the Said is the area of identification of the self as a persevering subject, and thus, identification of not only something as an anonymous cogito, but as an Ego, an I. Compare with Holte, Meaning and Melancholy in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas, 116.

75 “[...]the saying is both an affirmation and a retraction of the said.” OTB, 44.

76 OTB, 156.
its task is to make justice for the hither side and “reduce the betrayal”. And to make justice for the hither side could be understood as expanding the area of meaningful discourse by involuntarily caring for, and thus acknowledging, that there is always more meaning beyond language, beyond what is captured in the apparent ontology of a truth-value statement. This does not mean that philosophy is not about truth, but that vulnerability unconditionally conditions that a philosopher “[…]seeks, and expresses, truth.” The philosophical task, then, would be to acknowledge the importance of involuntary ethical responsibility for the establishment of truth and expansion of meaningful discourse. That will be my definition of how Levinas understood the task of philosophy in OTB in this essay.

What speaks in this “ethical language”, then, if it is not only the voice nor a written word? What is the “origin” of meaning? The Face speaks. We could understand the Face more concretely by once again imagining the child coming home after school, looking at the parent with an unspoken demand, the vulnerability exposed before saying anything, signifying an openness to whatever will come to pass. Or as described in the poetically alluring quote: “The one is exposed to the other as a skin is exposed to what wounds it, as a cheek is offered to the smiter.” Levinas thus turned the direction of meaning by turning the religious expression “word becomes flesh”, now expressed as “[…]flesh becomes word, the caress a saying.” I interpret this to have the consequence that the Saying is given a somewhat hybrid role – it is indeed ethical in its expressiveness, but instantly thematised as “this as that”. The Saying is ethical and not an expression of the self – it does not come from a self and its consciousness. How could we then name it? I believe that Levinas left the question open regarding the possibility of making justice of the ‘otherwise’ in OTB, of his own writing. Hence, great interpretative challenges arise in addressing how one should understand this hybrid “nature”

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77 OTB, 132.
78 OTB, 23.
79 OTB, 49.
80 “In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, the caress a saying. The thematization of the face undoes the face and undoes the approach. The mode in which a face indicates its own absence in my responsibility requires a description that can be formed only in ethical language.” OTB, 94.
81 Compare this to the tendency to argue that the Saying is unintelligible, see for instance Waldenfels who argues that the Saying on its own is underdetermined. He concludes that the Saying is partly unintelligible. This argumentation depends on an understanding of the Saying as a intentional expression of a subject. But clearly, this is not what Levinas had in mind since the Saying is described as signification of vulnerability “[…]the very respiration of this skin prior to any intention. The subject is not in itself […]” on p. 49, OTB. Compare with Waldenfels in Levinas on the Saying and the Said.
82 See for instance the discussion where Levinas questioned the possibility of philosophy with respect to the ontologizing force of the Said, pp. 170-171 in OTB.
of the Saying, challenges that however seem possible to overcome. What is clear is that Saying is nevertheless irreducible to a speech act and any form of language “game”, since speech acts would require thematization– which is for Levinas the possibility of the Said. The Saying is conditioned by Levinas to go beyond the ontology of the Said, but not to “be” the hither side itself. I therefore suggest that we ought to understand that the Saying therefore bear witness to the hither side. The condition of having a Face, if we stick to this interpretation, is the signification of the hither side, which always foregoes the Saying. What is signalled by the Face in its passivity, an openness expressing “here I am” for an other, is the very vulnerability of a human that opens it up for communication, what brings the Saying. This initial responsiveness is what Levinas calls the pre-original Saying. The Saying bears witness to the pre-original Saying, since it initially signals overflow of meaning, the infinite alterity of an other. Responsibility, then, requires sincerity. Moreover, it means that truth is “[…]rather produced in the demand, the appeal, of the Other upon me. I speak the truth about things because the Other demands that I do so. To refuse this demand is already to deny the truth even before you have spoken.”

Where or when exactly does the Saying enter this hybrid state of formalization? We have learnt that the Saying is not a speech act nor a certain “something” of a subject that expresses a truth value. Truth-value comes after the entrance of the Third, by thinking. Consequently, the transformation from Saying to Said takes, according to Levinas, place with the entrance of “the Third.” It introduces the question of to what extent we should limit the initial

83 For instance, Kajsa Eriksson suggests in her essay Att tala om ansvar that the ethical responsibility of the hither side expressed in the Saying is not completely undone by the Said. I think she is right when she asserts that Levinas himself therefore had as “starting point” in OTB that any written work is already in question with itself.

84 “Saying is not a game. Antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages […]it is[…]the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification.” OTB, 5.

85 See Rat, who suggests that “here is me” would be a better translation of the original French “me voici” since it signals the accusation and indeterminacy rather than a fixed foundation of an I. Such a translation would better highlight and match Levinas idea of a subjectivity without a foundation of an “I think”. See Rat, Un-Common Sociality: Thinking Sociality with Levinas, 49.

86 “‘Here I am” as a witness of the Infinite, but as a witness that does not thematise what it bears witness of, and whose truth is not the truth of representation, is not evidence.” OTB, 146.

87 Large, Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot – Ethics and the Ambiguity of Writing, 12.

88 Thus, I, in contrast to my agreement with Critchley’s description of the Said, disagree with his influential interpretation when he suggests that the Saying could be understood as a “[…]the performative stating, proposing or expressive position of myself facing the other.” Critchley, The Cambridge Companion to Levinas, 18.

89 Discussing what the third party is beyond the scope of this essay and in itself a vivid field of Levinasian studies. We just note that in a meeting, this third party could be interpreted to bring about the act of consciousness of an other in relationship to an I. “In the indirect ways of illeity, in the anarchical provocation which ordains me to the other, is imposed the way which leads to thematization, and to an act of consciousness. The act of consciousness is motivated by the presence of a third party[…]” OTB, 16.
responsibility, creating a distance in between the other and me – it introduces comparison and the I and Thou-relation. It introduces comparison and the I and Thou-relation. Comparison is nevertheless needed, since subjectivity means being responsive for an infinite demand of freedom of the other. The Saying becomes thematised, turns to language and identified sentences, and is put in relation to what is already Said. In this subordination, a reduction takes place.

Levinas described it as a violent reduction since the Saying is not representable but the Said is, per definition, a representation. Thus, it is argued by Levinas that to refer to Saying as only correlative to the Said or as an “exposure” of the Said is incorrect, since the exposure for the other is already present without any activity of an intentional self. To put the Saying in relationship to the Said would according to this be to subordinate unrepresentable alterity and freedom of the other to temporalization and identification (“you meant that”) and thus trying to identify it in the Said. It would according to Levinas’ argumentation be to forget that the Said were not to be possible without the condition for communication, the pre-original Saying of concern for the other that came from exile, from no ontological ground, outside. I therefore interpret this to be the main criticism executed by OTB: we should not believe that the Saying does de facto correspond to the Said, and that following, not believe that this Saying would imply identity, a certain case of meaning. An important consequence of this interpretation is that the Said never could be an exhaustive narrative – there could never be a true story that would cover the infinite alterity signalled by the other in the exposure for an other. In this section I have suggested that Levinas’ idea of language is a thorough critique of a naïve interpretation of apophansis, wherefore this will be considered as a premise for further discussions about ‘philosophy’ and ‘skepticism’.

90 OTB, 157.
91 It has in some literature been suggested that the Saying and Said are analogous to speaking and writing, a view I oppose since Levinas’ Saying is described as something beyond a speech act, as involuntarily expressing vulnerability - Levinas was criticising the idea of a logos. An example of the Platonistic reading I am opposing can be found in Staehler, Plato and Levinas: The Ambiguous Out-Side of Ethics, 163.
92 “The identity of entities refers to a saying teleologically turned to the kerygma of the said, absorbing itself in it to the extent of being forgotten in it. [...] It [the Saying] would take up a position with regard to this “something”, fixed in a present, re-present to itself, and thus extract from the labile character of time. The saying extended toward the said and absorbed in it, correlative with it, names an entity, in the light or resonance of lived time which allows a phenomenon to appear.” OTB, 37.
93 “The thematising logos, the saying stating a said in monologue and dialogue and in the exchange of information, with all the cultural and historical dimensions it bears, proceeds from this pre-original saying.” OTB, 198.
94 It is important to note that Levinas’ critique is towards the formation of a domain of meaning, not directed towards the possibility of truth. Truth “[...] has been obliged to undergo the deviation of saying and its temporality in order to become illuminated. But this priority can survive only if one actively subordinates saying to the process of thematization and regards it as saying only what needs to be said.” Hand, The other voice: ethics and expression in Emmanuel Levinas, 60.
Philosophy and its responsibility

Philosophy could therefore be understood is in that sense never done in incorporating meaning. The last word said will not bring closure to the meaningfulness of philosophical discourse, as far as philosophy is concerned with truth and not ideology. Within philosophical discourse, the meaning given by the propositions might be exhaustive to talk about the current discourse. But to forget about how Saying breaks up within this Said would according to Levinas be to forget the responsibility signalled in the Saying, witnessing the hither side. Accordingly, if philosophy forgets about the priority of Saying to language and thinks that the Said is exhaustive and separate, it has forgotten and neglected its task. This is what Levinas hold has often been done in the Western philosophy. An attempt to show that the Said is not exhaustive and sufficient would within Levinas’ philosophy be to Unsay the Said. The ‘unsaying’ could be interpreted to be to stress that truths do not come from themselves or an isolated “I think”, but from a vulnerability not amended by the thinking I. Consequently, philosophy must point out that there is more meaning expressed than what the current discourse claims. In line with this claim, it could be exemplified in how this written text on this paper still speaks and is open for different readings. The meaning of a text could only be said to be the same as what is presently stated here if it is already displaced. Consequently, discourse could never include the totalization of discourse, eg. the finite could only contain the idea of the infinite, but not the infinite itself. The idea of the infinite, then, is a possibility of the finite. Even though language produces the Said, it appears as if there is a way to go beyond it already. The possibility of going beyond the written and Said “showed” is one of Levinas’ arguments to why OTB or any book must transcend its own discourse.

95 “To affirm that this mutation in the amphibology of being and entities is an amphibology of the logos, that it is due to the status of the said, is not to reduce the difference between being and entities to a frivolous play of syntax. It is to measure the pre-ontological weight of language instead of taking it only as a code (which it is also). But also, by interpreting the fact that essence exposes and is exposed, the temporalization is stated, resounds, is said, it is not to give priority to the said over the saying. It is first to awaken in the said the saying which is absorbed in it, and, thus absorbed, enters into the history that the said imposes. To the extent that the saying would have no other meaning than this enunciation of the said, that it would be strictly “correlative” with the said, it would justify the thesis that the subject is dependent on being, as well as the thesis that being refers to the subject.” OTB, 43.

96 “To stay with the signification of the said, and of the saying that turns into apophansis, forgetful of the proposition and exposure to the other in which they signify, is to stay with the consciousness-subject, that is, in the last analysis, the subject self-consciousness and origin, arche, to which Western philosophy leads.” OTB, 78.

97 “Thematization is then inevitable, so that signification itself show itself, but does so in the sophism with which philosophy begins, in the betrayal which philosophy is called upon to reduce.” OTB, 151-152.

98 Levinas’ claim is that no discourse will be fully closed, there will always be an opening for the other due to subjectivity, necessitated by vulnerability: “Every discourse, even when said inwardly, is in proximity and does not include the totality.” OTB, 171.

99 OTB, 141.
Nevertheless, Levinas’ claim is that the reduction to the Said happens in using language.\textsuperscript{100} We could interpret this as the tendency to create a relationship between the Saying and statements and propositions, although there is no actual connection, no such ordering of a meta-language. Through this, we can recognize two important consequences of the analysis of the Saying and Said.

The first consequence is that according to Levinas the ontological reduction of language is inevitable and constant. The second consequence is further that there is always more meaning than what is left after this ontological reduction and that all possible meaning signified in the Saying could never be exhausted in the Said. The philosophical speaking in OTB is understood as a Saying, but Levinas’ claim is that philosophical discourse presents itself as a Said.\textsuperscript{101} The reduction of the Saying is interpreted as a violent reduction provoked by the cogito. It is violent because it reduces our responsibility for the other by appropriation, allowing the freedom of the other to be finite, kept in thought. At the same time, we learnt that the Saying is the opening to respond for the other’s infinite freedom – however language, a finite response, is never enough. Language is in that sense problematic. Philosophy could not avoid to reduce what it draws its meaning from– the asymmetrical nearness to the other – to something that is intentionally meaningful and certain by the “I think” – to the Said.

3. Interpreting Scepticism

3.1 Scepticism as a Reaction to Violence

Philosophy risks inflicting violence upon the other if it sticks to what it has reduced, the Said. What does Levinas mean with ‘violence’? I find that the term has a much wider scope than what we usually would mean with the word. It appears to me that Levinas in OTB used the term ‘violence’ to signify (at least) two different meanings.

The first notion of violence I believe signify an appropriation of the other and the asymmetrical responsibility through language. The second notion of violence signifies an act of violence.\textsuperscript{102} These two notions in turn become important in understanding why scepticism is ethically justified in the Levinasian picture. Due to the scope of the essay, I cannot articulate the connection further, so I am relying on the argumentation by Rosato in the article

\textsuperscript{100} OTB, 46.
\textsuperscript{101} “The philosophical speaking that betrays in its said the proximity it conveys before us still remains, as a saying, a proximity and a responsibility.” OTB, 168.
\textsuperscript{102} A good overview of Levinas’ account on ‘violence’, especially in relationship and reaction to Hegelian historicity, is found in Schroeder, \textit{Altared Ground: Levinas, History, and Violence}. 

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“Levinas on Skepticism, Moral and Otherwise”. Put shortly, she argues that the scepticism in OTB express the concern that meaning of the other is lost by the totalizing force of language, but by expressing the concern, it dissolves the question of totality posed in the earlier work Totality and Infinity. Thus, this ought, according to Rosato, to explain why Levinas appealed to scepticism, if we are to believe that Levinas tried to find a solution to the moral scepticism:

“[…]the appeal to a skepticism regarding language, and philosophical language in particular, succeeds as a response to moral skepticism not by rejecting the evidence of war but rather by accepting it and seeking to ground morality in a new way, on the saying of the other.”

As I mentioned earlier, Levinas did not claim to formulate a certain scepticism, he referred to scepticism in relationship to philosophical tradition from the very beginning of philosophizing. It is nowhere in OTB stated how the sceptical discourse should be expressed. One might therefore object that it is wrong to speculate and try to suggest what meaning ‘scepticism’ ought to have, if Levinas’ project in OTB was to criticize how philosophy tends to hold on to the belief that the meaning exhibited in language is all there is to meaningfulness. I think the objection actually supports my interpretation in a paradoxical manner. I will now explain what I mean by this.

We have seen that the worry in OTB is if language could make justice for the other, which this very objection against trying to define scepticism captures. What is important to note here is that the objection itself is already worried about if a linguistic definition could, in a responsible manner, capture what could have been meant. In that sense, there is a scepticism towards the meaningfulness of language already in the objection against following through with finding a definition for ‘scepticism’. My suggestion is therefore that a sceptic considers the impossibility of expressing the hither side (fully) through language. I hold that this suggestion of what ‘scepticism’ signifies is strongly supported by Levinas’ critique in OTB, presented in previous sections. Furthermore, in line with the argumentation of Rosato, where scepticism is a response to the moral concern of totalization in Totality and Infinity, we have a reason to believe that it was as a result of a plausible development in Levinas’ philosophy. There might be another interpretation of scepticism better than mine. Notwithstanding, Chanter, for instance, expresses an analogue conception of scepticism in The Betrayal of Philosophy. Her, as well as my, main reason for suggesting that ‘scepticism’ in OTB marks a

103 Rosato, Levinas on Skepticism, Moral and Otherwise, 446.
104 OTB, 7.
questioning of the meaningfulness of language is that there is always more meaning beyond
the domain of ontology:

“We have seen that Levinas finds a meaning in ethical responsibility that goes beyond phenomenality.
That which appears, and is represented through signification, as a being - God for example - does not
exhaust its meaning.”105

This is also observed by Cederberg, who adds the remark that “My responsibility for the
others […] means that the world is already meaningful.”106 That is, what is meaningful is
inflected by what is better for the other – the Face is the “origin” of meaning. From Rosato,
Chanter and Cederberg, then, I would suggest the conclusion that the critique of
meaningfulness in OTB is limited to the scope of ontology, which, as I have argued, is
produced by language. The scepticism could be understood as a critique directed towards
language since this is where the very other is reduced. 107 In other words, the sceptic might
express the problem referred to as “otherism” in Levinas’ studies.108 Out of these indications, I
would suggest that (one) appropriate formulation of the sceptical insight might be formulated
as “Language is not meaningful”.109

I am aware that there are other plausible interpretations of ‘scepticism’ that might need to be
examined.110 I am also aware that my interpretation of scepticism might be formulated
differently depending on how one interprets ‘meaning’ in OTB. However, the interpretation
of Levinas’ conception of ‘scepticism’ as a questioning of the meaningfulness of language
seems plausible if we are interested in keeping apart intentional meaning showed/appearing in
language and meaning beyond this intentionality available by vulnerability. Dissevering

105 Chanter, The Betrayal of Philosophy: Emmanuel Levinas's Otherwise than being, 73.
106 Cederberg, Resaying the Human: Levinas Beyond Humanism and Antihumanism,165.
107 It is also supported by Levinas’ somehow strange claim that language is insufficient in annulling the exposure
to the other but, at the same time, is the condition for an opening of communication. The one persecuted by the
other “[…] cannot defend himself by language, for the persecution is a disqualification of the apology.
Persecution is the precise moment in which the subject is reached or touched with the mediation of the logos.”
OTB, 121.
108 The Levinasian position that the ethical relation to the other is never fully captured in language is often
referred to as ‘Otherism’ in the field of Levinas’ studies, see Aikin & Simmons, Levinasian Otherism,
Skepticism, and the Problem of Self-Refutation, 29.
109 It further seems to be plausible to formulate scepticism as a critique of and in language since ‘critique’ and
‘scepticism’ seems to be overlapping concepts in OTB, as argued by, for instance, Atterton in Levinas's skeptical
critique of metaphysics and anti-humanism.
110 See the recent article Levinasian alterity and its analogy with skepticism by García for an overview of the
current dominant interpretations Levinas’ skepticism.
ideology and criticizing being content seems what Levinas wanted to imply by a scepticism provoked by an other.\textsuperscript{111}

\section*{3.2 Analysing the contradiction of language in OTB}

We have analysed why Levinas claimed that language already is misrepresentation of the hither side, of the infinite responsibility for the other.\textsuperscript{112} In a sense then, we could understand it as if language \textit{bears witness but does not have an exhaustive relationship to a hither side}.\textsuperscript{113} Any Said is in this Levinasian picture irreducible to one complete separate existence, as in another more fundamental language, since it has already assembled what is without principle, the hither side. But what is without principle is thereby without relationship. In the apparent formality of a Said then, a statement with a truth value is not an apparition of an underlying complete existence.\textsuperscript{114} I argued that we hence should understand this as a major critique against what Levinas called the “naïve interpretation” of apophansis. From what I stipulated in the former section regarding Levinas’ view of language, a statement with truth-value does neither signify the hither side, as in ‘shows its exhaustive meaning’, nor is independent from the involuntary responsibility for an other. Consequently, there will be a rupture of sense formed by the excess of the hither side in any statement. From this I would suggest that Levinas indicated that any formal set of words, by any degree of formality of a language, indicate and is dependent on the hither side.

Let us see how this relates to the problem of scepticism and our subject. Since knowledge and certainty is in the realm of consciousness – the Said - but what is the hither side is not\textsuperscript{115}, the difficulty of language seems to be how we could know what is beyond a statement.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{111} Compare the article \textit{Philosophy and its Shadow: On Skepticism and Reason in Levinas}, where Cederberg suggests that a definition of ‘scepticism’ could be understood as a reaction against idealism, a rationalist attitude that puts the concern for the other as a foundation (without ontological foundation) for reason. It is rational because it doesn’t deny truth but at the same time could be seen as a ground for reasoning that is not a “Hinterwelt” or an esoteric abyss of meaning.
\item \textsuperscript{112} OTB, 170.
\item \textsuperscript{113} In other words and in the same analogy, a witness is not testifying the complete event for which it gives a testimony, but the witness is giving a testimony from its point of view.
\item \textsuperscript{114} “The apophansis, the said, more formal still than the formal, is not in any way a statement of being, not even an ontological statement of formal ontology. It is irreducible to essence, but like it by the exhibition, the indiscretion it makes possible.” OTB, 155.
\item \textsuperscript{115} “[the hither sid]e does not come to pass in the form of a veiling and does not exhaust its meaning in terms of consciousness: clarity and obscurity, or distinctness and confusion, known and unknown. The not-known and the unknowable would still refer to a present, would form a structure in it, would belong to order. Diachrony is not a difference amounting to relations between the known and the unknown, where the dissimulated and the knowable would already share the thematizable plane of essence.” OTB, 154.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
proposition, state of affairs through itself.\textsuperscript{116} My interpretation of Levinas’ definition of the philosophical task is that philosophical practice has to integrate meaning by not being indifferent of the responsibility of the other (which is arguably “Unsaying the Said”). I want to suggest that this is possible. In order to do so, I need to show that 1) the sceptical claim is meaningful even if it is not necessarily true and 2) that the one refuting the sceptic must hold it to be meaningful by claiming that it is false. I will suggest that the sceptic is doing something meaningful in making a philosophical point by questioning metaphilosophical presuppositions and the refuter doing something meaningful in considering the sceptic’s questioning.

It appears that our everyday language, according to Levinas, is already burdened with the original sin of betrayal – a violence. So how could I examine language through language? Ordinary language is seemingly already infected and not a potential cure at first glance. Rather than being afraid of the disease, I will ask if it implies a fatal outcome for understanding the contradiction. For that, we need to approach language with itself.

The following part is an interpretation where I have deployed a hypothetical situation where one person – “the sceptic” – claiming that we ought not to accept the naïve interpretation of apophansis, and another one – “the refuter” – claiming that what the sceptic says is not true. This situation is interesting because I believe that Levinas has conditioned that scepticism and a refutation of it might imply that the contradiction is not final.\textsuperscript{117} Furthermore, the contradiction is regarding philosophical practice, not philosophical text. We therefore ought to analyse the practical situation of refutation.

### 3.2.1 Analysing the meaningfulness of the contradiction

In this section, I will argue that we should not accept the contradiction as a performative contradiction. When someone utters typical sceptical statements containing what seems to be a contradicting act, the propositional analysis often shows a contradiction or a paradox. Very often, this is due to what is usually referred to as a ‘performative contradiction’, eg. when the propositional content of our statements contradicts the implicit or explicit meaning of the

\textsuperscript{116} OTB, 42.

\textsuperscript{117} It is suggested that language could overcome itself through a “reversion […] like that which the refutation of skepticism brings out.” OTB, 170.
performance of our illocutionary acts.\textsuperscript{118} This is often reflected in addressing sceptical accounts within philosophical discussions.\textsuperscript{119}

If the sceptical insight as interpreted does indeed generate a performative contradiction, we have good reasons to believe that scepticism does not overcome language through language. It would also imply that the one refuting the sceptic is doing it on grounds of a performative contradiction.\textsuperscript{120} If we cannot show that the sceptic is doing something meaningful, it will follow from the two accounts that “Philosophical practice is not meaningful”. This, I will now try to show, is an implausible interpretation. I will suggest that claiming that it is a performative contradiction requires an intentional act by the refuter.

In my interpretation, the sceptic says: “Language is not meaningful”. What is important to note here is what is actually said is a criticism of language missing a point, missing meaning. This, I will now argue, is the key point for understanding why it does not with necessity follows a performative contradiction as in “But by saying that, you are already refuting yourself!”? Why? The refuter must presuppose that a proposition is indeed exhaustive for what the sceptic expressed and identical to the impact – they are in Levinasian terms operating within the Said. As we have seen, meaning is not merely understood by Levinas as a speech act expressing a certain case of meaning, a proposition, but already in the Saying as overflow, signalling infinite responsibility as directed direction. But clearly, in refuting scepticism, we must treat it as if the speech act is the only meaning, already in retrospective, in narrated time as an identified proposition. The contradiction of the sceptical statement is only possible if one presupposes that a relationship between what is uttered and what is meant could always be established and maintained in the same presence. By analysing Levinas’ account on the appropriation and violence executed in language, we saw that a possible interpretation is that Levinas’ sceptic wants to question this very presupposition. On this interpretation, the sceptic does not accept that we could presuppose a condition in which we could maintain that what the sceptic says generates one case of meaning separated from the sceptical insight, since this might be an intentional modification. But for the sake of the analysis, we could not suppose that it is or is not the case that the Saying is exhausted in the Said, since that would be begging the question on behalf of the sceptic. In other words, we

\textsuperscript{118}This is a part of one definition found on p. 12 in Apel’s *The Cartesian Paradigm of First Philosophy: A Critical Appreciation from the Perspective of Another (the Next?) Paradigm.*

\textsuperscript{119}Furthermore, analytic philosophy arguably often tends to disclaim continental philosophy by referring to its performativity, which is why I believe that the analytic interlocutor might suspect this problematic.

\textsuperscript{120}This challenge is put forth but not solved in Aikin & Simmons’ article *Levinasian Otherism, Skepticism, and the Problem of Self-Refutation.*
could not presuppose that our language is insufficient in meaning. Instead, we will examine if we have good reason to believe that the sceptical utterance as I have formulated it is merely a performative contradiction. We will now see what Levinas claimed about scepticism in OTB:

“Skepticism, which traverses the rationality or logic of knowledge, is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said. The contradiction is visible to reflection, which refutes it, but scepticism is insensitive to the refutation, as though the affirmation and negation did not resound in the same time. Skepticism then contests the thesis that between the saying and the said the relationship that connects in synchrony a condition with the conditioned is repeated. It is as though scepticism were sensitive to the difference between my exposure without reserve to the other, which is saying, and the exposition or statement of the said in its equilibrium and justice.”

Let us untangle this quote so that we could see the relation to the ethical problematic of language. The “affirmation” could be understood as the sceptical insight that language is insufficient and violent as it limits meaning and thus reduces responsibility. I take that the “negation” is the sceptic making use of language by saying something “as if it were meaningful”. In the “reflection”, a cognitive act which comes to pass retrospectively as soon as the sceptic has spoken, there is a contradiction that could be formed as a relationship between a proposition expressing the sceptical insight and what the sceptic did by using language. I believe that the “sensitivity” Levinas mentioned is to be analysed as an awareness of the involuntary time passing compared to the temporality invoked by the refuter. The “[…]exposure without reserve to the other” refers to the Saying, conveying infinite possible meaning. My interpretation of “[…]the exposition or statement of the said in its equilibrium and justice.” is the awareness of being a certain other amongst others brought by the Third, that we are in a discourse of discussion where we are comparing, trying to understand and add up with respect to our desire to follow through with our beliefs and argumentative accounts.

Following my interpretation, the sceptic is aware of that the one refuting them will refute them, since the sceptic is not alone in the discussion, but they nevertheless will not accept the refutation, because they reject that there is and will be an exhaustive relationship between the Saying and the Said. The rejection of the refutation is on my view possible, to start with, since the sceptical insight is intelligible, understandable for anyone – it is not a private feeling or experience of being misunderstood. On this interpretation, the refutation is in other words a

121 OTB, 168.
122 There are extensive discussions in Levinas studies on how to interpret ‘the entrance of the Third’, discussions that, as already mentioned, I will not enter. However, Levinas did not understand it as an empirical event.
123 This is an attempt to meet an objection that the sceptic as depicted is a solipsist with regards to meaning. But since the sceptical insight is intelligible to all partaking in the discussion, it is not a matter of a refutation in
reaction on other grounds than an accusation of solipsism of meaning in the sceptical account. One does not presuppose solipsicism of meaning, eg. that one’s own mind is apt for meaning, whereas other’s are not. The impossibility that the sceptic is concerned with lies not in the possibility for other minds to conceive the meaningfulness of the insight, but in the possibility of expressing this meaningfulness in language. Subsequently, the reason why someone would like to refute the sceptic ought to be that the sceptic according to Levinas is “[…]venturing to realize this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility.”¹²⁴ This could be understood as the ground for the accusation of the performative contradiction.

The performative contradiction that the sceptic is accused of would only be valid if it were the case that there is one and only one corresponding intentional meaning suitable for the sceptical utterance conflicting the performance of uttering something meaningful. But we seem to be able to intuitively understand a worry of not being able to make justice of something inexpressible in language through words. Eg., there is another proposition that is also meaningful and could be linked to what the sceptic is uttering, for instance the proposition “It is not the case that everything could be expressed in statements with truth-values”. One could also reformulate it, if one holds the argumentation form to be correct, accordingly: It is conceivable that ‘Everything could not be expressed in statements with truth-values” even if that would not be the case. If ‘Everything could not be expressed in statements with truth-values’ is conceivable, it is possible. Hence, even the one refuting the sceptic must admit the possibility of what is expressed. We could in this sense believe in the sceptical insight but this does not stop us from knowing what a self-contradiction is in its logical form, simply because the understanding of a contradiction requires a reflective act. We will now try to understand why Levinas did not consider the sceptic to be self-refuting.

“The sceptical discourse, which states the rupture, failure, impotence would be self-contradictory if the saying and the said were only correlative[…] Philosophy underestimates the extent of the negation in this “not appearing”, which exceeds the logical scope of negation and affirmation.”¹²⁵

I interpret this to mean that the sceptical insight “which exceeds the logical scope of negation and affirmation” does not signal a divergence only within formal logic, as I interpret the

¹²⁴ OTB, 7.
¹²⁵ OTB, 168.
quoted passage to be about. On my interpretation, there must be a graver divergence of the possible divergence of a formal representation, as in it falling into a non-sensical category, but also being meaningful in another logic. So, the “not appearing” is in other words possibly not with necessity only to be interpreted as a non-sense statement in a logical system. What is the non-appearing, then? Levinas answer in OTB was the neighbour, the very other.126 This closeness goes according to Levinas “against all logic”.127 Consequently, there must be at least another proposition for the sceptical utterance. I have suggested that an implicit meaning such as “Not everything could be expressed in propositions” or “Not everything could be expressed in truth-value-statements” do not create a performative contradiction in the act of saying something as if language was meaningful, but it could indeed be non-sensical in a logic, thus satisfying our interpretation. In other words, the sceptical utterance could express another propositional content that would not conflict with the performance. But it makes no sense to say that the sceptical utterance both engenders a performative contradiction (Performing: Language is meaningful. Proposition: Language is not meaningful) and not a performative contradiction (Performing: Language is meaningful. Proposition: It might not be the case that everything could be expressed in propositions). We have to choose an interpretation for the sake of the analysis. If we consider the interpretation of Levinas ‘philosophy of language, the sceptical insight aims at propositions and probably is closer to “It might not be the case that everything could be expressed in propositions.” than “Language is not meaningful [at all]”. Language is on my interpretation for Levinas a problematic, not a problem in itself. The interpretation I adopt is therefore the former. Due to this, I believe we have a good reason to abandon the idea that the sceptical utterance is merely a performative contradiction. What the sceptic is doing is in other words meaningful philosophical practice.

3.2.2 Non-sense contra ethical non-sense

One might now be tempted to object and wonder if all non-sensical statements are ethical, if ethics only shows itself as non-sense. This is a temptation if one consider that a statement is ethical iff it is non-sensical.128 In that case, it would be wrong to say that the sceptic is doing

126 “The neighbour qua other does not have himself be preceded by any precursor who would depict or announce his silhouette. He does not appear.” OTB, 86.
127 OTB, 87.
128 This temptation is embraced a bit too swiftly in recent comparative studies of Levinas and early Wittgenstein. I interpret that a parallel reading is quite a forced project since Levinas main project could be understood to be to write a book on ethics, considering that it might not be possible, whilst Wittgenstein described such an undertaking as a “chimera”. But there are some interesting parallels, that are beyond the scope of this essay, as for instance the analogy of Wittgenstein’s “Unsinn” and Levinas’ “pure nonsense”. See the investigation in Overgaard’s The Ethical Residue of Language in Levinas and Early Wittgenstein, 223-249.
something meaningful. In this section, I will argue that the sceptical utterance is not ethical because it is non-sensical, since it is not non-sensical prior to reflection. It will be shown that it is rather the other way around. How does one then differentiate any non-sensical statement from an ethical statement? Are all non-sensical statements ethical according to this Levinasian picture? This interpretation would arguably weaken the force which Levinas ascribe to scepticism. If one does not meet the objection and explain what differentiation is required in an interpretation, ethics risks to be a separate discourse rather than something of transcendence within a discourse. Levinas repeatedly described the transcendence of language as “transcendence in immanence” and if we want to make sense of that claim, we must not allow a separated realm of discourse. But according to Levinas, scepticism is not “pure nonsense”. The reason that Levinas gave us to believe this is that the sceptical refutation takes place in and over time, and time is not an a priori form of Being in the Levinasian understanding – time is not a duration. Time passes never to return again. If time was indeed a structure of perfect instants in succession, it would make sense to say that scepticism is purely non-sensical. Since it is not understood thus, the sceptical utterance is not just any non-sensical statement; for it to be non-sensical, it depends on a recollecting thinking self that could state the contradiction – recollecting time lost. A typical purely non-sensical statement will not require a passage of time to show that it is non-sensical, consider for instance a sentence of non-established words that instantly makes no sense since the words themselves are not instantly meaningful. “Meaningful” is here understood as “intelligible in communication” since communication is for the other. The words used to formulate the sceptical statement are meaningful (and not purely nonsensical as in “Blarg blarg blarg”) and one could only see a contradiction after reflection on and recollection of what was said in relation to what was apparently expressed.

I understand this as for the sceptic’s “Language is not meaningful” to be a contradiction, it requires a thinking subject that takes an interest, that involuntarily takes over responsibility of these non-linguistic circumstances. Eg., the refuter is showing that it does care for the sceptic’s concern by trying to take care of the concern, responding, thus by showing an ethical interest only possible by a passive responsibility. The ethical interest is only made

129 Apart from the criticism directed at Husserl’s conception of temporality, it also relates to Levinas’ criticism of Kant, see pp. 31-34 in OTB.
130 OTB, 171.
131 I believe that this corresponds to the demand in OTB of showing “non-indifference for the other”. The power of words is that it could say what remains unspoken – which is what fuels the transcending motion of scepticism. This has also been argued for in Ziarek’s Inflected language: Towards a Hermeneutics of Nearness.
possible by the meaningfulness provoked by the other. This ethical interest is not with necessity needed in the example case of “pure nonsense”. There is in this interpretation a difference between statements that are non-sensical because they are ethical (which would be the sceptical statement) and purely non-sensical (which would be “Blarg blarg”). Whereas the former requires an act of intentional reflection that necessitates the care possible by an involuntary ethical responsibility present. The answer to the question if all nonsensical statements are per definition ethical is therefore in line with this interpretation no, since an ethical statement might be initially meaningful, that is, understandable when expressed in communication, but then is contradictive by the help of a thinking subject’s intention. This is not the case for a nonsensical statement that unfolds all its non-sense on its own – no one needs to state that it is non-sensical for us to think that it is. I therefore interpret that Levinas by “underestimation” is referring to the failure of philosophers to recognize that philosophical practice involves a passive ethical responsibility that affects the notion of meaningfulness. On this interpretation, the involuntary ethical responsibility for the other is necessary to declare the sceptic’s utterance as non-sensical, for it to make sense to say so. I have therefore suggested that the refuter integrates meaning (beyond intentional meaning) in claiming that what the sceptic says is non-sense.

3.2.3 The Meaning of the Sceptical Insight

In this section, I will argue that for the one refuting skepticism to follow through with the refutation, they need to assume the belief that it is intelligible to hold the sceptical insight to be meaningful. The distinction made in the former section between pure and ethical nonsensical statements further strengthens my interpretation that the sceptic is expressing meaning. I argued that for the contradiction to appear, ethical care (responsibility for a responsibility never chosen) for the sceptic is shown by the refuter. I contrasted this with purely nonsensical statements, where ethical care is not necessary, eg. nobody must make justice of “Blarg” for it to be non-sensical – it already is. One may now object and suggest that I until now have merely shown that the refuter with necessity must care, eg. intentionally

132 It seems to me that Levinas has got a supporting view of the interpretation that ascribes a prior concern in discourse in OTB. On p. 84, he claims “The conscious discourse still knows how to tell this impotence without healing the affection that rends consciousness, without extracting through an admission the “seed of folly”, the thorn in the flesh of reason, which is the shudder of subjectivity. Even the philosopher that speaks of it, over and beyond the universality in which the subjectivity that is said appears, remains a subjectivity obsessed by the neighbour.” The “subjectivity obsessed by the neighbour”, the very concern for the other remains by the help of the refuting philosopher in that the philosopher presents an argument against that tells its “impotence without healing the affection that rends consciousness”, that is, an argument which states out a contradiction. The “affection” seems to be the concern of the other.
make sense of the sceptic. If the objection is correct, Levinas account on transcendence of and in philosophical discourse must be trivial. This objection is however, I believe, based on a misunderstanding that the sceptical insight is somehow cognitively private, or a psychological phenomenon. I will therefore now argue why I hold that the refutation is made possible through the fact that the one refuting the sceptic does not only “experience empathy” for the sceptic but also know the sceptical insight.

I suggested that the refuter fails to acknowledge the difference between a purely non-sensical statement and involuntary responsibility for the other that is necessary to call the sceptic’s concern nonsensical. They are in other words failing to realize that they are trying to make justice of the sceptical position, underestimating the non-appearing, Levinas’ description of the other. To follow through with the refutation could therefore be understood to be an unwillingness to abandon the presupposition that everything could be expressed simultaneously in meaningful statements with truth-values. A presupposition driven by a will, coveting totality, to make philosophical discourse to a coherent system of meaning and truth separated from ethical involuntary responsibility for the other. If a statement is non-sensical and this is realized upon reflection, if it is a “not appearing” in the Said, this could be interpreted to signal the Saying, an ethical overflow of the intentional meaning laid bare in the current philosophical discourse. When Levinas talked about “appearance and non-appearance” in discourse, it seems to refer to a time after the entrance of the Third, that is, of reflection by an “I think”.133 The “unsayable saying” does not appear to reflection fully. This is due to Levinas claim that everything shows itself for justice, which is (sometimes) represented by the Third party. So even ethical signification, the very other, shows itself in language as a “not appearing” according to Levinas’ account.134 In contrast, the Levinasian “appearing” is the Said that arises from the Saying, the order urged by the Third.135

In this section I will say something about why we have reason to believe that the refutation expands the field of meaning. For a statement to transcend (as in ‘overcome’) the current state of certain meaning, we have explained that it cannot be purely non-sensical, it needs to be meaningful as in intelligible in communication. As we remember, Levinas holds that the Saying is conveying infinite meaning, so the Saying could, to start with, generate a certain

133 “Order, appearing, phenomenality, being are produced in signification, in proximity, starting with the third party.” OTB, 160.
134 “Everything shows itself and is said in being for justice, and receives the structures of the thematised and the said – even signification and justice.” OTB, 163.
135 “The said, the appearing, arises in the saying.” OTB, 46.
case of meaning in language by the violent reduction of the Said. Hence, the sceptical insight is meaningful for both the one refuting it and the sceptic. We could in other words believe that the sceptical insight is meaningful because we are claiming it to be false. Since the sceptical insight could be meaningful both if one presupposes that the Saying is exhaustive in the Said or if one presupposes that the Saying is not exhaustive in the Said, this implies that a closed philosophical discourse of meaning, a Said, is not de facto fully possible. That one might believe that it is question-begging is based on misunderstanding responsibility as something that must be actively intended. One is responsible, that is, already offering a response in being sensible of that the sceptical insight makes sense.

We will now articulate why this is not question-begging. The worry of the refuter, since they recognise that the sceptical insight is meaningful, is only possible if the one refuting it presupposes the possibility of another meaning-giving system where the sceptical insight is not non-sense. Conforming to this interpretation of meaningfulness as something instable is probably what Levinas was referring to by the “ambiguity of sense and non-sense”, eg. that we must, and that we do, trade on the concept of non-sense to be able to make sense at all. To be concerned about responding to the sceptic means involuntary taking over responsibility with respect to the sceptical insight by believing that it is the case that the sceptic is expressing something meaningful. In fact, the refutation and judging the sceptic to be false is then always posterior to the ethical responsibility required. My interpretation could therefore provide explanation for why Levinas claimed that apophansis presupposes ethical responsibility neither chosen nor exhausted. In order to realize that the sceptical insight could be meaningful discourse, the one refuting scepticism must adopt and intentionally hold the sceptical position to be meaningful in the moment they form the contradiction. I will now present an interpretation that enables this without involving ‘the Saying’ and ‘the Said’ and summarizes what has been said.

The refuter knows that it is possible for it to be the case that not everything that is meaningful could be expressed in statements with truth-values. Accordingly, the refuter believes that it is

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136 OTB, 163.
137 An analysis of temporality is required to show exactly how Levinas’ suggestion of two different times completely annuls the possibility of a contradiction. Arguably, this project is undertaken by Bernasconi in Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy.
138 Particularly, it sheds some new light on a possible explanation for the following claim (my italicization): “But apophansis does not exhaust what there is in saying. The apophansis presupposes the language that answers with responsibility, and the gravity of this response is beyond the measure of being. The impossibility of declining responsibility is reflected only in the scruple or remorse which precedes or follows this refusal.” OTB, 6-7.
possible for it to be the case that not everything that is meaningful could be expressed in statements with truth-values. But at the same time, they are denying that the possibility is a part of the meaningful philosophical discourse in refuting the sceptic. The possibility is therefore not a part of the current meaningful discourse. But they need to hold it to be meaningful because of an involuntary responsibility that remains unexplained by ontology. Due to this, the refuter transcends the Said with its intentional meaning and overcomes the philosophical discourse of meaning through language.

We have now investigated if there is an expansion of the philosophical discourse done by the one refuting the sceptic. That the one refuting the possibility to transcend the Said is transcending the Said by doing so shows that by denying that the “Saying is not exhaustive in the Said”, one still must hold that the sceptical insight is intelligible by the demand for a response. In refuting scepticism, then, meaningfulness is expanded through that which is not already in the meaningful discourse of established truths, but in a sceptical and ethical “beyond”. There is in other words a transcending movement from and beyond language in forming the contradiction. The meaningfulness of the refutation is dependent on considering that it is meaningful to hold that the naïve apophantic interpretation is not true. For us to have reached this point, we had to “leave” OTB as a body of text and consider subjectivity through philosophical practice.¹³⁹ Both the one refuting the sceptic and the one being sceptic could be considered to pursue a meaningful philosophical practice, as they both take part in a transcendence in discourse.

4. Conclusion

I have in this essay on OTB tried to answer the question if there is a contradiction regarding the status of scepticism through textual analysis. I suggested that a possible interpretation of what Levinas could have meant by ‘scepticism’ is a reaction against the appropriating violence of language. By interpreting Levinas’ understanding of language, I concluded that Levinas’ critique of a naïveté concerning apophasis and the metaphysical status of the meaningfulness of language is connected to the concern about violence. In order to examine the contradiction, which revolves around philosophical practice, I set up a hypothetical situation to initiate my analysis. In my analysis of meaningfulness, I argued that there is a

¹³⁹ This actualizes Levinas metaphor of the ‘listening eye’, see OTB, 37. In The Listening Eye: Nietzsche and Levinas, Schroeder suggests that the question of the ethical is the question of a “listening eye”: subjectivity going beyond being and logos, and thus, beyond, for instance, the silence of words as visual appearances in a book.
transcending movement in the refutation of scepticism, where the area of meaningful discourse is expanded by the involuntary responsiveness/responsibility of the refuter. I further argued that both the sceptic and the refuter take part in this transcendence of and in discourse. From this I would like to suggest that the worry of scepticism as the only meaningful philosophical practice sketched out in the beginning is based on contradiction that is apparent. I have tried to show this by denying the assertion that ‘Philosophical practice is not meaningful’. My analysis, however, cannot remove the threat fully, since there are possibly other interpretations of ‘scepticism’ that remain to be analysed in the light of the question of meaningfulness before one could settle the question of meaningfulness. However, this might be another issue apart from the role of scepticism that is linked to the question of what ethical meaning is. I believe that Holte correctly argues in the chapter “The meaning of the ethical” that there is an actual duplicity in the notion of ethical meaning which underlies the examination of transcendence in OTB.\(^ {140}\)

By addressing the question of this essay hermeneutically, it was shown that the text itself could not dissolve the contradiction from within. OTB and hence Levinas’ philosophy possibly suffers from what it cannot say. Nevertheless, such a description is only true if one considers the text and its contradictions as something independent and closed off from an ethical presence, which I suggested to be false. Philosophical dialogue is dependent on sensibility. My analysis therefore suggested the priority of an involuntary ethical responsibility over the ontological appearance of language as text for the possibility of meaningfulness. The claim that philosophy is dependent of a sceptical “beyond” or “otherwise” has been understood as the returning failure to resist the “otherwise than being” – the concrete ethical meeting.\(^ {141}\) In the end, the analysis has come to understand Levinas “ethics as first philosophy” as an investigation in the conditions of meaningfulness. By that, it has been shown that scepticism in OTB could be interpreted to have an important role in waking the philosophical discourse from its dogmatic slumber of meaning. I therefore understand the role of skepticism to be a questioning of the rigidity of a hermeneutical circle, a questioning that exposes its plasticity and calls for new agreements of the limits of understanding. This force of disturbance seems to be exactly what Levinas suggests be the role of scepticism – the

\(^ {140}\) See Holte, *Meaning and Melancholy in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas.*

\(^ {141}\) “Skepticism, at the dawn of philosophy, set forth and betrayed the diachrony of this very conveying and betraying. To conceive the *otherwise than being* requires, perhaps, as much audacity as scepticism shows[…]” OTB, 7.
interrupter of philosophical discourse, an interruption which Levinas claimed is the “only possible end” of its conclusion.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{142} OTB, 20.
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