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The Undoing of the Subject: Levinas' Thought on Ipseity

Introduction

One of the most problematic concepts in Levinas' thought is *ipseity*. In *Totality and Infinity*, it is defined as a separation from *il y a*, that is personality, egoism, and uniqueness (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, pp. 39, 44, 60, 117-118, 208, 177-279). The Latin word *ipse* literally means "self", consequently ipseity should be considered as the firm core of the subject, the unalienable part of a singular being. However, there is a discrepancy between the literal meaning of the word and its use in Levinas' later works, published in the 1970's. In *Otherwise Than Being*, ipseity is defined as a certain kind of inner alterity: as the other person inside the self (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 125).

Some authors have found several differences concerning the subject and its identity between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*¹, but the problem of ipseity should be analysed more deeply. If one considers ipseity as the other person inside the self, the subject will be threatened in its deepest core, that is identification. In order to understand if this concern is grounded, one should analyse this kind of inner alterity, which is not the only one. Levinas also writes about *illeity*: this word, from the Latin *ille*, "that" or "he", indicates the immemorial trace of Infinity, the idea of God (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, pp. 12-13, 16,

¹ According to Rolland, the passage from the nominative (*je*) of *Totality and Infinity* to the accusative (*moi*) of *Otherwise Than Being* points out how the ego, from a self-positing being, becomes "subject to" responsibility (Rolland 2000, p. 16). Derrida writes that, in *Otherwise Than Being*, the subject is not a host (*hôte*) anymore, but a hostage (*otage*) of the other (Derrida 1997, pp. 101-102). According to Ricoeur, in *Totality and Infinity* the ego renounces to its power and becomes passive (hyperbole), whereas, in *Otherwise Than Being*, there is a greater hyperbole, that is a turn in a substitutive activity (Ricoeur 1990; eng. trans. 1992, pp. 337-338). Finally, Drabinski sees a difference in the relation between the ego and exteriority, since the latter is excessive in *Totality and Infinity* and impoverished in *Otherwise Than Being* (Drabinski 2001, pp. 216-218).

151-154, 162-168)². It recalls a pre-original past, an absence, a relation to the Other preceding every present.

The sameness of the ego is brought into question two times: by the absolutely Other (Infinity), who is inside it as *illeity*, and by the other person, expressed by *ipseity*. However, inner alterity does not necessarily lead to alienation. The ego could have “wounds” or “openings” inside, but also a genuine core of identity. It will be argued that, in Levinas’ later works, ipseity is not the core of identity anymore and that it incisively affects the author’s view of subjectivity.

In the first section of this paper, ipseity will be defined and compared with illeity, which is a different kind of inner alterity. It will be argued that illeity does not imply an alienation of the ego, but only a reference to exteriority (God); then a question will arise: is ipseity a wider opening of the ego towards exteriority (the other person)³, or the cause of subjective undoing?

In the second section, an answer through textual evidence will be given, pointing out the discrepancy between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*: in the former, ipseity coincides with the firm core of the subject, in the latter, it is a source of alienation.

In the third section, it will be shown that the reason of this change is due to a different foundation of the self: in *Otherwise Than Being*, the origin of ipseity is deeply rooted in the alterity of the other person and not in general alterity (the worldly one), as it happens in *Totality and Infinity*. In this way, the subject becomes a hostage of the other and cannot be itself anymore. Finally, it will be argued that this change starts from “No Identity” (1970) and then issued in *Humanism of the Other* (1972), two years before *Otherwise Than Being* (1974) is published.

1. Illeity and ipseity in Levinas’ writings

Illeity and ipseity are two different kinds of inner otherness. In Latin language, the term “other” is said in many ways. When Levinas writes about the other person, he uses the meanings of *alter* or *alienus*. *Alter* indicates the “different”, and *alienus* means “belonging to someone else”

² Levinas uses the word “illeity” for the first time in “The Trace of the Other” (Levinas 1963; eng. trans. 1986, pp. 345-359), and develops it in “Meaning and Sense” (Levinas 1964; eng. trans. 1996, p. 63).

³ Ricoeur states that Levinas alienates ipseity, but suggests an alternative view: ipseity should be the place of an opening towards the other person, who is seen “as myself”, just as the self is considered as another (Ricoeur 1990; eng. trans. 1992, pp. 1-3). This is the path of reciprocity, which is rejected by Levinas.

or “to another place”. The point is to understand what kind of alterity ipseity is, especially in *Otherwise Than Being*.

Levinas interprets the word *alter* as a radical difference between the other and the same. The words “separation” and “exteriority” are used very often in his writings and are referred both to God and to the other person, but in different ways.

The word “absolute” seems the best at defining divinity. *Ab-solutus* is a past participle from *ab-solvo*, whose meaning is “to set free”, or “release”. Levinas literally sets God free from onto-theology (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 149). Instead of conceiving the Infinite as the most eminent being, as present and persistent in time, Levinas defines Him as absent. For this reason, He cannot be seen, understood, or spoken of. However, there is an idea of Infinity inside the subject, an idea referring to somewhere else, to another dimension. God is defined as transcendent, in a more radical sense than in Judeo-Christian tradition, on which onto-theology is grounded: whereas the God of the Bible is outside His creatures as a supreme being and lives in eternity⁴ (an everlasting present), Levinas' God “is not there anymore” after creation and can be found only in the past.

Levinas is an original interpreter of Judaism, who radicalizes the separation between humanity and divinity. He also refers to the Western tradition of philosophy: following the suggestions of Descartes' *Meditations*, Levinas conceives God as wholly *alter*, because He can be thought of without being comprehended (“its *ideatum* surpasses its idea”⁵). The word *alter* indicates a radical difference, that is incommensurability. Levinas does not like the term *difference*, maybe because it evokes the ghost of Heidegger (Heidegger 1957; eng. trans. 1969, p. 71) or the thought of Derrida and Deleuze⁶. He prefers *altérité* (“alterity” or “otherness”), which has a radical meaning, indicating an overwhelming gap between the Same and the Other. This is the reason why the word *alter* (“the different”) can be referred only to the Infinite, who exceeds every Hamletic doubt: He neither is nor is not. He is beyond Being. The I, on the contrary, exists, therefore the subject and the Infinite belong to incommensurable dimensions.

For what concerns the alterity of the other person, the situation is more complex. Whereas God is completely unreachable by the theoretical grasp of subjectivity, the other person is vulnerable to the violence of thought

⁴ In Exod. 3:14 NIV, God says to Moses: “I am who I am”. The original version is “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh”, literally meaning “I will be what I will be”. Both translations refer to the ontological dimension of divinity.

⁵ Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, p. 49.

⁶ According to them, difference is an infinitesimal differential (Deleuze 1968; eng. trans. 1994, pp. 27, 69, 145-147) or an archi-structure (Derrida 1968, pp. 50-52).

(Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, p. 27). According to Levinas, the single subject knows according to Totality, to the Same. He refers especially to Husserl, whose ego, after the suspension of judgement (*epoché*), is deprived of its particular features. The Husserlian I is a theoretical entity, knowing through intentionality and grasping the ideas (or essences) of the things (Husserl 1913; eng. trans. 1982, p. 74). Levinas interprets the thought of Husserl not as a limitation of subjective knowledge to phenomena, but as a power on phenomena themselves: the Husserlian ego reduces entities to objects. The individual subject, as a singular expression of the universal subject (Totality), reduces entities to essences and the other person to a mere *alter-ego*⁷.

According to Levinas, these theoretical statements imply ethical consequences. The subject has not only the power of knowledge, but also the power of freedom. Non-living objects, plants or animals become part of its domestic dimension, as nourishment or tools (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, pp. 111, 133). Something similar happens to other people, who are submitted to free will. Levinas criticizes Husserl and asserts the very alterity of the other. Though sharing the same egological perspective of his master, he overturns its meaning. Levinas, from a subjective view, sees the other person *qua alter*, who indicates not an *alter-ego*, but incomensurability⁸: “He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal” (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, p. 39).

Even if only the Infinite is fully *alter*, the other person has a certain irreducibility: God reveals Himself through the Face of the Other, upsetting the subjective world and making it aware of its limits. Theoretical intentionality is confined in a phenomenological dimension and what goes beyond it is unreachable. Human thought cannot grasp the Infinite in the Other, who refers to the Infinite in the ego, that is *illeity*. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas explains that he has coined a “neologism formed with *il* (he) or *ille*” to indicate “a way of concerning me without entering into conjunction with me” (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 12).

The subject becomes aware of *illeity*, the Infinite in the finite, through the other person, who is *alter* as an expression of Infinity. However, the other person is not only *alter*, but even *alienus*, belonging to another dimension, to someone else. Even if the Other is weaker than the Same (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, pp. 77-78, 244-245, 251), he belongs to God, who gives him ethical strength.

⁷ Levinas criticizes Husserl’s statements about the *alter-ego* and the reduction of objects to sameness (Husserl 1913; eng. trans. 1982, pp. 55, 313) in several writings (Levinas 1940, eng. trans. 1998, pp. 74-75; 1959, eng. trans. 1998, pp. 124-126; Levinas 1961, eng. trans. 1969, pp. 109-110, 121-126; 1974, eng. trans. 1981, pp. 8, 33, 63-66; 1977, eng. trans. 1998 pp. 176-177).

⁸ For this reason, the other person will never be “my other” (Meazza 2013, pp. 118-119).

Since ipseity, in *Otherwise Than Being*, is the other person in the ego, a question arises: is it an inner alter (as *illegitimacy*), or an inner *alienus*? Is it just an inner trace of the Other or a source of alienation? The question is, shortly, if the ego is alien or alienated. Even if Levinas tries to prove the former, it will be shown that he states the latter.

2. The role of ipseity

Before analysing the problematic foundation of the subject in Levinas' works, one should bring out the differences between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*. This concerns especially ipseity, whose role is crucial in the constitution of the I.

2.1. Totality and Infinity

About the general meaning of the word "I", Levinas writes:

To be I is, over and beyond any identification that can be derived from a system of references, to have identity as one's contents. The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it. It is the primal identity, the primordial work of identification (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, p. 36).

According to this passage, I is a synonym for identification, not for sameness: this is the reason why it is *ipse* and not *idem*. It is constituted when it finds unity through its own becoming, the flux of changing. Moreover, it is a separated being, emancipated from the anonymous "who" of ontology. Its foundation begins with individuation, which implies the awareness of *ipseity* ("separation or ipseity"⁹). The self-consciousness of the subject does not coincide either with theoretical intentionality, or with logical identity (A=A). They are both impersonal, expressions of a general "there is" (*il y a*). To be I means to be aware of oneself as a unity of thought, heart, chair and blood: I am neither pure thought, nor pure matter (I am *psychism*, sensibility¹⁰).

The constitution of the I is not revealed by a movement upon itself, but by a relation to alterity. The importance of this passage is suggested by Levinas in *Existence and Existents*, written in 1947: the I is considered

⁹ Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, p. 60.

¹⁰ Ivi, p. 59; Levinas 1963; eng. trans. 1986, p. 345.

as “stuck in the present” (“it refracts the future”¹¹), and as incapable of being in a temporal dimension. Only through otherness the subject can go towards an *ek-stasis*, that is standing out and projecting itself toward the future (Courtine 2012, chap. 3). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas offers his solution, writing that, through the otherness of the world, the subject becomes aware of itself.

But the true and primordial relation between them, and that in which the I is revealed precisely as preeminently the same, is produced as a *sojourn* [*séjour*] in the world. The *way* of the I against the ‘other’ of the world consists in *sojourning*, in *identifying oneself* by existing here *at home with oneself* [*chez soi*]. In a world which is from the first other the I is nonetheless autochthonous (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, p. 37).

The I is separated both from the anonymous “there is” (general identity) and the world (general alterity). The difference between the two is that the world does not absorb individuals, just as the *il y a* does, but allows them to be themselves. The exteriority of the world is important, because it sets the subject free from anonymity and makes it joyful. A constituted ego is happy: it is in an immediate relation with the pure elemental, followed by the construction of a domestic dimension towards an economic life¹². The subject lives for itself, since the “self-sufficiency of *enjoying* measures the egoism or the ipseity of the Ego and the same” (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, p. 118). “Iipseity” is here a synonymous of “egoism” and the I is defined as that which lives in the world as at home: even if the world is other, “the I is nonetheless *autochthonous*”. Living at home means being in a favourable environment, where the I can be itself and its needs are satisfied.

Levinas dedicates a great part of *Totality and Infinity* to the constitution of the subject before the meeting with the other person. It means that *only if* it is happy, *then* it will be ready for the revelation of the Other (it is “incapable of approaching the other with empty hands”¹³). This time the subject relates not to a general alterity, which is the worldly one, but to a singular one. The Face, expression of weakness, refers to another dimension: through the other and his visibility, the subjects sees the invisible, the Infinite. It becomes aware of its culpability, due to its egoism and inclination to possession (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, pp. 203, 244).

¹¹ Levinas 1947; eng. trans. 1978, p. 71.

¹² Levinas 1961, sect. II A-C about enjoyment and D-E about economic life.

¹³ Ivi, p. 50 and Levinas 1963; eng. trans. 1986, p. 350. Levinas specifies that the desire for another arises in the subject, because it lacks nothing. It is neither the Hegelian movement towards the enemy, nor the Platonic need for complementarity. Desire arises only in a satisfied being.

The subject is not guilty because of its deeds, but for the simple fact of being itself, that is being capable of violence. It will never stop feeling guilty, but at least it will have something to give. It shows its hands to the other person and says: "Here I am". This gesture expresses the gift of sensibility.

Interiority therefore becomes the place of the call of Infinity, and *ipseity* signifies uniqueness in election (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, p. 279). In *Totality and Infinity*, the core of the individual, after the revelation of the Other, is not destroyed. The subject has Infinity in itself, and the *alter* (the absolute Other) points His invisible finger on the *alienus* (the other person).

It does not mean that the subject is not *ipse* anymore or that the other expropriates its interiority. The I relates vertically to the Other, expression of Infinity, and listen to him as a Master (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, pp. 100-101). When the subject is in front of the other, is "gathered up in its ipseity, as a particular existent unique and autochthonous" (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, p. 39). Infinity gives sense to ipseity and confirms, in an ethical sense (uniqueness in election), the ontological unity of psychism. *Totality and Infinity* leaves the reader with an assurance: meeting the other person does not destroy one's own identity, but enriches it, turning it towards transcendence.

2.2. Otherwise Than Being

Thirteen years after *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas publishes *Otherwise Than Being*. Here the author shows a radical change in his concept of subjectivity. The I is, from the beginning, undermined by the other, since it is radically separated from its ontological dimension.

The one assigned has to open to the point of separating itself from its own inwardness, adhering to *esse*; it must be dis-interested. This being torn up from oneself in the core of one's unity, this absolute non-coinciding, this dia-chrony of the instant, signifies in the form of one-penetrated-by-the-other (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 49).

To be "dis-interested" means to be separated from being, which is not the general *il y a*, but singularity as such, "inwardness". It means to be inhabited by the other person, who penetrates one's unity. The concept of disinterestedness ("dis-inter-esse") indicates a new perspective on transcendence, now defined as "otherwise than being". The latter concerns subjectivity, which does not coincide with its essence anymore. In *Totality and Infinity*, the I is separated from a universal concept of being, finding its individuation through the external world. In *Otherwise Than*

Being, instead, the subject relates primarily to an inner alterity. It does not meet the Other after experiencing a status of happiness and egoism, but as an internal opening, a wound dated back to a pre-original past.

“The complacency of subjectivity, a complacency experienced for itself, is its very ‘egoity’, its substantiality. But at the same time there is a coring out (*dénucléation*), of the imperfect happiness which is the murmur of sensibility” (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 64). Levinas does not deny the substantiality of the subject, however it has not enough time to experience a full state of enjoyment: its happiness is “imperfect”. The ego is aware of its singularity and, “at the same time”, of its “coring out”.

Even in *Totality and Infinity* happiness is not the last stage of the individual life, but the subject has a complete experience of it, following a precise phenomenological path before meeting the Other. And this path takes place in time. Time has not to be intended as a linear concept. There is not an anonymous *il y a*, then a constituted subject, then the revelation of Infinity through the Face. The phenomenological path of the ego follows the time of consciousness, which starts from the present of happiness, comes back to the past of revelation and goes towards the future of giving.

In *Otherwise Than Being*, happiness cannot be fully enjoyed. When the subject is aware of its substantiality, it feels, “at the same time”, permeated by the other, who is in me as a “malady of identity” (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 68). The ego belongs to the other, it is *alienus*.

An anarchic liberation, it emerges, without being assumed, in the undergoing by sensibility beyond its capacity to undergo. This describes the suffering and vulnerability of the sensible as *the other in me*. [...] The self-accusation of remorse gnaws away at the closed and firm core of consciousness, opening it, fissioning it (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, pp. 124-125).

The other is in the heart of the subject. He undermines the ego from a pre-original dimension, before being, time and freedom: he was inside it *before the beginning*. The fission of the “core of consciousness” is caused by remorse, self-accusation, awareness of culpability. This condition is rooted in a pre-original dimension, shared by the I and the other person. They are both *alieni*, but in a different sense.

Levinas is not explicit about the constitution of the other person: it does not mean that he lacks foundation, but that it is directly rooted in Infinity, the source of the ethical call. The other is described as weak, as a victim of theoretical intentionality and freedom. The I is his enforcer and culpability precedes its acts. Before constituting itself as a subject, the ego is guilty (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, pp. 83-91). Levinas’ ethics is clearly asymmetrical: the relation of the ego to the other is ascendant and

vertical, and does not imply reciprocity (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, pp. 82-84). This aspect is developed even in *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas 1961; eng. trans. 1969, p. 298), however, in *Otherwise Than Being*, the ego has no time to recognize its ontological unity. The self is without self-ishness, de-nucleated, spoiled of its skin by the other, struck in the heart of its sensibility. The other person does not suffer the same lot because of his alterity. He has not any ontological core or sameness to be destroyed: the ego is not *alienus* in the same sense of the other.

The other is only *alienus*, the ego is *alienated*. The other has nothing except his alterity, but the subject should have its identity. This is the reason why *ipseity* should be a specific part of the ego, maintaining self-ishness. However, in *Otherwise Than Being*, the subject has no core anymore. It is a prey of the other before its ontological constitution (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, pp. 54, 122).

It must be said that Levinas knows the risks implied in his thought and tries to save the subject, focusing on its ethical uniqueness¹⁴.

That is not as a freedom, impossible in a will that is inflated or altered, sold or mad, that subjectivity is imposed as an absolute. It is sacred in its alterity with respect to which, in an unexceptionable responsibility, I posit myself deposed of my sovereignty. Paradoxically it is qua *alienus* – foreigner and other – that man is not alienated (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 59).

Levinas states that freedom does not imply uniqueness, because it relates to Totality, which reduces everything to anonymous entities. The sacredness of the ego depends on its passivity, on a spoliation of its own identity in behalf of the other. Levinas enounces a precise philosophical (and religious) choice: ethics coincides with sanctity, which founds uniqueness. However, the ego loses its identity and becomes psychotic (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 142).

Levinas thinks that the other person has the right to accuse me, because I am guilty from time immemorial. In *Totality and Infinity*, it happens to a well constituted subject, whereas, in *Otherwise Than Being*, it causes the break-up of identity. The *ego* (nominative) is put aside in behalf of *me* (accusative), and passivity becomes the only source of uniqueness (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 112). Levinas introduces the concept of substitution, changing his position from *Totality and Infinity*. Respon-

¹⁴ Some scholars accept Levinas' assumptions on uniqueness, denying the alienation of the subject in *Otherwise Than Being* (Petitdemange 1995, pp. 23-47; Ponzio 1996, p. 44; Yampolskaya 2019, par. 3). Other authors do not agree and assert that the ego experiences a profound alienation instead (Tornay 1999, pp. 202-203; Visker 1999, pp. 266-268; Lellouche 2006, pp. 11, 57, 70-71). In this paper the latter perspective is shared.

sibility implies not only an infinite push to donation, but also a being for-the-other and by-the other. Leaving to the subject an ontological core is considered too dangerous by Levinas: he thinks that only a complete humiliation of the ego leads to a peaceful ethics; however, the obsession for non-violence brings the dissolution of identity.

It is an undoing of the substantial nucleus of the ego that is formed in the same, a fission of the mysterious nucleus of inwardness of the subject by this assignation to respond, which does not leave any place of refuge, any chance to slip away, and is thus despite the ego, or, more exactly, despite me. Quite the contrary of nonsense, it is an alteration without alienation or election. The subject in responsibility is alienated in the depths of its identity with an alienation that does not empty the same of its identity, but constrains it to it, with an unimpeachable assignation, constrains it to it as no one else, where no one could replace it (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, pp. 141-142).

This is the clearest passage in *Otherwise Than Being* where contradiction takes place. From “it is an undoing” to “despite me”, Levinas writes that the core of the ego is undone. It is deprived of its inwardness, its identity. Soon after, Levinas states that identity is still there and that alienation preserves it. Alienation is then justified, not denied anymore.

In conclusion, the only trace of subjective identity, *ipseity*, is the place of accusation, passivity, and alterity. The I is not *alienus*, but alienated, so that the “subject” is just “subject to”, not “subject of”, being not itself anymore.

3. The source of subjective alienation

At this point, it will be shown what is the origin of the alienation of the ego in *Otherwise Than Being*: it concerns the foundation of the self and its being rooted in the alterity of the other person. Being rooted in alterity does not imply alienation as such. Even in *Totality and Infinity* the singular identity separates from the general identity (Totality or *il y a*) because of a general otherness (the world). Singularity, in Levinas, is tightly bond with alterity. In this case, it is the alterity of the world, which allows the subject to be itself and to enjoy happiness. After the meeting with the Other, the ego renounces to its solipsistic condition, however it does not lose its identity.

In *Otherwise Than Being*, there is a different foundation of the subject. Levinas writes about enjoyment, but there are just a few references (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, pp. 55-56, 63-64, 72-74). The beginning of identity does not seem particularly relevant: there is no mention of the alterity of the world and enjoyment is referred as a source of egoism and sensibility, which is already permeated by the other.

If subjectivity is not founded in the world, where are its roots? Certainly not in Totality, an undifferentiated identity, which hinders separation, therefore they must lie somewhere else. There are only two solutions left: the singular alterity of the other person and the infinite alterity of God.

The identity of the same in the ego comes to it despite itself from the outside, as an election or an inspiration, in the form of uniqueness of someone assigned. The subject is for another; its own being turns into for another, its being dies away turning into signification (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 52).

The ego is forced (“despite itself”) to assume identity from the outside, such as happens in *Totality and Infinity*, however “outside” here means something different. The subject does not live for itself, but for another, therefore egoism cannot be shaped and developed. The word “outside” seems to refer to a specific kind of alterity, which is the alterity of the other person. Levinas writes that “outside” does not signify a world (here the difference with *Totality and Infinity* is explicit), but a kingdom, that is “the kingdom of the Good” (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 52). The religious language suddenly refers to a divine dimension, to Infinity. However, the latter seems not to found identity as such, because it is rooted in a pre-original past, not in the present where the ego lives: the existence of God is uncertain, otherwise than being, but the other person is there, in the life which the ego experiences every day. He permeates the sensibility of the subject through his own sensibility, through the oppression that he experiences (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 55).

God has another role in the foundation of the subject, since He is the source of the ethical call, of the inclination towards the other. The alterity of the other person seems to be rooted in God (the primal form of alterity), whereas the subjectivity of the subject is rooted in the other person, who undermines ipseity from the beginning.

Since this is the origin of subjectivity, the concept of substitution becomes clear: “this desire for the non-desirable, this responsibility for the neighbor, this substitution as a hostage, is the subjectivity and uniqueness of a subject” (Levinas 1974; eng. trans. 1981, p. 123). Substitution is not voluntary, does not depend on the free choice of the ego, but on ethical obligation. The other person is the persecutor, who takes the interiority of the I as his hostage, so that ipseity belongs to him. There is no space for identity, which becomes otherness. The alterity of the other person coincides with the alterity of the ego, whose identity is nothing but an illusion. One could finally say that, in *Otherwise Than Being*, subjectivity loses everything, even itself, in behalf of the other.

The difference in conceiving ipseity between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being* is evident. However, this change of perspective re-

quires a time lapse to be developed. It becomes evident from “No Identity” (1970), but Levinas starts his reflection some years before. In 1963 Levinas publishes “The Trace of the Other”, where he emphasizes the role of Infinity in the relationship between the ego and the other person, thus coining the concept of illeity.

“To be an I then signifies not to be able to slip away from responsibility. This surplus of being, this exaggeration which we call to be an I, this upsurge of ipseity in being, is realized as a turgescence of responsibility” (Levinas 1963; eng. trans. 1986, p. 353). The singularity of the subject is exalted by the importance of the ethical call. Its “surplus of being”, which is the “upsurge of ipseity” is fulfilled in the “turgescence of responsibility”. It means that the I must be considered as a wholly realized being, in order to answer to the indigence of the other and to be “a support for universe” (Levinas 1963; eng. trans. 1986, p. 353). However, this call to responsibility cannot be explained by the mere self-constitution of the I. It requires a third person, who is the source of the ethical inclination. According to Levinas, God is necessary to escape the danger of an all-comprehensive totalization, since He is beyond being (Levinas 1963; eng. trans. 1986, p. 356). This aspect is deepened in later works, such as “Meaning and Sense” (1964), where the trace of God, illeity, gives sense to being and is the source of otherness: “illeity is the origin of alterity of being” (Levinas 1964; eng. trans. 1996, p. 64).

A significant change of perspective can be found in “Substitution” (1968)¹⁵, where the homonymous concept is developed. Levinas interprets the XX century crisis of the I, introducing a particular kind of openness. He considers identity as separate from identification, and distinguishes ipseity from intentional and logical reduction (discourse). Ipseity is not the very identification of the I, such as in *Totality and Infinity*, but “the living recurrence of subjectivity” (Levinas 1968; eng. trans. 1996, p. 84). The unity of the ego is described as “presynthetic, prelogical, and (in some way) atomic” (Levinas 1968; eng. trans. 1996, p. 85), so that its constitution must be found in a pre-original past. The subject is not rooted in its present anymore, after the emancipation from *il y a* and through the alterity of the world. The ego is constitutively passive, deprived of its identity, and hostage of the other person (Levinas 1968; eng. trans. 1968, p. 90): substitution means exactly this, being in the place of the other, despite oneself. The ethical inclination of the I, the one-for-the-other, takes the place of identification: the subject *does not give itself* to the neighbour, but is *already given* to him.

¹⁵ *Otherwise Than Being* probably starts from its four chapter, derived by the essay “Substitution” (Bernasconi 1998, pp. 234-251).

The concept of substitution is decisive for what concerns the undoing of identity; there is only one step left, which is a clear definition of an alienated subjectivity. Levinas makes it two years later, in “No identity” (1970). “But, in approaching another, where the other is from the first under my responsibility, ‘something’ has overflowed my freely taken decisions, has slipped into me *unbeknownst to me*, thus alienating my identity” (Levinas 1970; eng. trans. 1987, p. 145). The other reaches the inwardness of the subject despite its will, secretly. This hidden operation, through which the alterity of the other person takes possession of identity, makes the subject alienated. Here is a clear declaration of the undoing of subjectivity, an undoing caused by the operation of substitution (Levinas 1970; eng. trans. 1987, p. 146). In order to strengthen the image of an ego spoiled of its egoity, Levinas writes that “no one is at home” (Levinas 1970; eng. trans. 1987, p. 149).

At this point, if the I (who is considered as “no one”) is deprived of its dwelling, if the other person has taken possession of everything, then the word “identity” cannot be uttered anymore. Levinas recognizes this turn of perspective, a turn from which he will never come back: “There is a divergency between the ego and the self, an impossible recurrence, and impossible identity” (Levinas 1970; eng. trans. 1987, p. 149).

In conclusion, Levinas stresses his thought to an extreme point. In order to eliminate violence, he humiliates the subject and makes it completely powerless. He longs for peace, but pays a high price for it: the destruction of identity.

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La dissoluzione del soggetto: il concetto di ipseità in Levinas

Questo articolo è incentrato sul concetto di ipseità in Levinas e sul modo in cui questo muta tra gli anni '60 e '70 del Novecento, dimostrando che siffatto mutamento implica la dissoluzione del soggetto. In *Totalità e Infinito* (1961), l'ipseità è considerata il nucleo più profondo dell'io, mentre, in *Altrimenti che essere* (1974), si tratta dell'altro interno al sé. Levinas teorizza, inoltre, un'altra tipologia di altro-nel-medesimo, ovvero l'illegittimità, la traccia di Dio nell'anima umana. Si dimostra che il concetto di illegittimità non è problematico per il soggetto, in quanto non ne causa la dissoluzione. Oltre a ciò, si rende chiaro che l'ipseità, in *Altrimenti che essere*, non costituisce una semplice apertura all'alterità, bensì una fonte di alienazione. Si dimostra, infine, che Levinas inizia questo cambiamento di pensiero nel 1968 (con "Sostituzione"), tuttavia questo mutamento diviene esplicito solo nel 1970 (in "Senza identità").

PAROLE CHIAVE: Levinas, ipseità, illegittimità, alterità, alienazione

The Undoing of the Subject: Levinas' Thought on Ipseity

This paper focuses on Levinas' concept of ipseity and on its change between the 1960's and the 1970's, arguing that this change implies the undoing of the subject. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), ipseity is considered as the deep core of the I, whereas, in *Otherwise Than Being* (1974), it is the other person inside the self. Levinas also theorizes another kind of other-in-the-same, which is illegitimacy, the trace of God inside the human soul. It is shown that illegitimacy is not problematic for the subject, since it does not cause its undoing. Furthermore, it is argued that ipseity, in *Otherwise Than Being*, is not a mere opening to alterity, but a source of alienation. Finally, it is shown that Levinas starts to change his mind on ipseity in 1968 ("Substitution"), however this modification becomes clear only in 1970 ("No Identity").

KEYWORDS: Levinas, ipseity, illegitimacy, alterity, alienation