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**Paul Formosa**

*Levinas and the Definition of Philosophy: An Ethical Approach*

## ABSTRACT

Emmanuel Levinas' thought seems to be strictly neither rational, phenomenological nor ontological, and it thus intentionally exposes itself to the asking of the question 'why call it philosophy at all'? While we may have trouble containing Levinas' thought within our traditional philosophical boundaries, I argue that this gives us no reason to exclude him from philosophy proper as a mere poser, but rather provides the occasion for reflection on just what it means, in an ethical manner, to call something 'philosophical'. Instead of asking whether or not philosophy can 'contain' Levinas' thought, I contend that it would be more ethical to instead re-phrase the question in terms of 'sociality'. When we do this, I argue, we can indeed justifiably call Levinas' thought philosophy.

## BIOGRAPHY

Paul Formosa is a post-graduate research student in the Philosophy department at the University of Queensland. His thesis is on the topic of evil, considered from an ethical perspective, with special emphasis on the work of Hannah Arendt. He has forthcoming publications on his thesis topic appearing in the *Journal of Social Philosophy* and *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. His other research interests include Kant, ethics, political philosophy and philosophy of the social sciences.

# LEVINAS AND THE DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY: AN ETHICAL APPROACH

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Emmanuel Levinas opens the preface to his *Totality and Infinity* with a question, which in a post-Auschwitz world, he claims is of ‘the highest importance’ – have we been ‘duped by morality’?<sup>i</sup> The question I shall be addressing in this paper is whether or not we have been ‘duped’ by Levinas’ thought – that is, why call it philosophy? Levinas claims to be discussing a relation of which we can never have knowledge, that is beyond phenomenological description, beyond or prior to time and prior to the very definition of the ontological self. In short, an event which is not an event, of which there neither is nor ever could be any ‘evidence’, but only traces left behind, gaps in our ontology that ‘point’ to a transcendental ethical responsibility. Dermot Moran complains that Levinas has made an ‘apparent abandonment of rational argument and justification in favour of repetitive, dogmatic assertions which have the character of prophetic incantation and quasi-religious absolutist pronouncements’.<sup>ii</sup> Another commentator, Theodore De Boer, wonders if Levinas has fallen back into ‘prephilosophical opinions and beliefs’.<sup>iii</sup> Stephen Smith points out that as Levinas’ work is neither rational, phenomenological nor ontological, it thus intentionally exposes itself to the asking of the question ‘why call it philosophy at all’?<sup>iv</sup>

Smith tries to contain Levinas’ work under the banner of ‘soft reason’,<sup>v</sup> which might be thought of as essentially sophistic or oratorical, in the Platonic sense. The sophistic rhetoricians and orators, the users of ‘soft reason’, are for Plato mere persuaders and not philosophers, not lovers of wisdom searching for the ‘truth’ but only trying to bring about belief without knowledge, merely the ‘appearance’ of truth. In other words, Plato (philosophy as love of wisdom) excludes the sophists (mere persuaders) from philosophy proper. Are we likewise to exclude the ‘sophist’ Levinas from philosophy proper? Is Levinas what Plato calls a ‘counterfeit philosopher’, a mere poser trying to dupe us, or is he justifiably a ‘true philosopher’?<sup>vi</sup>

## 2.0 WHY CALL IT PHILOSOPHY?

Levinas, in explicitly acknowledging the concern over the philosophical nature of his work, asks, in relation to his own work (specifically *Otherwise than Being*), whether his ‘discourse remain[s] then coherent and philosophical?’ – ‘familiar objections’<sup>vii</sup> he exclaims! We can see from such comments that Levinas largely considers the question of whether his work is philosophy to be a question of language, a concern over whether or not his discourse is sufficiently philosophically coherent. And in so formulating and understanding such ‘familiar objections’, Levinas implicitly transforms the question from, ‘why call it philosophy?’, into the linguistic formulation, ‘is the discourse philosophical?’ In a published dialogue with Richard Kearney, Levinas states:

For me the essential characteristic of philosophy is a certain, specifically Greek, way of thinking and speaking. Philosophy is primarily a question of language; and it is by identifying the subtextual language of particular discourses that we can decide whether they are philosophical or not. Philosophy employs a series of terms and concepts – such as *morphe* (form), *ousia* (substance), *nous* (reason), *logos* (thought) or *telos* (goal) etc. – that constitute a specifically Greek lexicon of intelligibility.<sup>viii</sup>

In this passage Levinas implies that philosophy is primarily (or ‘in essence’) characterised through its employment of a specifically Greek lexicon of intelligibility. Hence, assessing whether or not Levinas’ work is ‘philosophy’ becomes for Levinas primarily a matter of identifying whether the subtextual language of the discourse is relevantly philosophical. Clearly, there are certain terms which Levinas employs, such as ‘reason’, ‘knowledge’, ‘being’, ‘transcendence’ and so on, which belong to a specifically Greek philosophical lexicon of intelligibility. However, while the employment of such a lexicon may arguably be a *necessary* condition for calling a discourse ‘philosophy’, it is at least certainly not a *sufficient* condition. Evidently the philosophical tradition implies more than just the simple employment of various key terms; it also includes an implicit world-picture, a certain way of approaching the world, a certain manner of thinking and thinking-about things. Indeed, as Wittgenstein has stressed, our language literally forces us into a certain way of thinking about the world.<sup>ix</sup> Thus, by employing a certain specifically Greek language we are committed to a certain specifically Greek way of thinking about the world and,

consequently, a certain specifically Greek understanding of what does and does not count as ‘doing’ philosophy. Levinas characterises this Greek way of thinking as follows:

perhaps the most essential distinguishing feature of the language of Greek philosophy was its equation of truth with an intelligibility of presence...truth to be that which is present...which can be gathered...into a totality that we would call the world or cosmos...To equate the truth with presence is to presume that however different the two terms of the relation appear...they can be ultimately rendered...the same.<sup>x</sup>

But if Levinas equates philosophy with a Greek way of thinking, a thinking which reduces everything to the sphere of the same, to an ontology of presence, how can his own thought, which aims to transcend such limitations, still be called philosophy? Levinas responds to this challenge as follows:

*But although philosophy is essentially Greek, it is not exclusively so...What we term the Judaeo-Christian tradition...proposed an alternative approach to meaning and truth...The difficulty is, of course, to speak of this alternative tradition, given the essentially Greek nature of philosophical language.<sup>xi</sup>*

For Levinas, what is missed out by the Greek language, but which is still nevertheless a source of wisdom, is the ethical which transcends the ontological. This implies, then, that there is a ‘dual origin of meaning’,<sup>xii</sup> which can be found in *both* the Greek and non-Greek (or ‘Judaeo-Christian’) traditions and lexicons; that is, as Levinas puts it, ‘philosophy can be ethical as well as ontological, can be at once Greek and non-Greek in its inspiration’.<sup>xiii</sup> I do not think we should read Levinas here as claiming that when philosophy’s speaks it can somehow transcend the Said. That is, in Oona Aizenstat’s terms, philosophy (and Levinas too) must *necessarily* ‘betray’ otherness in its Said,<sup>xiv</sup> but nonetheless philosophy can still be (to use Levinas’ term) ‘inspired’ by an ethics it can never re-present in language. This inspiration ought to lead philosophy into trying to minimise that betrayal, to deconstruct itself in order to undermine itself, to recognise its own fragility and leave open the possibility for genuine difference through a commitment to defining itself in terms that avoid, what Aizenstat calls, ‘totalities’ the ‘tendency to claim finality’.<sup>xv</sup> Claims to finality are an endorsement of status quo sameness and a closed door to otherness.

But, of course, in exploring that which is beyond ontology, in approaching the ethical demand which is never present, we face a difficulty that Levinas himself acknowledges in the preface to his *Totality and Infinity*. Here Levinas writes: ‘And is not philosophy itself after all defined as an endeavour to live a life beginning in evidence, opposing the opinions of one’s fellow-men, the illusions and caprice of one’s own subjectivity?’<sup>xvi</sup> Indeed it would seem to be the case that Levinas’ work, which lies outside the very possibilities of evidence, must then only ‘live on subjective opinions and illusions’.<sup>xvii</sup> But this would only be the case:

Unless the philosophical evidence refers from itself to a situation that can no longer be stated in terms of ‘totality’...We can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality *breaks up*, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is...transcendence in the face of the Other.<sup>xviii</sup>

Consequently, in order for Levinas to claim that his work is philosophy, he must show wisdom to be broader than merely the totality of ontology that comprises knowledge. Thus, in order to remain philosophical whilst going beyond Being and so also beyond the very possibility of phenomenological evidence, Levinas must show how the totality of ontology ‘breaks up’, how ethics disrupts ontology and how the Greek lexicon necessarily points to ‘the ethical or biblical perspective that transcends’ it.<sup>xix</sup>

### 3.0 THE CONTAINER METAPHOR

The standard approach to defining philosophy has traditionally been to forward a proposition (or perhaps a small set of propositions) as to what philosophy is; i.e. philosophy is...the love of wisdom/the search for truth/the meaning of Being/the use of a Greek lexicon of intelligibility etc and *that’s it*. This approach to defining philosophy is governed by what I shall refer to as the container metaphor. The container metaphor approach involves the desire to enclose philosophy in a water-tight container. That is, philosophy is to be defined *once and for all*, finally and completely, in terms of a proposition or set of propositions which form a container, or fenced enclosure, in which the philosopher resides and the poser/sophist/counterfeiter is excluded.

The overwhelming political dominance of this approach to defining philosophy has been so great that its domination has gone largely unchallenged. Many of the great philosophers have at times attempted such a container definition and, further, their tendency has been to define ‘philosophy’ in such a way such that their work or approach to philosophy becomes the very paradigmatic example of what philosophy is (or rather, *ought* to be). And this is inevitably the case with all approaches which work within the container metaphor, as one simply cannot saw off the philosophical branch one sits upon (although some may wish to throw away the ladder). That is, one naturally defines philosophy in such a way so that one’s own philosophical work becomes the paradigmatic example of what philosophy is, simply because if one had thought philosophy was something else then one’s philosophical work would have been something else.

The container metaphor thus implies an approach where the (great) philosopher attempts to define the identity of philosophy in terms of their own self-image. And this is always, at least somewhat, a totalising gesture – the whole state (or philosophical discourse) is forced into a sameness with the leader or paradigmatic example. It is also a case of identity defined in terms of exclusionary policies – those that challenge or fail to meet such identity requirements, the ‘poser’ or ‘sophist’, are seen to challenge the collective identity of the dominant party, and, as such, are excluded on the grounds of political necessity. Hence we see that the task of defining ‘what philosophy is’, when governed by the container metaphor approach, is essentially an ontological question. It is less a concern with the epistemological problems of how we are to know who the posers are, and more cornered with ontologically defining the ‘we’, the philosophers, as opposed to the ‘posers’, the sophists.

Alain Badiou comments on the violent nature of the relationship between the philosopher and the sophist in a short paper entitled *The Definition of Philosophy*. There he writes:

Every philosophical process is polarized by a specific adversary, the sophist. The Sophist is externally (or discursively) indiscernible from the philosopher...In this sense, we can also define philosophy as the act by which indiscernible discourses are nevertheless opposed, or rather as what separates itself from its double. Philosophy is always the breaking of a mirror.<sup>xx</sup>

This concern with the double, the poser who is externally indiscernible from the original, can be traced through Dostoevsky’s story, *The Double* and Poe’s tale *William Wilson*. In both tales the double appears suddenly and continually tries to undermine the original and subsume their place in society. In Dostoevsky’s story Mr Golyadkin’s double continually foils all the original’s plans, and the story ends with the original Mr Golyadkin being excluded from society (driven away to where: ‘Dark forest loomed left and right. It was lonely and desolate’)<sup>xxi</sup> and his double fully taking his place within society and the economy. This is philosophy’s great fear of being usurped and replaced by the sophist.

Poe’s William Wilson knows, with a vigour that Dostoevsky’s Mr Golyadkin lacks, that the only way he can feel secure from the undermining of his double, the only way he can safeguard his identity, is through the destruction of his double. William Wilson exclaims: ‘Scoundrel! Impostor! Accursed villain! You shall not – you shall not dog me unto death!’<sup>xxii</sup> Here Wilson vents what Badiou calls the ‘desire to finish with the sophist *once and for all*’.<sup>xxiii</sup> The only way Wilson can rid himself of his impostor, his poser, is through violence. Thus Wilson stabs his double, but as he looks into a mirror, he finds he has stabbed himself. As Wilson lies dying his double says to him: ‘In me didst thou exist – and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself.’<sup>xxiv</sup>

The purely ontological approach to the definition of philosophy implied by the container metaphor inevitably leads to the desire to kill off the sophist double who challenges the original’s (philosophy’s) sense of self and their place in society and the economy. That is, it creates the desire (or need) to rigidly define philosophy *once and for all* so that the external world will no longer confuse the philosopher with the indiscernible sophist. This violent need to silence a difference that does not conform to our definition of sameness and identity can be seen in Hume’s fiery conclusion to his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, where he writes:

Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.<sup>xxv</sup>

Hume, in his desire to rid the world of the sophist, the poser, those who do not fit in with his conclusions as to what is to be allowed into or contained within the 'real' realms of philosophy, are to be got rid of in the flames of a good old fashioned book burning – indeed, burning being the only Final Solution, the only way to once and for all silence one's opponent.

Therefore, it seems that the container metaphor approach to defining philosophy is inevitably unethical and violent. It seeks to undermine its opposition and assert its own universal supremacy and domination on all who can be called philosophers. Rather than endorsing this approach implicitly by working within its confines, I shall instead consider an ethical alternative. Badiou writes that: 'The ethics of philosophy, which wards off disaster, consists entirely in a constant *reserve* with regard to its sophistic double, a reserve that allows philosophy to remove itself from the temptation of dividing itself.'<sup>xxvi</sup> However, philosophy's killing of its double is not only unethical, in that embodies a container approach where philosophy is defined only at the expense of the excluded double, but, as Poe's Wilson makes clear, suicidal. The reason that this is so is because in the killing or burning of the double philosophy permits and endorses unnecessary and unjustified *violence* - and it is the reign of violence which alone, I shall argue, fundamentally undermines the very possibility of the existence of philosophy. Thus it is only an ethical approach to the definition of philosophy that can save philosophy from doing violence to the poser, and thus violence also to itself.

#### 4.0 AN ETHICAL DEFINITION OF PHILOSOPHY: PHILOSOPHY AS SOCIALITY

While philosophy has traditionally taken an unethical container approach to the task of defining itself, it arguably need not. Indeed Levinas' own thought provides us with the tools to develop an ethical alternative. Levinas exposes the totality of ontology as made incomplete by, and dependent on, the ethical which transcends it. Rather than reduce the otherness of the Other to the sphere of the same, Levinas shows how, by equating the epiphany of the face with the Cartesian idea of infinity, the alterity of the Other overflows or transcends all boundaries of totality and finitude. The ethical Saying, which can never be represented, is a transcendence of the ontological Said, in which it is nevertheless always present as a trace. In other words, the infinity of the face is that which overflows all possible containers, just as the Saying is an openness that exceeds the finality of all possible containers. And while we can think of defining philosophy in such a way so as to be able to 'contain' Levinas' thought, by accepting a broader account of wisdom as containing both ontology and ethics, this replacement of the old container by a slightly bigger one, while it may do justice to Levinas' work, is nevertheless arguably unethical. Rather, I propose, we can see in Levinas' thought, through its idea of an ethics that cannot be reduced to a finite container, a fundamental challenge to such an approach.

But how can we ethically define philosophy? Is it even possible? What is required is a new governing metaphor for the task of defining philosophy and not a bigger container. The ethical metaphor I propose is the metaphor of *sociality*. In a dialogue with Richard Kearney, Levinas states:

The fact that philosophy cannot fully totalize the alterity of meaning in some final presence or simultaneity is not for me a deficiency or fault. Or to put it another way, the best thing about philosophy is that it fails. It is better that philosophy fail to totalize meaning – even though, as ontology, it has attempted just this – for it thereby remains open to the irreducible otherness of transcendence. Greek ontology...expressed the strong sentiments that the last word is unity, the many becoming one...Man's relationship with the other is *better* as difference than unity: *sociality* is better than fusion.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Rather than trying to 'call it philosophy' by containing it *within* philosophy, by reducing it to a sameness, might it not be more ethical to instead take an approach which maintains an openness – thus to conceive of philosophy as a fluid sociality rather than a fixed container. To repeat Levinas: '*sociality* is *better* [i.e. more ethical] than fusion'.

The metaphor of sociality implies a broadness, a conversation, a discourse and an openness. It is an approach that not does seek ontological presence but ethical *proximity*. Philosophy is thus envisaged as a communal practise, fundamentally rooted in sociality. Sociality implies openness, a Saying, a dialogue, as well as the ethics and justice that necessarily founds community and sustains, and makes possible, the

discourse of one speaking to, or with, another. The ethical openness of philosophy as sociality challenges the ontological and spatial metaphors of philosophy as a closed container. For Socrates, philosophy is above all else a way of life, a way of living, a dynamic engagement in the form of dialogue or sociality with others. In his *Apology*, Socrates proclaims: ‘*discussing* goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and examining both myself and others is really the very best thing a man can do, and that life without this sort of examination is not worth living.’<sup>xxviii</sup> The term ‘discussion’ is important in the above quote. In *The Protagoras* we find this elucidation of the term: ‘Let your conversation be a *discussion* not a *dispute*. A discussion is carried on among friends with goodwill, but a dispute is between rivals and enemies’.<sup>xxix</sup> What Socrates/Plato gives us here is a picture of philosophy as the openness of dialogue, as the sociality of engagement with community, founded on goodwill and friendship, for the sake of examination and discussion. Philosophy is thus envisaged not as an abstract container, but as an actual, vibrant and evolving sociality of peoples engaged in philosophical discussion. This approach does not merge into violent repression of the double, because it is comfortable in a self-identity that is not dominated by any particular image. Indeed it recognises it needs difference, it needs Other in order to engage in external discussion, not just internal meditation. As a communal activity it relies on an ethics of engagement that must underlie any social interaction. And it is only when this ethical engagement has been ratified that the way becomes open for the discussion of ontology to commence; that is, to re-use Levinas’ phrase, ethics precedes ontology.

My definition of sociality has much in common with Hannah Arendt discussion of the Greek *polis*.<sup>xxx</sup> Arendt writes that:

for the Greeks the essence of friendship consisted in discourse. They [the Greeks] held that only constant interchange of talk united citizens in a *polis*. In discourse the political importance of friendship, and the humanness peculiar to it, were made manifest.<sup>xxxi</sup>

That is, the sociality metaphor implies an approach to defining philosophy based on friendship within a *polis*, not the totalising definition of a new realm in which all must conform in order to be granted access. Arendt defines the *polis* as the place of true equality and freedom – where freedom means freedom from necessity, and thus to be free from ruling (like a tyrant) and being ruled (like a slave or one in bad health and tyrannised by illness). The *polis* is where equals engage in discussions and use persuasion, not violence. Violence, and thus violent definitions, are incompatible with the *polis* so conceived. Likewise all open discussions, including a philosophy defined in terms of the sociality metaphor, require above all else a non-violent opening, a place where equals can safely engage in discussion based on goodwill, and where an ethical openness is vigilantly maintained in order to allow and welcome the Other to enter into discourse. Philosophy ought to seek not to define itself as a totalising regime looking for *fusion* and sameness under a single, constant and eternal banner, but should seek to maintain a place of goodwill and welcoming, based on a sociality of openness and non-violence.

It is not the poser, as the container metaphors thinks, but violence, that will destroy philosophy once and for all. Arendt argues that:

Where violence rules absolutely, as for instance in the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes, not only the laws...but everything and everybody must fall silent...Violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Violence induces and enforces silence, and thus it is violence alone that can destroy the very possibility of sociality and thus philosophy. That is, violence is unsociability *par excellence*. There can be no open discussion based on goodwill in a realm governed by violence. It is for this very reason that philosophy’s violent obsession to burn the sophist, to be done with them once and for all, is suicidal. For by endorsing and allowing violence *into* philosophical practise, philosophy commits suicide by endorsing that which contradicts its own preconditions for existence.

However, violence itself is not intrinsically unethical, but rather becomes so when it is used in a way such that its ends do not justify its means. For example, burning the sophist because he says things which contradict our definition of philosophy is a use of violence that is clearly unethical. But to never use

violence would amount to bystander apathy and the inability to engage in justified self-defence. As Arendt notes:

Violence can be justifiable, but it never will be legitimate. Its justification loses in plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future. No one questions the use of violence in self-defence, because the danger is not only clear but also present, the end justifying the means is immediate.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

In other words, sometimes ‘violence is the only way of ensuring a hearing for moderation’.<sup>xxxiv</sup> In order for philosophy to maintain a space where philosophical discourse can survive, it is ethically obliged and justified to use (non-legitimate) violence, if absolutely necessary, to exclude that which is violent from disrupting an open discourse based on goodwill – that is, to ensure the possibility of the survival of philosophy. As Derrida puts it, sometimes violence must be used, but only to ‘avoid the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse’<sup>xxxv</sup> – philosophy can exist only in the light of an opening, and not in the silence of darkness.

In 1934, hardly a year after Hitler’s rise to power, Levinas wrote an article entitled *Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism*.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Levinas wrote a preface to that article, when it was later reprinted, in which he claimed to regret having ‘dignified’ Hitlerism with the name of a ‘philosophy’. This raises the question of whether the ‘openness’ of the sociality metaphor has sufficient force to exclude Hitlerism as legitimate philosophy? Is an ethical definition of philosophy too open? Levinas, in his 1934 paper, according to Robert Manning’s reading, claims that: ‘the philosophy of Hitlerism, the biological conception of man, the Germanic ideal, can be expressed short hand in the term racism, and racism has its own particular way of spreading: violence and war and conquest.’<sup>xxxvii</sup> Thus we can see that Levinas identifies violence as the very essence of Hitlerism. As such, as an idea it is a violent affront to the openness to discourse, the freedom from imposed silence that philosophy requires to live and flourish. As such, by employing the sociality metaphor as governing the task of defining philosophy, we have the ethical right, on the basis of self-defence and the bystander obligation to maintain a space of openness, to exclude Hitlerism as a discourse able to be referred to as ‘philosophy’. That is, while it may be, in general, violent to exclude and silence, when it comes to ideas that are intrinsically violent, we are justified in excluding on the basis of self-defence – to do nothing would only result in a burning, in a Holocaust. Hitlerism is not philosophy because it does not engage in a sociality of open discourse with philosophy – it dictates, its proclaims, it is not open to opposition, and the possibility of other positions. It wants total silence and sameness. It is in principle *unsociable* and against the very possibility of sociality, of spontaneity and difference existing anywhere. Thus, in this sense, Hitlerism it is not and cannot be philosophy.

## 5.0 WITTGENSTEIN AND THE STRENGTH OF A THREAD

Wittgenstein argues that some terms, when we ‘look and see’ what actual uses fall under that term, have many similarities that crop up and then disappear. That is: ‘we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail...I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than ‘family resemblance’.’<sup>xxxviii</sup> Might we not think of philosophy in terms of family resemblance? However a problem inevitably arises (in the context of this paper) as Wittgenstein’s method, in itself, is too passive – it simply wants to ‘look and see’ and does not want to actually *judge* what we ought and ought not call philosophy. Further, it is concerned with seeing how we use words *now*, and hence is not much use in helping us to decide how to classify potentially new instances of a term, or even how we might reform or change our usage.

Nonetheless, I think some use can be made of Wittgenstein’s idea here, provided we govern the concept with the appropriate metaphor. The ‘family resemblance’ approach can be governed by either the container or sociality metaphor approaches. If we think of a family as just another type of container, defined by a set of propositions that stipulate what philosophy is once and for all, then this approach will suffer from the unethical features common to all closed containers. However, if we govern our usage of the family resemblance concept, when we come to define philosophy, with the sociality metaphor, then we can generate a series of propositions or definitions (fibres to use Wittgenstein’s metaphor)<sup>xxxix</sup> as to what philosophy is and which we can weave into a thread we call ‘philosophy’, whilst at the same time maintaining that the family must remain ethically open-ended or non-final. That is, we ought never tie the

thread off, once and for all, or close off the possibility of the addition of a new fibre to, or even the removal of an old fibre from, our thread. In this sense of an open-ended dynamic thread, there would be no single totalising essence of sameness to philosophy, no single fibre that runs through the entire thread that all must conform to, nor a finality or closure, but only a perpetual ethical openness to expansion (or contraction). Therefore I propose we might use the concept of family resemblance, when governed by the sociality metaphor, as a method to ethically define what philosophy is and ought be.<sup>xi</sup>

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

I have been attempting, by re-thinking the question of why we call something philosophical, to avoid the old standstill that either we accept Levinas' 'prophetic appeal',<sup>xii</sup> in which case we find his incoherence coherent and therefore find his work philosophical, or we don't accept its appeal, in which case we seemed left with nothing much that deserves or merits being called philosophical. However, I have not been arguing that philosophy can avoid totalising, in other words, that its betrayal of otherness is not necessary, but only that philosophy can totalise either ethically or unethically. It does so unethically when it takes the container approach and makes absolute claims to finality, whereby it excludes, almost a priori, all dissenters through an unjustified and illegitimate violent silencing of difference. It can do so ethically if it maintains an openness, if it makes a virtue of its fragility and purposefully refrains from claims of finality that would dislodge the possibility of a challenge to its sameness and instead thinks about itself in terms of the notions of sociality and family resemblance. Thus we can use this approach to repose our questions about the philosophical nature of Levinas' discourse. We need not ask whether or not philosophy can 'contain' Levinas' thought, or reduce it to an either/or question of whether or not we accept Levinas' 'appeal'. Instead we can ask: can we find a home for Levinas' thought as a thread in the fibre of philosophy? Does Levinas' thought enjoy a sociality of open engagement with philosophical thought? Does Levinas' thought remain non-violent, in the sense of entering and maintaining a non-violent opening, a place where philosophical discourse based on goodwill can exist and flourish? Does it remain open to the possibilities of Other, of plurality and difference? Is it, in principle, philosophically sociable? The answers to all these questions, and ones like them, must be a resounding yes. Levinas' thought not only engages and confronts, but challenges many of our core philosophical positions. Thus we can, regardless of whether or not we accept Levinas' thought as 'correct', still indeed justifiably call Levinas' thought philosophy; we can surely find a space in philosophy for his voice to be heard, whether or not we agree with it. While we may have trouble containing Levinas' thought within our traditional philosophical boundaries, I have shown that this is no reason to exclude him as a poser, but rather provides the occasion for reflection on just what it means, in an ethical manner, to call something 'philosophical'.<sup>xiii</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (USA: Routledge, 2000), 352.

<sup>iii</sup> Theodore De Boer, 'An Ethical Transcendental Philosophy,' in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (New York: S.U.N.Y Press, 1986), 106.

<sup>iv</sup> Stephen Smith, 'Reason as One for Another,' in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (New York: S.U.N.Y Press, 1986), 53.

<sup>v</sup> See *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>vi</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. A D Lindsay (London: Everyman's Library, 1935), 475.

<sup>vii</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. A Lingis (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1981), 155.

<sup>viii</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, 'Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,' in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen (New York: S.U.N.Y Press, 1986), 18-19.



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<sup>ix</sup> Wittgenstein has argued that our language is part of our form of life and so in adopting a certain language, for example a Greek lexicon of intelligibility, we are thus committed to accepting a certain form of life, a certain way of living, of looking at the world. Wittgenstein, when examining the fact of the seemingly insolubility of the ‘great philosophical problems’, writes that: ‘It is because our language has remained the same [i.e. Greek] and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions’ that we keep running up against the same dead-ends when we try to solve these ‘problems’ - Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 15e. In other words, our Greek philosophical language forces us to think about things in a certain way. Levinas identifies a similar problem in his struggle to express his thoughts in a non-ontological language; i.e. our Greek language implicitly implies an ontological way of thinking.

<sup>x</sup> Levinas and Kearney, ‘Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,’ 18-19.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid. Of course, this point is the central focus of the exchange, or series of exchanges, between Levinas and Derrida - for a brief introduction see Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, ‘Editor’s Introduction,’ in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

<sup>xii</sup> Levinas and Kearney, ‘Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,’ 21.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ajzenstat distinguishes between avoidable and unavoidable totalities – for her it is clear philosophy belongs in the latter category. In being a totality, even if unavoidably so, philosophy thus ‘betrays’ the Other. See Oona Ajzenstat, *Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas’s Postmodernism* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 32, 97-8, 108.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid. 48.

<sup>xvi</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 24.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xix</sup> Levinas and Kearney, ‘Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,’ 20.

<sup>xx</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘The Definition of Philosophy,’ in *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2004), 167. By the metaphor of philosophy as breaking the mirror, Badiou is trying to emphasise that the philosopher, unlike the sophist, wants to get beyond the reflection of ‘appearance’, to get to the thing-in-itself *behind* the mirror.

<sup>xxi</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, ‘The Double,’ in *Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky*, ed. Ronald Hingley (New York: Perennial Classics, 2004), 144.

<sup>xxii</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, ‘William Wilson,’ in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, ed. J M Dent (London: Everyman, 1993), 19.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See Badiou, ‘The Definition of Philosophy,’ 167.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Poe, ‘William Wilson,’ 20. Poe makes it quite clear that the double is supposed to represent our conscience. The conscience is supposed to keep consciousness *honest*, or more generally, *ethical* – without it, Poe seems to be arguing, we lose our very humanity. Likewise the sophist can also be thought of in this regard as someone who, in challenging the dominance of philosophical positions, keeps the philosopher honest.

<sup>xxv</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

<sup>xxvi</sup> Badiou, ‘The Definition of Philosophy,’ 168.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Levinas and Kearney, ‘Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,’ 22.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Plato, *The Apology*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Great Britain: Penguin, 1954), 45-46.

<sup>xxix</sup> Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. W K C Guthrie (England: Penguin Books, 1985), 337B.

<sup>xxx</sup> My use of the term ‘sociality’ has nothing to do with what Arendt refers to as the ‘social’ and my outline of philosophy is closer to Arendt’s polis than it is to her understanding of philosophy, which she takes to be in conflict and outside of her conception of the plural polity – see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>xxxi</sup> Hannah Arendt, ‘On Humanity in Dark Times: Thought’s About Lessing,’ in *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

<sup>xxxii</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 9.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), 52.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Ibid. 79.

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<sup>xxxv</sup> Derrida, quoted in David Michael Levin, 'Cinders, Traces, Shadows on the Page: The Holocaust in Derrida's Writing,' in *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*, ed. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 273.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,' *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1990).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Robert John Sheffler Manning, 'Serious Ideas Rooted in Blood: Emmanuel Levinas's Analysis of the Philosophy of Hitlerism,' in *Postmodernism and the Holocaust*, ed. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 133.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. E Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 27e.

<sup>xxxix</sup> In discussion of what we call a 'number', Wittgenstein writes: 'And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist on fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres' - see *Ibid.* 28e. In other words, there is no one thing in common to all the fibres on a thread, or no one thing in common, or a single essence, to all things we call 'games' or 'numbers' or, as I have argued, 'philosophy'. Levinas also uses this same metaphor of a thread, but in a negative sense, to argue that philosophy closes off the thread by tying it into a knot – see Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, 170. But a thread doesn't have to be (though perhaps it often is) tied into a knot or made into a container – it can remain open-ended.

<sup>xl</sup> That is, rather than looking and seeing if philosophy *is* a family resemblance term, I argue that it *ought* to be, as it would be unethical to define philosophy in any other way. Further, Wittgenstein own work, particularly the open-ended, sensitive, receptive and non-combative style he adopts in the *Philosophical Investigations*, might be taken as a nice example of what a truly sociable philosophy might stylistically look like.

<sup>xli</sup> Susan Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 180. A similar point is made in Ajzenstat, *Driven back to the Text*, 6.

<sup>xlii</sup> Minister makes a similar claim, writing: 'the very things that...Levinas brings into question are our conceptions of philosophy and rationality' – Stephen M. Minister, 'Is there a teleological suspense of the Philosophical?,' *Philosophy Today* 47, no. 2 (2003), 123.