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Source: *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 29, No. 3, SPECIAL ISSUE WITH THE SOCIETY FOR PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY (2015), pp. 366-375

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jspecphil.29.3.0366

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Metaphorical Transcendence: Notes on Levinas's Unpublished Lecture on Metaphor

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ABSTRACT: In his published work, Levinas only mentions metaphor for the sake of dismissing its relevance to his ethics of transcendence. Metaphor is aligned with the poetic imagery and the rhetorical devices that weave together an ontology of immanence, whereas transcendence is said to occur through an immediate encounter with the other. But Levinas's unpublished lecture "La Métaphore" is of interest precisely because it troubles this distinction through the notion of a "metaphorical transcendence." Although Levinas abandons this terminology after his lecture, this article suggests that an implicit, but unavowed, operation of metaphor persists in the guise of his ethics of substitution.

KEYWORDS: metaphor, transcendence, Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur

This article is motivated by the 2009 publication of Levinas's lecture "La Métaphore" in volume 2 of the collection *Oeuvres*.[1] The objective of that collection is to bring Levinas's unpublished materials into print. Volume 2 in the series is subtitled *Parole et Silence* (Speech and Silence), and it is composed of a series of lectures that Levinas gave at Jean Wahl's Collège Philosophique between 1947 and 1964. The aim of the Collège Philosophique was to provide an open forum to facilitate the development

JOURNAL OF SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY, VOL. 29, NO. 3, 2015

of new voices in philosophy, and Wahl is warmly acknowledged by Levinas for his support in the early stages of his career (for instance, this is where he presented his first book, *Time and the Other*). Presented on February 26, 1962, "La Métaphore" was also the first of these lectures (and the only one included in the volume) that Levinas delivered after the publication of *Totality and Infinity*. So, whereas the other lectures in this volume provide additional clues about its genesis, this lecture is the only one that might offer some insight into Levinas's thought after *Totality and Infinity*. And by its chosen theme, it is already evident at this early date that Levinas had become preoccupied with the issue of language, to which his later work returns again and again.

Metaphor, of course, is a good candidate for a project such as Levinas's, which is concerned with the question of transcendence. According to its Greek etymology, *metaphor* literally signifies a "carrying over." And indeed, on the traditional understanding, metaphor is considered to carry a term beyond its original, literal meaning and toward a new, figurative sense (as when we say, for instance, that an idea is over your head). By transporting a word beyond what is proper to itself, would not the metaphorical operation exemplify how transcendence is at work within language? And more broadly, if the meaning of each word could be said to point toward something other than itself, would not all language be metaphorical and, as such, a mode of transcendence? These are the types of questions that naturally might lead Levinas to look to metaphor as a resource for developing the language of transcendence.

Yet it is noteworthy that his published writings tend to mention metaphor only for the sake of dismissing its relevance. In *Totality and Infinity*, for instance, Levinas aligns metaphor with disclosure and the work of ontology, whereas he identifies his ethics with a "revelation" of the other that is straightforward, direct, and immediate.[2] Shortly after that work, he characterizes his ethics of the face as being "without any metaphor."[3] And later, in *Otherwise than Being*, he goes on to insist that "the suffering of constriction in one's skin" describes the ethical encounter in a way that is "better than metaphors."[4] On the basis of these assertions and countless other ones like them, the boundaries of Levinas's thought would seem to be set: metaphor belongs to poetic imagery and the rhetorical devices that weave together an ontology of immanence, whereas transcendence is established through a literal, direct, and nonmetaphorical encounter with the other. But Levinas's unpublished lecture on metaphor is of interest precisely because it troubles the apparent boundaries established in his published writings by introducing the notion

of a "metaphorical transcendence."[5] To explore the meaning of this notion, first I will provide a brief overview of the content of Levinas's lecture "La Métaphore" and then suggest that it can help us to detect an implicit, but unavowed, function of metaphor in Levinas's later thought.

Levinas on Metaphor

Schematically, philosophical treatments of metaphor could be divided into two camps: there are advocates who regard it as indispensable and the critics who want to unmask it. Proponents of metaphor have gone beyond the classical treatment of metaphor as a figure of language. They have observed that our language, to a considerable extent, is made up of dead metaphors that have "worn" over time and come to shape our picture of the world. They note how deeply metaphorical expressions are solidified in our language, as when we refer to understanding as "grasping a concept" or helping as "lending a hand." And as Heidegger's etymologies remind us, the same holds true for our philosophical discourse. When we employ such notions as "substance" and "idea" and even "metaphysics," it is easy to overlook their metaphorical dimension.[6] Due to their pervasiveness and familiarity, we can easily miss their influence over how we think and how we practice philosophy.

Yet this observation about the pervasiveness of metaphor can at the same time serve as the basis for the critique of metaphor. For we can easily be carried away or duped by metaphors, for instance, as Descartes shows that we are misled by our language to think that the sun "rises" and "sets" or to think that a piece of wax really has a color or a smell. The critique of metaphor identifies the figurative dimension of our language as a stumbling block that gets in the way of our understanding of the world. It sets out to unmask the distortions resulting from the metaphorical constructions of our language and, in so doing, aspires to return us to a nonmetaphorical and undistorted contact with reality.

Even with this schematic distinction between two competing attitudes toward metaphor, however, it is still not easy to classify Levinas's own place within this philosophical debate. To simplify the complex and winding structure of his lecture, we can boil it down to the assertion of two basic claims. First, Levinas takes a stance against the critique of metaphor. He rejects the attempt to flatten language by reducing it to what is univocal or literal, and instead he maintains that all language is metaphorical. But then, after

establishing the universality of metaphor, he issues a critique of metaphor in its usual sense. As an alternative to it, he introduces the notion of "metaphorical transcendence" and suggests that it alone provides the ultimate meaning of metaphor. Levinas's stance, as a result, is at once aligned with and against metaphor, in a sense.[7] To better understand how this position gets staked out, I propose to examine each of his two claims more closely.

To begin with the first claim, one way to think about the view that "language is metaphorical" is to go back to the role of intuition in Husserl's phenomenology. Sensible intuition can only grasp one side of the object and never its entirety. The meaning of what is intuited thus always exceeds the actuality of what is presented there. In other words, there is always a horizon that exceeds what appears. Inasmuch as it goes beyond what is given, it can be said that meaning is "meta-phorical," at least in the literal sense that it points beyond the given and toward an idea that exceeds it. Here Levinas's point echoes the view of thinkers such as Hegel and Derrida, who consider the movement from the sensible to the ideal, or to the concept, to be the movement of metaphor.[8] The metaphoricity of all language, then, would be rooted in the ideality of meaning.

But Levinas also supports this claim in another, more Heideggerian way. This comes from the suggestion that language is metaphorical, because meaning is always contextual. A word does not serve, first and foremost, to designate an object; its literal meaning, or reference, is not primary. Instead, the meaning of a word is always in deferral, because it is always deferred to another word or another context. That is to say that meaning is always predicated in language as this or as that; it is "this" as related to this context or "this" as "that" term. To see something *as* this or *as* that—to see one thing *as* another[9]—is to see metaphorically, and since the meaning of words is always in deferral to other words, it can be said that all language is governed by the rule of metaphor.[10]

In addition to his engagement with the phenomenological tradition, Levinas also draws on the work of his contemporaries to challenge traditional conceptions of metaphor. Traditionally, metaphor is construed on the basis of a distinction between the primary or literal meaning of a term and its secondary or figurative meaning.[11] Consider the expression "man is a wolf." Here the term *wolf* is considered to take on a secondary or figurative meaning through its comparison with man. But in drawing from the work of his contemporaries (including Snell, Minkowski, and Dufrenne), Levinas suggests that the metaphorical transfer does not simply take place

in a single direction from one term to the other.[12] One cannot say either that the wolf becomes anthropomorphized or that the human becomes animal in the metaphor; instead both of these are equally true.[13] The point is to observe that a particular quality, such as "greed," does not belong primarily to either "man" or "wolf" alone; instead it emerges out of the metaphorical intersection between them.[14] This would constitute the generative or productive dimension of metaphor.

Yet, after providing this very suggestive account of the metaphorical function, Levinas's lecture abruptly shifts its focus (this would be a surprise, at least, if it were not so Levinasian). Levinas proceeds to launch a criticism of metaphor in its universality, contending that "the universalization of metaphor is a condemnation of transcendence."[15] Even if metaphor might seem to provide a passage to the other, the objection is that it does not offer a genuine transcendence. For it does not really add anything new; it only unfolds a new way of saying the same thing. Metaphor is thus reducible to the play of words, Levinas contends, as if he were echoing the traditional critique of metaphor. And provided that metaphor can only provide a false or distorted mode of transcendence, this raises the question: Is another form of meaning than that of language possible?[16] This question leads to Levinas's second claim, namely, that there is a metaphorical transcendence that occurs not in language but in the ethical relation to the other.

Whereas metaphor in the usual sense shows that meaning is always relative to a context, Levinas considers metaphorical transcendence to be the true significance of metaphor. Instead of being expressed in words, it signifies what makes words possible.[17] This possibility is opened up by the other as an interlocutor. And it is in the passage of speech from one interlocutor to another that we can discover what Levinas calls "the absolute meaning of metaphor."[18] The interlocutor's speech passes beyond itself and moves toward the other. And Levinas goes on to identify this speech that is carried beyond (literally speaking, a "meta-phor") with the idea of the infinite as the "metaphor par excellence."[19] A transcendent metaphor does not simply expand thought by leading it to think more; instead it brings about the possibility for thought to go beyond what it can think. By leading thought beyond itself, metaphor opens onto what is absolutely other.

In the end, Levinas's lecture establishes a distinction between two different senses of metaphor that seem to run parallel to his distinction between the language of disclosure and the language of revelation in *Totality and Infinity*. First, there is metaphor in its ordinary sense, which

has to do with language's role of disclosing the world by saying something about something. To say that language is metaphorical is to say that the meaning of words is not self-contained; instead, they are always in deferral to other words, things, or contexts. But this deferral of meaning has a limited value for transcendence, inasmuch as it can only establish a relational form of otherness. By contrast, metaphor in its fundamental sense is the "transcendent metaphor," which introduces an absolute form of otherness. This has to do with the interlocutor who says something to someone. To speak of metaphor in this sense is to say that the voice of the interlocutor introduces something new and unprecedented into language. In this respect, metaphorical transcendence resembles the role of revelation in *Totality and Infinity* in bringing about a relation to the transcendence of the other.

What makes Levinas's lecture fascinating, though, is that he does not follow the same trajectory as he does elsewhere. In works such as *Totality and Infinity*, the metaphor's operation is aligned with disclosure, while revelation is associated with an ethics without metaphors. This lecture, by contrast, charts a unique path. Instead of separating ethics from the work of metaphor, here Levinas aligns the notion of metaphorical transcendence with his ethical project. Metaphor then comes to govern both ontology and ethics, both immanence and transcendence, although it operates differently in these domains.

The Antinomy of Metaphor

One cannot help but to wonder why Levinas explored this path in his lecture and then ultimately left it behind. Borrowing from Derrida, my suspicion is that this can be traced back to what might be called the antinomy of "the *plus de* metaphor."[20] Put simply, this antinomy stems from the fact that if Levinas positions ethical discourse outside of metaphor, then he must posit the existence of a reality without metaphor. But if Levinas places ethical discourse within metaphorical discourse, then he must posit ethical discourse in terms of the production of more metaphors. To deepen this antinomy within the context of Levinas's broader project, we can flesh out each of its two poles.

The first pole of this antinomy involves the attempt to separate ethical discourse from the rule of metaphor. We see this at work in Levinas's lecture when he tries to establish the "true" meaning of metaphor from metaphor in its "usual" sense. Whereas ordinary metaphors are caught up in the free play of terms with one another, absolute metaphor opens up a univocal

or absolute relation to the other. This move, in Levinas's lecture, resembles the critique of metaphor that rejects it as the superficial play of words and insists, instead, on returning to an undistorted, univocal reality. This is in fact the route that Levinas typically follows in his work. But can his usage of such terms as *revelation* and *the face*, to name only a couple examples, truly claim to be outside of the play of metaphor?

There are, of course, good reasons to resist Levinas's argument. Noting that Levinas himself employs many rhetorical devices (exclamations, hyperboles, metaphors, images) in his account of the ethical, Derrida famously challenges the claim to step outside of metaphor:

> That it is necessary to state infinity's excess over totality in the language of totality; that it is necessary to state the other in the language of the Same; that it is necessary to think true exteriority as non-exteriority, that is, still by means of the Inside-Outside structure and by spatial metaphor; and that it is necessary still to inhabit the metaphor in ruins, to dress oneself in tradition's threads and the devil's patches—all this means, perhaps, that there is no philosophical logos which must not first let itself be expatriated into the structure Inside-Outside. . . . [M]etaphor is congenital to the philosophical logos.[21]

The point, here, concerns the irreducibility of metaphor. Instead of being able to exchange the figural for the literal, the indirect for the direct, it implies that the best that Levinas can do is to exchange one set of metaphors for another. He could only displace one set of metaphors (of light, disclosure, horizon, ontology) through the use of another set of metaphorical terms (of the invisible, revelation, height, ethics). But to read him in such a way would undercut the ethical seriousness in which Levinasian discourse shrouds itself. Levinas's ethical project would be reduced to a play of words; it would become a rhetorical strategy, a game that sets out to praise one set of metaphors over other metaphors.[22]

Although the notion of "metaphorical transcendence" disappears from Levinas's lexicon after his 1962 lecture, it nonetheless resurfaces in spite of its avoidance. To avoid something, after all, does not mean that it goes away; it often means that what is repressed simply manifests itself in another way or in another context. And this especially turns out to be the case with Levinas's later work. When one is attuned to metaphor, it becomes clear that there is something like an implicit metaphoricity in Levinas's later thought.

To provide an illustration of this unavowed role of metaphor, I want to call attention to a specific feature of his account of the ethical encounter in *Otherwise than Being*. We can see the role of metaphor by situating it in contrast to another figure of speech: metonymy. Through metonymy, one term points beyond itself and slides to another term that is closely related to it; it signifies a movement from "one to the next." This movement is associated with the ontological language of the Said, or with the play of signifiers. Within the Said (or metaphor in its usual sense), language signifies metonymically, passing from one sign to the next. By contrast, the metaphorical function is governed by the logic of substitution—in metaphor, one term takes the place of another; it is the standing of one sign "for the other." This metaphorical substitution—in which one term stands for another term—is associated with the language of the Saying.[23] It takes on an ethical meaning in what Levinas calls substitution. In ethical substitution, the self becomes a metaphor in the true sense; the self stands in for another person and substitutes for the other. In short, one becomes the other.

While recognizing the implicit role of metaphor in Levinas's later thought can provide an interpretive key for Levinas's ethics, it can also help to pinpoint a problem in Levinas's account of intersubjectivity. This problem stems from the identification of metaphor with the work of substitution. The substitution model conceptualizes metaphor as the replacement of one term by another. This model, in turn, leads to a conception of intersubjectivity in which the self relates to the other through a logic of replacement, where one takes over the role of the other and becomes the other. But other contemporary models of metaphor can provide valuable resources for rethinking this model. One such model can be found in Ricoeur's conception of metaphor not as substitution but as a "tensive" relation.[24] Such a model conceptualizes metaphor in terms of an interactive and dynamic production of meaning and, as such, can help us to rethink what it means to see oneself *as* another. Instead of substituting oneself for the other, here intersubjectivity becomes a dynamic co-production of meaning with the other.

NOTES

1. Emmanuel Levinas, "La Métaphore," in *Oeuvres 2: Parole et Silence*, ed. Rodolphe Calin and Catherine Chalier (Paris: Grasset, 2009), 319–48. Note that volume 3, *Eros, littérature, et philosophie*, has recently been published and calls added attention to the literary dimension of Levinas's work.

2. For a good account of the tensions involved in maintaining these distinctions, see Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), especially "The Face as Figure," 68–74.

3. See Emmanuel Levinas, "A Priori et Subjectivité," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 67 (1962): 497.

4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 110.

5. Along with this reassessment, it is worthwhile to reread essays such as "Everyday Language and Rhetoric Without Eloquence" and "The Transcendence of Words" for their implicit connection to this unpublished lecture.

6. This is the gist, as I understand it, of Martin Heidegger's observation that "the metaphorical exists only within the metaphysical" in *The Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 48.

7. This is where my reading of Levinas's lecture departs from the interpretation offered by the editors of the volume. Calin and Chalier identify these two claims in the lecture but fail to note their ambiguity, in the sense that Levinas takes a stance both with and against metaphor.

8. Derrida writes: "The movement of metaphorization (the origin and then the effacing of the metaphor, the passing from a proper sensible meaning to a proper spiritual meaning through a figurative detour) is nothing but a movement of idealization." Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 226.

9. Later, I will connect this to Ricoeur's account of metaphor and suggest that metaphor provides an important clue to intersubjectivity in which one regards "oneself as another." See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially Study 10.

10. Levinas, "La Métaphore," 337. For a critical examination of this type of claim, see also Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).

11. See Aristotle's treatment of metaphor in his *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*.

12. The works that are cited in this context are B. Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes, Studien zur Entstehung des Europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen* (Hamburg: Claasen Verlag, 1955); Eugène Minkowski, *Le Temps vécu* (Paris: PUF, 1933); Mikkel Dufrenne, *La Notion d'"a priori"* (Paris: PUF, 1959).

13. I do not know whether scholars have yet connected these thinkers' explorations of metaphor to Deleuze and Guattari, but there certainly seem to be some connections between these accounts of metaphor and their idea of becoming-other, which is developed, for instance, in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), especially chap. 7.

14. Much more could be done to explain this, though it would require a more detailed study of Dufrenne in particular, whose influence on Levinas has been completely ignored.

15. Levinas, "La Métaphore," 337.
16. Ibid., 338.
17. Ibid., 341.
18. Ibid., 342.
19. Ibid., 344.
20. This notion is developed in Derrida, "White Mythology," 207–71.
21. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 112. Later, John Llewelyn touches on this irreducibility of metaphor as well: "To think metaphoricity as such is to think of being again, a metaphor more or less. And when Levinas, instead of affirming metaphoricity, again and again denies it, is he not embarrassed by the same predicament? Since he has to think metaphoricity if he has to deny it, he has to think being." John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 179.
22. This would not undermine Levinas's project as much as it would alter its tone. It would prevent Levinas from adopting the position of the moralist who stands outside of the system and condemns it; instead he would become an ironist operating from within. Like Plato, who expels the poets from the *Republic* at the same time as he is writing a philosophical fiction, Levinas could only resort to the use of irony in the employment of metaphor and countermetaphor. In my own opinion, this would make Levinas's project more appealing (rather than less) than the prevailing readings of his work.
23. The connection between metaphor and intersubjectivity points back all the way to Husserl, inasmuch as it is implicit in key notions such as "association," "pairing," and "analogizing apperception." Through metaphor, the resemblance of the other to me can be established in spite of (or because of) the other's alterity or difference from me. What I am suggesting here is that the nature of this relation between self and other hangs precisely on the way in which the metaphorical operation is understood. The stakes of the debate over metaphor are thus directly related to intersubjectivity.
24. For this notion, see Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, especially Study 6, "The Work of Resemblance." And for a good general discussion of Ricoeur's theory of metaphor, see Jean-Luc Amalric, *Ricoeur, Derrida: L'enjeu de la métaphore* (Paris: PUF, 2006).