Sound Not Light: Levinas and the Elements of Thought

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Absolute difference...is established only by language. (Levinas, 2004 [1961], p. 195)

Thought is speech, and is therefore immediately face. (Derrida, 2009 [1968], p. 125)

I. INTRODUCTION

The improvement of thinking continues to be an issue on the agenda of educators and policy makers today, and yet it can be argued that the mechanisms employed to this end (such as critical thinking, “thinking skills” and some factions of philosophy for children) are based on narrow and restrictive conceptions of thought. The aim of this paper is to defend such a claim via the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. More particularly, this paper aims to demonstrate how Levinas’ account of the relation to the other opens up a new conception of human thought. We say a “new” conception of thought here so as to highlight the sense in which this goes beyond the way thinking has been understood both within traditional philosophy and certain educational approaches to thinking that buy into these schools of thought. Elsewhere, the authors of the present paper have worked to explicate key features of this traditional account, how they feed into educational accounts of thinking, and suggested ways such conceptions might be got beyond (Levinas, 1969).

This paper offers a similar argument. Yet it also contends that, with Levinas, the argument comes to be cast in a particularly striking way. For Levinas’ philosophy, as we shall see, works to move beyond what can be called a tradition of understanding thinking through the medium of light. What Levinas moves towards, by contrast, is a conception of thinking understood through the medium of sound. We are not yet in a position to understand this difference. It will be the task of sections IV and V to explain what is at stake in Levinas’ move. Key to doing so will be an examination of what Levinas says about language and the role language plays within the encounter with the face. Before exploring this, however, let us say a little more about the notion of thinking afforded by the thematic of light. Indeed, it was through an engagement with this picture that Levinas himself came to move towards the otherness of the face and the sound of thought.

II. RAYS OF LIGHT

Where might we locate a conception of human thought that takes its cue from the medium of light? We do not need to look very far for an answer. Indeed, a thematic of light finds early formulation in Plato’s celebrated allegory of the cave, which depicts the ascent of a set of prisoners, from a dimly lit cave and world of shadows, into the brightly lit by the sun. This story is, of course, used by Plato as a metaphor for man’s ascent out of ignorance into the realm of knowledge and reality. And yet it is clear that, within this allegory, a connection is made between light, reality (as opposed to mere appearance), and the process of gaining knowledge of this reality. Indeed, the realm of appearance is depicted as one that takes place in the dim light of the cave fire, whereas the world of truth and reality are the bright, illuminated world of the sun. Moreover, light itself is cast as a condition for moving out of the world of appearance – for it is by virtue of light that things are illuminated, shown as they really are, and hence made intelligible and sensible.

Within early modern philosophy, a similar conception is at play. Descartes conceived the Meditations as an attempt to reach a firm foundation for the sciences, by means of a process of purely deductive a priori reasoning. And yet it soon becomes clear that at the centre of his project is the moment of “clear and distinct perception” - that which, as Descartes puts it, proceeds purely from his own intuition or the “indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind” (AT X 368). Clear and distinct perception is, of course, not synonymous with the perception yielded by the sense of vision or sight, which for Descartes was wont to be mistaken and deceived. This inward-facing perception proceeds not from the potentially fallible experience of the physical world but from the “light of reason” – cast by Descartes as
an indubitable and infallible source. Moreover, it is precisely such illuminated, infallible perceptions that give rise to Descartes’ final acceptance of the existence of the material world. Hence, in his final meditation, Descartes reminds us that what we know of the material world remains mediated through our clear and distinct perceptions: that internal “touch” that shines forth and illuminates things as they really are.

We could say much more. Yet in the interests of space we should perhaps move here to another tradition in philosophy: that of phenomenology. The phenomenological project, as envisaged by Edmund Husserl, sought to offer a new description of human experience, which would move away from metaphysical philosophising and do justice to what is given in experience as it is given. In this way, Husserl sought to return philosophical considerations to the realm of “lived experience” and the “things themselves”. A key feature of this move was Husserl’s claim that human consciousness is intentional (that is, is consciousness of something) and is thus constituted through a relation to what is outside itself. It is interesting, however, that Husserl continued to view this intentional mode of comportment primarily as an act of perceiving essences – an act that was itself understood in visual terms as the intuitive seeing of “that which appears”.

Husserl’s phenomenological project was extended and developed by a number of subsequent thinkers, most notably Martin Heidegger. And yet, for all Heidegger’s attempt to expunge phenomenology of Husserl’s metaphysical presuppositions, it could be said that Heidegger himself continues with this phenomenological thematic of light – as can perhaps be evidenced through his foregrounding of notions such as disclosure and interpretation, and through later developments in his characterisation of Being (as opposed to beings). Indeed Being, for Heidegger, is Es gibt (what gives…): it has a bestowing and productive character. Being is the “clearing” (Lichtung) that brings things forth and allows them to shine forth. And for this reason, as John Llewellen (2004) notes, it is possible to argue that Heidegger’s philosophy itself can be read as a project that is, like Husserl’s, still “in a strict sense” concerned with “the giving and the given in light” (p. 24).

It is at this point that we can cross over to the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas’ thinking was itself greatly influenced by the phenomenological movement – and yet at the same time sought to move radically away from this tradition. A key part of his doing so is his movement away from a philosophy of light. What reasons does Levinas have for such a move and what does it consist in? To answer this, let us firstly consider the way Levinas himself characterises picture of human experience afforded by the thematic of light.

III. THOUGHT-QUA-LIGHT

In his phenomenologically-inspired picture of the relation between “I and world” presented in *Existence and Existents*, Levinas suggests that our existence in the world is primarily characterised by a relation to “things” that are wholly given to us, which we are attached to, and which function as the terminus and satisfaction of our intentions (pp. 27-29). Our relation to things in the world is, as Levinas puts it, “terribly sincere”: we do not reach for things for the sake of something else, and we do not primarily maintain an abstracted or theoretical relation with things (p. 28). Such sincerity can be illustrated well via the simple activity of eating an apple. For it is clear that such an activity is not performed in view of some “higher purpose”, and is not characterised by cognitive or theoretical orientation. Rather, eating an apple is a physical and visceral act, necessarily involving a number of sensations from the feelings of hunger gnawing away at my stomach to the taste of the apple as I bite. Notably, and in a way that develops this last point, Levinas also suggests that such sincere worldly comportment is thus marked by an attitude of consumption. Crucially, however, this is a consumption that runs only one way – for in the intentional move towards things in the world the “I” itself is not absorbed. What this means is that while we seek to possess and consume things in the world, we are at the same time “not overwhelmed by that possession” (p. 38) but maintain a fundamental distance. In our relation with the world there is thus, Levinas states, “an attitude of reserve” and an element of “keeping one’s hands free” (p. 39).

When he turns to examine what conditions and makes such separation possible, Levinas concludes that it is the fact our worldly relations have here been understood as taking place in
the medium of light. This is because, he suggests, light gives things to us and makes them show up as “destined for me” or usable “by me”. Light thus makes possible the acts of intentional consciousness – the “enveloping of the exterior by the inward” (p. 41). Yet crucially, Levinas also goes on to claim that such illuminated relation is not only located in those branches of philosophy which foreground the worldly comportment of intentional consciousness (i.e. phenomenology). Rather, for Levinas, it is a mark of Western thought in general, and its particular understanding of human experience. And it is not too hard to see how this is the case, given the thematics we traced above. Yet what Levinas suggests here is that by virtue of this focus on light, human thought comes to be cast in a particular kind of way. For by virtue of the light “all the unfathomable mystery of a thing shows itself to us and is open to our grasp” (p. 33). Through light, the world thus becomes sensible and intelligible to the human “subject”. Thought-qua-light thus becomes the activity of thematisation and conceptualisation. And, through this, human beings come to do violence to the objects of thought – for, as Levinas puts it, the “I think” comes down to “I can”, to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality” (2004 [1961], p. 46).

If, then, in the philosophical tradition “the miracle of light is the essence of thought” (p. 41), we are here dealing with a thought that takes its cue and receives its character from the notions of determination, mastery, conceptualization, thematisation, and representation. Such characterization appears, as we have seen above, to have been at work in philosophy even when it seeks to get beyond the prioritisation of epistemology and the knowing relation, and return our considerations viscerally to the world of things. The question that concerns us in this paper is whether it is possible to break free from this stranglehold. Can there be a conception of thinking that goes beyond the element of light? It is to this question that we shall now turn.

IV. AN OTHER RELATION

As we stated at the outset, it is our contention in this paper that Levinas’ philosophy itself has the resource to move us beyond this conception of thought-qua-light. As we also stated, the key area that we need to attend to in order to see why this is the case is Levinas’ account of the other. Now, this account is fairly well known in educational circles today. However, in this paper we shall be working to bring out a dimension of this account that is often overlooked. We shall come to see this more fully in the next section of this paper. For now, however, let us move towards this by tracing some of the more familiar aspects of Levinas’ account.

Levinas characterises the relation with the other as a relation with the face – an encounter in which I am confronted with that which radically exceeds myself: the alterity of the other. The face, Levinas claims, signals an interiority that I can never reach or subsume; it directs me towards the impassable distance between me and the other person that not even the closest spatial proximity could transverse. Furthermore, the encounter with the face refers us to the vulnerability of the other: to see the face is already to have seen this vulnerability and interiority. Hence our encounter with the face is comparable to Vasily Grossman’s description in Life and Fate of the way people who were standing in line before the gate in Lubyanka, from which one could get news of loved ones arrested for political crimes, could read “on the nape” of the person in front of them “the feelings and hopes of his misery” (Morgan, 2011, p. 19). The face, like the nape, expresses to us the frailty, weakness, and mortality of the other. The face thus serves as a kind of metonym for this larger human vulnerability. And in this way, Levinas argues, the face confronts us as an ethical command: it summons me to responsibility before the other and to an obligation that deepens the more I answer to it. This is not, importantly, to be understood as an incidental relation – say, where we come across the other in an unfortunate situation. People always are vulnerable, not just possibly but inevitably so. Such is the human condition. For Levinas, then, the relation with the face is the primordial structure of our relation with other people: it is what conditions and makes possible all our further relations.

While the encounter with the face is an experience of something that is before us (something physically confronting us), we should understand the nature of this confrontation carefully. It is, Levinas says, a “concrete abstraction”. Now, the term “concrete” here points us to the way in which the account of the face is intended to do justice to our actual experience of the other
– it should not be understood as a (philosophical) abstraction that turns us away from the real individual, from the physical encounter with the face, and towards a generalized other. However, and as the phrase also suggests, there is a sense in which the relation with the face is at the same time an abstraction. For Levinas is not here depicting an encounter in which one becomes fixated upon a particular person who, in virtue of their particular characteristics, is the object of our concern, and where, say, one gazes into the depths of the other’s eyes in a heightened moment of awareness and empathy. To encounter the face is not to fix our gaze upon the particular features of another’s face such as the colour of their eyes or the shape of their face: to see the face is not to see the colour of the eyes. In fact, the face itself radically exceeds and overflows its physical determination. The face is there in the nape of the neck and, as we shall see, in the approach of language.

But with this last point, we are introduced to a thought that is admittedly complex. For in what way can we understand this excessive and overflowing quality of the face? The question is a significant one. Indeed, we would argue that it is, in fact, through this point that we are brought to see how Levinas’ account of the face has import beyond what can be said only about our relations with other people – for it also refers us to something significant about the nature of human thought itself. Let us now turn to explore this more fully.

V. THE SOUND OF THE FACE

As we have shown in section II, human thought is intentional and as such is always already a relation to the other (and this of course includes the other human being). The thematic of light affords a certain characterisation of this relation – one that takes its cue from representation, comprehension, assimilation, and thematisation. The question that now concerns us is: does Levinas’ philosophy open us to an alternative view?

We have already started to move some way towards seeing that it does through our consideration of what Levinas says about the relation to the face. Yet clearly we can say more. For what constitutes the relation to the face? What conditions make the relation with the face possible? It is here that we move towards a shift in the elements. For it can be said that what conditions Levinas’ account of alterity is, to be sure, not light but sound. And this characterisation is there recurrently in Levinas’ words: the relation to the face is not realised in abstract contemplation but is “heard in language” (2004 [1961], p. 297). And I am always already addressed.

We will need to do some work in order to understand precisely what Levinas is referring us to here. Let us note initially that, through this characterisation, Levinas suggests that language cuts across the realm of light – that sphere constituted by the categories of the contemplative subject and the external object - and hence moves us beyond representation, appropriation, thematisation, and conceptualisation. Now, initially, this might sound like a strange point to make about language. Indeed, on the strength of a traditional reading, wherein language is taken to be a communicative instrument and is hence given the “servile function of translating...pre-existing thought”, it would appear that language precisely plays such a representative role. Of course, with his claim that the relation to the other is “heard in language” Levinas is not seeking to deny that such a function is there. Yet he is seeking to bring out a further, and perhaps more essential, dimension of language. This is the way language functions as expression and invocation. This dimension is perhaps most clearly evidenced, as Levinas himself suggests, in the act of being spoken to or being addressed. When I am addressed, language does not, to be sure, function merely as representation or communication by way of some lifeless sign. Rather a condition of being addressed is that I am approached by what is exterior to myself, otherwise than myself. We shall come to say a little more on this point in a moment. For now let us note that, in this way, Levinas comes to draw a connection between language (understood in its invocative sense) and the face. More exactly, for Levinas, the relation with the face is inseparable from speech; to be confronted by the face is to be confronted by someone who speaks, who addresses me. Indeed, would it be possible to see someone’s face without at the same time knowing that this is someone who speaks? We might of course be able to do this via a thought experiment or some other abstraction from the primary situation. But for such abstraction to be possible there must have first been the recognition of the other as one who speaks. Indeed, the very possibility of
communicating and conversing with others, upon which our everyday life is built, is itself predicated upon this initial casting of the other as one who speaks – for what would be the point of speaking to someone if we did not think they were themselves capable of speech? More radically, what could our speaking be? What could we be?

In fact in 1976, in a lecture series at the Sorbonne (Levinas, 2000), in the wake of the publication of Otherwise than Being (1974), Levinas reprises the theme of sincerity, introduced, as we saw, in Existence and Existents, but here in a way that moves beyond the satisfactions identified there. Sincerity is now found not in the eating of the apple, the satisfactions of consumption or possession, but in a breaking open of this sensuous-affective relation, even to the giving of bread taken from one’s mouth. Language is not then to be understood in terms of any putative fit with a pre-existing “objective” reality, to which it is adequate and wherein it finds satisfaction; rather, in its essential temporalisation, it creates meaning and world. Saying then is always a movement away from any ossification of the said. “To make signs to the extreme point of making a sign of oneself” is to resist the dispersal of the logos in possibilities of being (Levinas, 2000, p. 192). Such saying is not explainable in terms of partnership in dialogue or exchange of information. It is rather to be understood in terms of “a passivity of passivity” (p. 191), of the accusative “I”, realised in the French expression Me voici (literally, “See me here”; otherwise, “Here I am”). The ethic imperative in the passivity of this reception of the other is always there, logical precondition to any dialogue or communication. It imparts a truthfulness prior to the making of true statements. Its sincerity is not an act of exposing but a matter of “exposing the exposure” (ibid.), a giving that exhausts our reserves.

The subject is sensitive to the pro-vocation that was never presented but that struck it with a trauma… Therein lies a heteronomy, in this relationship with another where I am, myself, torn from my beginning in me, from my equality with myself. This heteronomy is an alteration that is not alienation, not slavery, not a loss of uniqueness, since precisely no one may replace me, since I am chosen (p. 193).

This breaking open realized in the saying, however much we may deny or attempt to override it, is the condition of subjectivity and hence constitutive of the relation to the other.

Certainly these are dizzying thoughts, but they should leave us with no doubt of the place that Levinas accords to language as speech. Specifically, the experience of the face is itself the experience of speech, of invocation, of being called, of saying. Hence, whatever different materialisations language can subsequently assume, its primordial element is sound. And with this, crucially, we also come to understand more fully what is at stake in the alterity of the other that we glimpsed in the previous section. Let us steady the tone a little by thinking more simply about the nature of signs.

Consider first the way in which speech, and more generally language itself insofar as language is a system of signs, always involves a reference to something beyond itself. More specifically, as structuralist and post-structuralist philosophers have pointed out, the sign is what it is by virtue of its difference from other signs; hence we never grasp signs as they are “in themselves”. Of course, signs do have a material form; they are constituted by a particular sound sequence, for example, or via certain marks on a page. Yet signs are not themselves reducible to their particular material form – as can be shown from the way that one can say “day” in a loud or a soft voice, at a high or low pitch, and the word will still, within certain limits, be recognizable. Indeed, what makes it possible for the sound sequence that is produced when one says “day” to function as a signifier is the fact that it can be distinguished from the sound sequence that is made when one says “way” or “lay” or “bay” for example. A similar point can be made with regard to the written sign. Indeed, one can recognize the letter “b” even if it is written a number of different ways, using different fonts, and different sizes:
What makes these particular marks recognizable as instances of the letter “b” is, indeed, that they are not instances of the letter “a” or “c”. Yet from this it becomes clear that signs, spoken words included, necessarily remain unsaturated and unconsummated. As Jacques Derrida puts it, signs are, by nature, always “delayed” or “deferred”: the very nature of the sign “is not to be proximate to itself” (Derrida, 1976 [1967b], p. 50). Signs are thus, we might say, constituted via an absence.

Now, all of this refers us to something important about the relation with the face. For in and through language, and speech is no exception, we are called by something which remains beyond our comprehension and grasp. Levinas himself attests to such a relation, stating that “absolute difference...is established only by language” (2004 [1961] p. 195). Yet if the relation with the face is itself one that is inseparable from speech, and is accomplished in speech, then it must be the case that this is itself a relation with absolute difference – with what is not fully given and goes beyond my comprehension and grasp. And it is in this way that we come to understand what is at stake in Levinas’ claim that the relation with the face is a relation with what refuses “to be contained”, with what is “forever outside” and could never “be converted into interiority” (p. 295). For the face, like the sign and by virtue of its being inseparable from the sign, has an interiority that I cannot and will never fathom or assimilate. Hence while it is the case that I can see another face, the face is given to sight and vision, the face also exceeds its particular material form; it is not proximate to or given through its material form. As Levinas puts it, the face “breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it” (p. 198). It is hence an “overflowing, irreducible to an image of overflowing” – phrasing that might fruitfully be compared to Derrida’s evocation of the “non-saturation” and “dissemination” of the sign: its bursting open with possibilities of meaning and interpretation.

In this way, we come to understand why the relation with the face must be one that takes place not in the light, but in sound. For we would not do justice to the relation with the face if we considered this under the glare of light – that which gives everything over to us but in such a way that it yields to or feeds our tendencies towards assimilation and domination. The relation with the face is an experience of the appresented, the unrepresentable; hence it must be realised in language. And as such, as Levinas points out, the relation with the face should not, strictly speaking, be called an experience at all. For the term “experience” presupposes an encounter with something that is fully given to us, and is present to us; it presupposes that which can be comprehended, grasped, and known. Yet the face is precisely not like this. The face escapes and eludes our “sensory experience” – at least in the way sense experience is typically theorized about, especially in terms of atomistic experiences of seeing, hearing, touching, and so on. It is not illuminated, or “given to vision”. The relation with the face is, rather, accomplished in the structural non-presence of expression, the sign, and language.

Can we say any more? More specifically can we draw out the implications of this account of the face further? Indeed we can. And this is because, as we have noted in the previous section, the relation with the face should not be understood as merely one aspect of human experience amongst others. The relation with the face is not a merely incidental and occasional relation. Rather, Levinas takes it to be the very condition of human experience in the first place. Hence we can say that the relation with the face conditions human thinking itself (in that this is already a relation to the other). Indeed, Levinas himself emphasises the fundamental “solidarity” between thought and speech - drawing as he does upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s conception that “disincarnate thought, thinking speech before speaking it, thought constituting the world of speech . . . was a myth” (2004 [1961] p. 205-206). And in this way we come to see how Levinas’ account of the relation with the other can be read as offering a new conception of human thought. This is a conception that radically departs from the traditional picture of thought-qua-light. For indeed, as we might put it utilising Derrida’s phrasing, Levinas’ philosophy opens us to the view that “thought is language”, and “is thought in an element analogous to sound not to light” (Derrida, 2009 [1968], p. 125). Here, then, we are moved towards a re-description of what happens when we think. If thought operates qua sound, then our thinking will be less under our control than it was within the realm of light. To acknowledge this is to build on the phenomenological insight - there, for example, in Heidegger’s Being and Time (Heidegger, 1962) – that, whereas to a large extent we control
what we see by the movements of our head (including those of our eyelids and our eyes themselves), our hearing is not so autonomously regulated: sounds come to us from behind and surprise us, and we do not, for the most part, move our ears. To look is to concentrate the attention by directing the gaze and focusing the eyes; to listen is also to attend, but in a manner more passive and receptive, open to what one happens to hear. What I see is the object of my gaze, while the sounds I hear envelop me. As Levinas himself puts it, and like the sound that catches me unawares, “signification surprises the very thought that thought it” (2004 [1961], p. 206). But the phenomenological contrast exposes a more metaphysical difference: specifically, that thinking (qua sound) will no longer be understood as secured by that stable, permanent, Archimedean point from which we can view the world, but will rather be recognized as open, dynamic, and fluid. Thought-qua-sound will conversely be something that does not depend upon what is permanently given, what is present, and what endures, but on what fades and passes into nothingness, just as speech depends on the fading of syllable after syllable. And yes, again following phenomenological insights, as indicated in Heidegger’s title Being and Time, this is to emphasize the temporal, not the spatial: it constitutes a freeing from the ocular obsessions that came to the fore with the rise of science, just as it is a renunciation of the more or less Platonist expectations of full presence, spatial and temporal, that have dominated Western thought. By understanding thinking through the element of sound we will no longer connect thought with the traditional notions of psyche, theoria, or intellect. Indeed, thought-qua-sound invokes more readily a thematic of breath, of inspiration, of pneuma, which brings us, following the Latin (Christian) tradition, into the realm of the spirit – which, like the sign, is what it is by virtue of what it is not, by virtue of absence. There is much more that could be said on this. Perhaps, however, we are already saying more than we are permitted to in the present context. Let us then, by way of drawing this paper to a close, turn to consider how this new conception of thought might play out in our everyday human practices, and in our educational practices in particular.

VI. ELEMENTS OF THOUGHT

In education today there is a predominant tendency to talk about, and indeed bring about, the improvement of thinking in terms of notions such as “critical thinking”, “thinking skills”, and in some quarters “philosophy for children”. What is foregrounded in such fields is, as we have suggested elsewhere ( ), a particular and limited way of thinking: such thinking relies on the generic procedures of logic and epistemology, and is almost exclusively concerned with the quasi-technical activities of constructing arguments, formulating demonstrations, assessing and evaluating claims by way of set criteria, and so forth. What we think about, on such a view, is, simultaneously, made to appear as data, quantifiable propositions, or statements that are subject to our scrutiny and control. Hence we stand well back from the things we are thinking about and learn to approach and relate to the world in a manner that is claimed to be objective, reflective, and critical.

Such tendencies operate upon an understanding of thinking that takes its cue from the element of light. For here, we are in the realm of a subject who stands apart from the things she is thinking about; who consumes them without being consumed by them; and who thus thinks while “keeping her hands free”. Moreover, we are in the realm of thinking as assimilation, conceptualisation, and thematisation – activities at which we human beings are, of course, undeniably good and towards which we are, like the moth to the flame, undeniably drawn.

Such an understanding of thinking – and of what is thought about – is increasingly prevalent not only within the field of thinking education. The call to stand back and gain a critical, reflective perspective on things (and, indeed, on ourselves insofar as we are one of the “things” we can think about) is one that is made upon us in many areas of life today. Hence the human resources manager shortlists applicants for a role by means of a quantified rating system; the new employee undergoes an appraisal that measures her successes (and failures) against predefined criteria; the uncertain fiancée draws up a list of the pros and cons of her potential partner to aid her in making her big decision. In each of these cases, the possibilities are limited by structures that, in many ways, work as a convenient substitute for thought itself.
We have sought to open an account of thinking that goes beyond this picture. Via Levinas' notion of the other, we have come to a conception of thinking that is conditioned not by light, but by *sound*. This means, as we saw at the close of the previous section, that human thinking is made possible by means of a relation to that which is appresented, held back, and beyond ourselves. And of course, through this, we also come to re-describe what it is that we are thinking *about* – for, *qua* sound, things cannot be understood simply as objects fully given to us, to be brought entirely under our control and domination. Thus we come to recognize that the job applicant is indeed more than the criteria she is defined by; the new employee is indeed more than the successes and failures defined by the appraisal form; and the potential husband is indeed more than the sum of pros and cons drawn up on the hesitant fiancée's list. It might be objected that this much is *obvious* – for surely we have known all the time that a person is more than a quantified number or a list of pros and cons? Yet by virtue of the increasing stress on reductive modes of thinking, such obviousness can, paradoxically, come to be overlooked. Moreover, it can be said that the *teaching* of thinking, predominantly in terms of the discourse of critical thinking or “thinking skills”, heightens the possibility of such forgetfulness by shoring up the idea that it is only thinking of this kind that provides a rigorous and robust way of proceeding.

As our analysis of Levinas has shown, then, to construe human thought in this way is to fail to do justice to the otherness that conditions and makes such abstracted relations possible in the first place. Put simply, it is to fail to do justice to the elements of thought. It is to be deaf to the fact that, before light, there is sound.

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1 For one, we could invoke the philosophy of the Enlightenment, a term utilised to depict man's move out of immaturity and into self-sufficiency and autonomy.

2 Heidegger draws attention approvingly to Aristotle's explication of discourse in terms of *apophainesthai*, letting something be seen, while his later elaboration of the notion of the clearing alludes obliquely, though more obviously than is evident in English, to the *Aufklärung*, the Enlightenment.

3 In fact, we can say too that our ordinary seeing is itself something beyond the abstracted physical sense that we construct in our theorisations. We return to this point below.

4 Of course, the sense of analogy the quotation from Derrida invokes here is not analogy as it is normally understood. The relation for Levinas between thought and sound is not merely analogical, for the two are inseparable.

REFERENCES


