

Chapter 1

The Infinite and the Evil Genius: Reading Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* plays a major role in Levinas's work. The profundity of the *Meditations* lies, for Levinas, in "[t]he ambiguity of Descartes's first evidence, revealing the I and God in turn without merging them, revealing them as two distinct moments of evidence mutually founding one another" (TeI 19/TaI 48). This ambiguous "double origin" of the *cogito* and the infinite is performed in a reading that progresses from the First Meditation to the discovery of the infinite in the Third Meditation. This performance of what I would suggest is a "drama in several acts" (TeI 258/TaI 282; see also TeI 260/TaI 284) is the production of a trace of the *in-finition* of the infinite, of the infinite *as* interrupting the thought that thinks it. This performance is re-enacted throughout Levinas's work.

However, the role played by Descartes' *Meditations* in Levinas's work is not limited to the performance of the double origin of the *cogito* and the infinite. Levinas also reads the performance of an irreducible double movement into Descartes' presentation of the evil genius.

The performance of these two irreducible double movements not only interrupts a traditional reading of Descartes' *Meditations*, but also interrupts a too easy reading of Levinas's work.

Prior to 1957 there are a few scattered references by Levinas to the work of Descartes. "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," published in 1957, introduces a reading of the Cartesian analysis of the idea of infinity that will play either an explicit or an implicit role in most of Levinas's subsequent work,

most obviously in the very title of the work *Totality and Infinity*. In Descartes' *Meditations*, Levinas finds an I that thinks, which maintains a relationship with the infinite in which the alterity of the infinite is not "extinguished" by the thought that thinks it. "In thinking infinity the I from the first *thinks more than it thinks*" (PeI 172/PaI 54). This aporetic formulation is, I would suggest, elaborated in *Totality and Infinity* in terms of two contradictory movements that necessarily yet impossibly call for being thought together. It is important to note that even in its introduction in "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" Levinas's reading of Descartes' *Meditations* retains "only the *formal* design of the structure it outlines" (PeI 171/PaI 53). The two movements are an elaboration of this "formal design" of the *Meditations* that fascinates Levinas. "If, in a first movement, Descartes takes a consciousness to be indubitable of itself by itself, in a second movement—the reflection on reflection—he recognizes conditions for this certitude" (TeI 186/TaI 210). Before undertaking a close textual reading of Levinas's reading of Descartes' *Meditations* it is necessary to situate these two movements within the context of the distinction Levinas makes between comprehension and critique.

In the opening sections of *Totality and Infinity* Levinas makes a distinction between knowledge or theory understood as comprehension and the critical essence of knowing. In its comprehension of being, knowledge or theory is concerned with critique. Discovering the arbitrary dogmatism of its free exercise, knowing calls itself into question. The critical essence of knowing turns back at every moment to the origin of this arbitrary dogmatism of its free exercise (TeI 13/TaI 43). The essence of knowing does not consist in grasping an object, but in being able to call itself into question. Knowing "can have the world as its theme, make of it an object, because its exercise consists, as it were, in taking charge of the very condition that supports it and that supports even this very act of taking charge" (TeI 57/TaI 85). Knowledge or theory seems, therefore, to be characterized by an ambiguity—two distinct movements. The movement of comprehension is inverted at every moment by the movement of critique. However, these two movements are not *merely* opposed to one another. Although oriented in inverse directions, and therefore opposed, they nevertheless call for being thought at the same time. "Knowing becomes knowing of a fact only if it is *at the same time [en même temps]* critical, if it puts itself into question, goes back beyond its origin—in an unnatural movement to seek higher than one's own origin, a movement which evinces or describes a created freedom" (TeI 54/TaI 82–83, emphasis added). In this unnatural movement of critique, knowledge goes back beyond its *own* origin, that is, back beyond an origin in which it is justified by itself. "Knowledge as a critique, as a tracing back to what precedes freedom, can arise only in a being that has an origin prior to its origin—that is created" (TeI 57/TaI 85). The moment when comprehension is called into question by critique is

what Levinas calls “ethics” or “morality.” This suggests, as Robert Bernasconi has noted, “that the ambitions of epistemology are only fulfilled when it recognizes itself as morality.”² Levinas discovers this ambiguous double movement, and therefore an “ethical” structure, in Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

The critical essence of knowing leads—according to Levinas’s reading of Descartes’ *Meditations*—beyond the knowledge of the *cogito* (TeI 58/TaI 85). It penetrates beneath knowledge understood as comprehension, beneath knowledge which takes itself to be indubitable of itself by itself. “If, in a first movement, Descartes takes a consciousness to be indubitable of itself by itself, in a second movement—the reflection on reflection—he recognizes conditions for this certitude” (TeI 186/TaI 210). In a second movement—that is, the critical reflection on the reflection characteristic of comprehension—Descartes recognizes conditions for the certitude of comprehension. This certitude, Levinas provisionally states, is due to the clarity and distinctness of the *cogito*. Levinas goes on to point out that while certitude is indeed due to the clarity and distinctness of the *cogito*, certitude itself is sought because of “the presence of infinity in this finite thought, which without this presence would be ignorant of its own finitude” (TeI 186/TaI 210). That is, without this presence, consciousness would be unable to posit and conceive its own finitude, its own doubt (TeI 185/TaI 210). It would be unable to be certain of its own doubt, unable to actualize the first movement. Levinas is referring here to the following famous passage from the Third Meditation in which Descartes counters his own query that perhaps his perception of the infinite is arrived at by negating the finite.

On the contrary, I clearly understand that there is more reality in an infinite substance than in a finite one, and hence that my perception of the infinite, that is God, is in some way prior to my perception of the finite, that is myself. For how could I understand that I doubted or desired—that is, lacked something—and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were in me some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison? (MPP 45–46/MFP 31)

How could Descartes understand that he doubted, how could he have posited and conceived his doubt, his finitude, his imperfection—which, in the Second Meditation, established the certitude of the *cogito* (that is, he understood, he was certain, he had no doubt, that he doubted)—unless there were always already in him some idea of a more perfect being which enabled him to recognize his own defects by comparison? Descartes here discovers in a second movement—that is, after the fact or in the critical reflection on the reflection characteristic of comprehension—the condition of the certitude characteristic

of the first movement, the condition of what was initially taken to be “indubitable of itself by itself,” an absolute origin. Descartes discovers in the Third Meditation a pre-originary origin—the infinite.

The way in which the infinite is articulated in the finite devolves from the two distinct movements outlined earlier. Levinas establishes the proximity of this reading of Descartes’ *Meditations* with his own descriptions of death and the future, in that part of *Totality and Infinity* titled “Atheism or the Will.” The reading undertaken in this section, like the reading cited earlier, characterizes the *Meditations* in terms of two distinct movements. The first movement is called the chronological order and the second movement is called the “logical” order. These two distinct movements are likewise articulated by the distinction between comprehension and critique.

The being infinitely surpassing its own idea in us—God in the Cartesian terminology—subtends the evidence of the *cogito*, according to the third *Meditation*. But the discovery of this metaphysical relation in the *cogito* constitutes chronologically only the second move of the philosopher. That there could be a chronological order distinct from the “logical” order, that there could be several moments in the progression, that there is a progression—here is separation. For by virtue of time this being is not yet [*n’est pas encore*]—which does not make it the same as nothingness, but maintains it at a distance [*à distance*] from itself. It is not all at once [*n’est pas d’un seul coup*]. (TeI 24–25/TaI 54)

It is important to keep in mind that the passages describing the *cogito* as “not yet” and “not all at once” are written from the perspective of a reader/writer who has discovered the infinite in the Third Meditation. It is at this moment, that is, the moment of the discovery of the metaphysical relation in the *cogito*, that Levinas describes the *cogito* as “not yet” and “not all at once.” The condition of the actualization of the *cogito* is yet to come (note: from the perspective of the chronological order, the *cogito* is *already* assumed to be an *actual* entity, indubitable of itself by itself). However, this does not make the *cogito* the same as nothingness, or, the same as potency. At the moment of the discovery of the infinite, the *cogito* is maintained at a distance from itself in the interval between being and nothingness, between act and potency. It is maintained in the interval of the not yet (or, the not all at once). It is this interval—an interval that marks the production of a trace of separation or alterity—that, I would suggest, Levinas calls “dead time” (*le temps mort*). Even God is not yet. Even God is still to come. Levinas writes: “Even its [i.e., the *cogito*’s] cause, older than itself, is still to come [*est encore à venir*]. The cause of being is thought or known by its effect *as though* it were posterior to its effect” (TeI 25/TaI 54). The *cause* of being (God) is thought or known by

its *effect* (the *cogito*) as though the cause were posterior to its effect. Dead time marks the moment in comprehension when comprehension finds itself at a distance from itself. An attentive reading of Descartes' *Meditations* demands the critique (and, at the same time, the recognition) of comprehension. At this moment of the discovery of the infinite, that is, at this moment of critique (if only for a moment), what is critiqued (that is, comprehension) retains all of its value *in* the very critique.

Referring to these passages, Levinas writes: "Thus already theoretical thought [. . .] articulates separation" (TeI 25/TaI 54). "Theoretical thought" here refers to both comprehension and critique, which articulate not merely the reflection, but the production of separation. For "[s]eparation," Levinas writes, "is not *reflected* [*réflétée*] in thought, but *produced* [*produite*] by it" (TeI 25/TaI 54, emphasis added). To appreciate this passage fully it will be necessary to clarify what Levinas means by the term *production*.

Levinas introduces the ambiguous term *production* in the preface to *Totality and Infinity*. It designates both the effectuation of being and its being brought to light, that is, its appearance or revelation (TeI XIV/TaI 26). This ambiguous term is crucial for a proper understanding of the following passage, which, as will become apparent later, is likewise crucial for a proper understanding of Levinas's reading of Descartes' *Meditations*. The alterity of the other is not merely reflected within the thought of an I. Perhaps alluding to his consideration of the Cartesian *cogito*, Levinas writes: "It is in order that alterity be produced [*se produire*] *in being* that a 'thought' is needed and that an I is needed" (TeI 10/TaI 39). This suggests that the *cogito* is needed in order that alterity be produced in being. Thought, insofar as it is comprehension coupled with critique, is the very break-up of comprehension and the production (not merely the reflection) of transcendence. "We know this relation," Levinas writes, "only in the measure that we effect [*effectuons*] it; this is what is distinctive about it. Alterity is possible only starting from *me*" (TeI 10/TaI 40). We know the relation, we can reflect upon it, only in the measure that we *effect* it (that is, bring it about). But what is known or reflected upon in this effectuation, what is revealed, is *not* the unambiguous appearance of something, as is usually the case in production (which ambiguously conveys *both* effectuation *and* being brought to light or appearing). For what is produced in *this* effectuation is not something that unambiguously appears, but rather what infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) revelation and merely leaves a trace of itself in an ambiguity. Therefore, what is known or reflected upon is an irreducible ambiguity—a trace of what infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) revelation.

It is now possible to appreciate properly what Levinas means when he writes: "Separation is not *reflected* in thought, but *produced* by it" (TeI 25/TaI 54, emphasis added). Separation is produced by thought in that one *effects* a

progression through the two movements of the *Meditations*, in the measure that one *effects* a performance of a reading of the *Meditations*. But what is reflected upon in this effectuation is *not* the appearance of something, as is usually the case in production (which ambiguously conveys *both* effectuation *and* being brought to light or appearing). For what is produced in *this* effectuation is an inversion of order with respect to the chronological order and the “logical” order. What is produced in *this* effectuation is the double origin of the *cogito* and God. “The ambiguity of Descartes’s first evidence, revealing the I and God in turn without merging them, revealing them as two distinct moments of evidence mutually founding one another, characterizes the very meaning of separation. The separation of the I is thus affirmed to be non-contingent, non-provisional. The distance between me and God, radical and necessary, is produced [*se produit*] in being itself” (TeI 19/TaI 48). To borrow a phrase from another context in *Totality and Infinity*, one could write that the constituted becomes within constitution the condition of the constituting (TeI 101/TaI 128). What is produced in *this* effectuation is not something that appears unambiguously, but rather an irreducible ambiguity. What is produced in *this* effectuation is not something that appears unambiguously, but rather what infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) revelation and merely leaves a trace of itself in this ambiguity. Therefore, what is reflected upon is an irreducible ambiguity—a trace of what infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) revelation.

One must be careful here not to hypostatize the infinite. The infinite is not anything that first exists and then reveals itself. It is nothing other than the exceeding of limits. The *infinition* of infinity is its very mode of being.

The production [*production*] of the infinite entity is inseparable from the idea of infinity, for it is precisely in the disproportion between the idea of infinity and the infinity of which it is the idea that this exceeding of limits is produced [*se produit*]. The idea of infinity is the mode of being, the *infinition*, of infinity. Infinity does not first exist, and *then* reveal itself. Its *infinition* is produced [*se produit*] as revelation, as a positing of its idea in *me*. It is produced [*se produit*] in the improbable feat whereby a separated being fixed in its identity, the same, the I, nonetheless contains in itself what it can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity. (TeI XIV–XV/TaI 26–27)

The production of infinity’s mode of being, its *infinition*, is inseparable from the idea of infinity. The *infinition* of the infinite is produced in the performance of a reading that progresses through the *Meditations* to the discovery of the necessary, yet impossible, idea of infinity *in* the I. The idea of infinity names this performance. It names the irreducible ambiguity of the chronolog-

ical order and the “logical” order. Among all of Descartes’ ideas, the idea of God or the infinite is, according to the Third Meditation, exceptional. Descartes’ investigation makes use of the scholastic distinction between formal reality and objective reality. The formal reality of an object is the intrinsic reality of the object. Objective reality refers only to ideas. The objective reality of an idea is the representational content of the idea. It is the object as it is represented in an idea. With the exception of the idea of the infinite, it is conceivable that there is enough formal reality in the I, in the thinking thing, to be the cause of the objective reality contained in every idea possessed by the I. “[T]he idea of infinity is exceptional in that its *ideatum* surpasses its idea, whereas for the things the total coincidence of their ‘objective’ and ‘formal’ realities is not precluded; we could conceivably have accounted for all the ideas, other than that of Infinity, by ourselves” (TeI 19/TaI 49). The relation with infinity cannot be stated in terms of experience, because the *ideatum* of the idea of infinity surpasses its idea, because “infinity overflows the thought that thinks it.” In fact, “[i]ts very *infinition* is produced [*se produit*] precisely in this overflowing” (TeI XIII/TaI 25). What is experienced is the effect of the overflowing, the effect of the performance of the two movements that produces an irreducibly ambiguous double origin. Yet all that the infinite is is its effect. All the infinite is is the revelation after the fact of the pre-original origin (which is produced in the performance of the two movements that produces an irreducibly ambiguous double origin).

The effectuation of this double origin makes possible those descriptions of the *cogito* pointed out earlier—those descriptions which must have been written from the perspective of a reader/writer who has *already* effected a progression through the two movements of the *Meditations*. For example: the *cogito* is not yet, is not all at once, or God is still to come. Another example pointed out earlier: “The cause of being is thought or known by its effect *as though* it were posterior to its effect.” The effectuation of an inversion of order, of a double origin, makes possible the production of this logically absurd inversion of the “posteriority of the anterior” (TeI 25/TaI 54) by thought. “Thus already theoretical thought,” on the basis of the effectuation of an inversion of order, “articulates separation” (TeI 25/TaI 54). Returning to the sentence in question: “Separation is not reflected in thought, but produced by it. For in it,” Levinas writes, reiterating the logically absurd inversion of the “posteriority of the anterior,” “the *After* or the *Effect* conditions the *Before* or the *Cause*: the *Before* *appears* and is only welcomed” (TeI 25/TaI 54). It appears, however, only as the irreducible ambiguity of the chronological and “logical” orders. Therefore, what is reflected upon in this effectuation is *not* the unambiguous appearance of something, as is usually the case in production, but the ambiguous trace of what infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) revelation, of what is not yet.

The performance of the two movements of Descartes' *Meditations* is a production of a trace of the not yet of the *cogito* and the not yet of the infinite. The performance of these two movements is the production of a trace of the *cogito* as interrupted and the infinite as interrupting. It is the production of a trace of what Levinas calls "dead time."

The productionlessness characteristic of Levinas's reading of Descartes' *Meditations* is marked by dead time. Dead time marks the interval of the not yet. This interval of the not yet is a third notion between being and nothingness, between act and potency. "Its originality consists in being between two times," that is, I would suggest, between the time of the chronological order and the time of the "logical" order. "The rupture of historical and totalized duration [i.e., the chronological order], which dead time [*le temps mort*] marks, is the very rupture that creation operates in being" (TeI 29/TaI 58).³ Recall that "creation" names one aspect evinced or described by the two irreducible movements of comprehension and critique; that is, it names one aspect of a "created freedom" (TeI 54/TaI 83). Dead time marks the relation without relation (*relation sans relation* or *rapport sans rapport*) (TeI 52, 271/TaI 80, 295) of the *cogito* and the infinite. The phrase *relation without relation* articulates the fact that one term of the relation—the infinite—absolves itself from the relation, infinitely approaches (or withdraws from) the relation, or said otherwise, merely leaves a trace of itself in the production of a double origin in which it, momentarily appearing as an origin, is interminably vulnerable to being reappropriated by the *cogito*.

It is important to note that, given this reading of Descartes' *Meditations*, there is not a simple step beyond totality described in Levinas's work. It is not as though the title of the work *Totality and Infinity* is a reflection of the judgement that one is called to step beyond totality to infinity. In the preface to *Totality and Infinity* Levinas writes that the "beyond" the totality and objective experience is "reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience" (TeI XI/TaI 23). It is as though the key word in the title *Totality and Infinity* is not, as many readers of Levinas would suggest, *infinity*, but *and*. That the production of separation is not beyond the totality and history is suggested in several passages throughout *Totality and Infinity*. For example, in a passage already quoted, Levinas writes: "The distance between me and God, radical and necessary, *is produced [se produit] in being itself*" (TeI 19/TaI 48, emphasis added). The infinite leaves a trace of itself *in* the production of an irreducibly ambiguous double origin.

Levinas returns to an extended reading of Descartes' *Meditations* in "God and Philosophy." In this essay his consideration of the two movements (or here, moments) of the *Meditations* makes explicit the interruption characteristic of the moment of the discovery of the infinite. Here one again sees the

double origin of the *cogito* and the infinite: the uncludable infinite bears in a second movement of consciousness what in a first movement claimed to bear it.

The actuality of the *cogito* is [. . .] interrupted by the uncludable, not thought but undergone in the form of the idea of the Infinite, bearing in a second moment of consciousness what in a first moment claimed to bear it. After the certainty of the *cogito*, present to itself in the second Meditation, after the “halt” which the last lines of this Meditation mark, the third Meditation announces that “in some way I have in me the notion of the infinite earlier than the finite—to wit, the notion of God before that of myself.”⁴ The idea of the Infinite, *Infinity in me*, can only be a passivity of consciousness. Is it still consciousness? There is here a passivity which cannot be likened to receptivity. Receptivity is a collecting that takes place in a welcome, an assuming that takes place under the force of the blow received. The breakup of the actuality of thought in the “idea of God” is a passivity more passive still than any passivity, like the passivity of a trauma through which the idea of God would have been put into us. (DP 106/GP 160–61)

The infinite is *in me* insofar as it *interrupts* a “me” that would comprehend or include it (that is, have it *in me*). That is, in some way I have received an idea, I have it in me, before there is an I that is capable of receiving it. That the infinite is necessarily yet impossibly in the finite is reflected in the prefix *in-* of the word *infinite*. In “God and Philosophy,” Levinas writes: “[I]t is [. . .] as though—without wanting to play on words—the *in* of the Infinite were to signify both the *non* and the *within*” (DP 106/GP 160). This prefix signifies negation in the sense of “breaking-up”⁵ and inclusion in the sense of immanence (or more provocatively, incarnation). “The idea of God is God *in me*, but God already *breaking up* the consciousness which aims at ideas” (DP 105/GP 160, emphasis added). It is necessarily in the finite insofar as it is the condition of the certitude of the *cogito*. “For,” as Descartes writes, “how could I understand that I doubted or desired—that is, lacked something—and that I was not wholly perfect, unless there were *in me* some idea of a more perfect being which enabled me to recognize my own defects by comparison?” (MPP 45–46/MFP 31, emphasis added). That the necessary inclusion of the infinite in the finite is different from what is structured as a comprehension of a *cogitatum* by a *cogitatio* is due to the impossible inclusion of the infinite in the finite. The infinite is uncludable. It is impossibly in the finite insofar as it overflows the thought that would comprehend it, insofar as it is an in-comprehensible exteriority that is the uncondition of the certitude of the *cogito*. The in-comprehensible interrupts the comprehension

characteristic of the first movement. "And yet," Levinas writes, "there is an idea of God, or God is in us, as though the being-not-includable were also an exceptional relationship with me, as though the difference between the Infinite and what ought to include and comprehend it were a non-indifference of the Infinite to this impossible inclusion, a non-indifference of the Infinite to thought" (DP 105/GP 160). This non-indifference to the finite "amounts to a *cogitatio not comprehending the cogitatum* which affects it utterly. The Infinite affects thought by devastating it and at the same time calls upon it; in a 'putting it back in its place' it puts thought in place. It awakens it" (DP 109/GP 162).

Levinas's reading of the moment of the discovery of the infinite in the Third Meditation of Descartes' *Meditations* "works" its way—either explicitly or implicitly—into most of Levinas's works since its introduction in "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity." This is not true, however, of Levinas's reading of another moment in Descartes' *Meditations*. Levinas's reading of the role of the evil genius in the *Meditations* is limited (as far as I know) to *Totality and Infinity*, where it is still further limited to the first few pages of that part titled "Truth Presupposes Justice." This part follows "The Investiture of Freedom, or Critique," which is an extended reading of the discovery of the infinite in the Third Meditation. The relation without relation of the *cogito* and the evil genius, like the relation without relation of the *cogito* and the infinite, is marked by dead time.

In that part of *Totality and Infinity* titled "Truth Presupposes Justice," Levinas points out that taking the *cogito* as the "first certitude"—which is characteristic of the first movement—constitutes "an arbitrary halt which is not justified of itself" (TeI 65/TaI 92–93). After the pathway of doubt taken in the First Meditation, which seems to leave everything doubtful, Descartes concludes at the beginning of the Second Meditation that the exercise of doubt itself is beyond doubt. He may doubt, for example, the reliability of his senses, but he has no doubt that he doubts. But taking the *cogito* as the first certitude constitutes, according to Levinas, an arbitrary halt that is not justified of itself since it can likewise be cast into doubt.

Doubt with regard to objects implies the evidence of the exercise of doubt itself. To deny this exercise would be again to affirm this exercise. In the *cogito* the thinking subject which denies its evidences ends up at the evidence of this work of negation, although in fact at a different level from that at which it had denied. But it ends up at the affirmation of an evidence that is not a final or initial affirmation, for it can be cast into doubt in its turn. The truth of the second negation, then, is affirmed at a still deeper level—but, once again, one not impervious to negation. This is not purely and simply a Sisyphean labor, since the dis-

tance traversed each time is not the same; it is a movement of descent toward an ever more profound abyss which we elsewhere have called *there is* [*il y a*], beyond affirmation and negation. (TeI 65–66/TaI 93)

Here one sees Levinas take Descartes' argument to its logical extreme. Here Levinas takes Descartes down a path that Descartes started to journey, but, with no apparent justification, discontinued. Levinas outlines here, I would suggest, two movements not wholly unlike those outlined with respect to the *cogito* and the infinite. In both cases, dead time marks the moment when the *cogito* finds itself at a distance from itself. In this particular case, it is as if the certitude of the *cogito*—which is characteristic of the first movement—were not yet, as if every attempt to actualize it were interrupted in the very attempt. At this moment, if only for a moment, what is doubted retains all of its value in the very negation. Dead time, therefore, marks the alternation between doubt and refutation of doubt that is a spiraling movement of descent toward the *il y a*.

Levinas prefaces this part of *Totality and Infinity* by drawing an analogy between the spontaneous freedom of the I characteristic of the first movement and the fate of Gyges who not only sees without being seen, but also knows that he is not seen. "But does not Gyges's position involve the impunity of a being alone in the world, that is, a being for whom the world is a spectacle? And is not this the very condition for solitary, and hence uncontested and unpunished, freedom, and for certitude?" (TeI 62/TaI 90). Levinas calls this pure spectacle a "silent world," presumably because the spontaneous freedom and certitude of the I are uncontested by any revelation. Nothing exterior to the solitary I disturbs its silent interiority. But Gyges's position, that is, the first movement of Levinas's reading of Descartes' *Meditations*, is not as unequivocal as these remarks lead one to think. The spontaneous freedom and certitude of the I is always already haunted by the doubt arising from the evil genius, a disturbance that is seemingly distinct from the infinite's interruption of the *cogito* in the Third Meditation.

Levinas joins his own account of the *il y a*, the *there is*, that he had offered in *Existence and Existents* and in *Time and the Other*, with Descartes' description of the evil genius in the *Meditations*. The evil genius is introduced by Descartes to help him persevere in the suspension of his ordinary beliefs by reiterating his previous arguments in a more vivid form. The potency of the doubt arising from the evil genius arises from the possibility, not the actuality, of the evil genius, from the nagging possibility that things "which all seem to manifest themselves for good" only *seem* to manifest themselves for good. "The evil genius does not manifest himself to *state* his lie; he remains, as possible, behind things which all seem to manifest themselves for good. The possibility of their fall to the state of images or veils codetermines their appari-

tion as a pure spectacle, and betrays the recess that harbors the evil genius; whence the possibility of universal doubt, which is not a personal adventure that happened to Descartes" (TeI 63/TaI 90). I would suggest that universal doubt is not a personal adventure that happened to Descartes because of what Levinas calls the "arbitrary halt" at the first change of level in the spiraling movement of descent toward the ever more profound abyss called the *il y a*. The equivocation characteristic of the spiraling movement of descent is a deepening on Levinas's part of the doubt arising from the evil genius as it is presented in Descartes' *Meditations*. It is a deepening of that equivocation that opens "that interspace between the illusory and the serious in which a subject who doubts breathes" (TeI 64/TaI 91).

This interspace is marked by the interval of dead time, which is *between* being and nothingness. The equivocal appearance, "which is not a nothing, is not a being either—not even an interior being, for it is nowise *in itself*" (TeI 63/TaI 91). The equivocal appearance of the phenomena is neither pure nothingness nor a straightforward appearance *in itself* which, as such, would enable one to dismiss it with certitude. Appearance is terrifying precisely because of this equivocality, precisely because it *might* deceive one.

This equivocal interspace likewise has consequences for the thinking subject. This is especially evident in that spiraling movement of descent that deepens the doubt arising from the evil genius as it is presented in the *Meditations*. The I in this spiraling movement of descent, in this "work of infinite negation" (TeI 66/TaI 93), does not find in the *cogito* itself a stopping place. Like the subject interrupted by the infinite, it dwells in the equivocal interval between being and nothingness. In this equivocal interspace in which there is neither *this* nor *that*, but there is simply *there is* (*il y a*) without one being able to fix a substantive to this term, the I is itself depersonalized. In that part of *Existence and Existents* titled "Existence without Existents" Levinas writes:

The disappearance of all things and of the I leaves what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which *one* participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously. Being remains, like a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one, universal, returning in the midst of the negation which put it aside, and in all the powers to which that negation may be multiplied. (DEE 95/EE 58)

Like the subject interrupted by the infinite, the subject subjected to the spiraling movement of descent toward the *il y a* dwells in the equivocal interval between being and nothingness. This spiraling movement of descent that is the alternation between doubt and refutation of doubt outlines, I have already suggested, two movements not wholly unlike those outlined with respect to

the *cogito* and the infinite. Even though Levinas prefaces this section of *Totality and Infinity* by positing an absolutely silent world that is “the very condition for solitary, and hence uncontested and unpunished, freedom, and for certitude” (TeI 62/TaI 90), his subsequent description calls this unequivocal world characteristic of the first movement into question. This world is fraught with equivocation. It is *not* simply silent (“[i]t is as though in this silent and indecisive apparition a lie were perpetuated, as though the danger of error arose from an imposture, as though the silence were but the modality of an utterance”), it is *not* simply solitary (it “comes to us from the Other, be he an evil genius”), it is *not* simply certain (“[t]he evil genius’ lie [. . .] is in that interspace between the illusory and the serious in which a subject who doubts breathes”), and, as such, it is *not* uncontested (TeI 64/TaI 91). The first movement is interrupted by a second movement. The spontaneous freedom and certitude of the I is always already haunted by the doubt arising from the evil genius, a disturbance that is *seemingly* distinct from the infinite’s interruption of the *cogito* in the Third Meditation.

This reading of Levinas’s reading of Descartes’ *Meditations* is disruptive on several different levels. First, doubling the two irreducible movements interrupts any linear reading of the *Meditations* that would easily step from the evil genius to the certitude of the *cogito*, and then to the *cogito*’s relationship with the infinite. That is, it interrupts any reading that would leave the evil genius behind, that would treat it as merely a step on the way to the *cogito*’s relationship with the infinite. Second, doubling the two irreducible movements likewise interrupts any linear reading of Levinas’s work. One can locate such an interruption in the relationship of silence and language considered by Levinas in the context of his reading of Descartes’ *Meditations*. Levinas writes that language is “an attitude of the same with regard to the Other irreducible to the representation of the Other, irreducible to an intention of thought, irreducible to a consciousness of . . . , since relating to what no consciousness can contain, relating to the infinity of the Other. Language is not enacted within a consciousness; it comes to me from the Other and reverberates in consciousness by putting it in question” (TeI 179/TaI 204). Language, for Levinas, is itself the relation without relation of the I and the infinity of the other. But the “total frankness ever renewed [*franchise totale, toujours renouvelée*]” (TeI 71/TaI 98) characteristic of language cannot simply be *opposed* (as Levinas sometimes leads one to think) to the “ever renewed equivocation [*équivoque toujours renouvelée*]” (TeI 63/TaI 91) characteristic of the doubt arising from the silence of the evil genius/*il y a*. By the same token, this silence cannot easily be inscribed in a linear reading that would situate it as a step on the way to the frankness of language. The “ever renewed frankness” is always already accompanied (haunted?) by the “ever renewed equivocation.” In fact, the ever renewed equivocation is the “inverse of lan-

guage" (TeI 64/TaI 91), the inverse of the ever renewed frankness characteristic of language. Rather than being opposed to one another, they seem to describe inverse sides of the same relationship. This calls any simple step from the equivocation arising from the evil genius/*il y a* into the frankness of language, into the frankness of the ethical relation with the other, into question. A clear and distinct distinction between the other and the *il y a* will be called incessantly into question throughout the book.