



## Saying fraternity

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**Abstract:** In this paper I examine the meaning of fraternity in Emmanuel Levinas' philosophy by exploring its potential of resisting totality. I begin by discussing its early conceptual roots and its development as a notion that encompasses both political and ethical meanings. Then, by proposing an approach to fraternity that relates to Levinas' notions of the an-archival past and the Saying, I argue that such a reading brings forth fraternity in a more complex understanding, as a means to resist homogeneity and thematisation. This approach recovers fraternity as a core-concept and inscribes it in Levinas' larger project of overcoming totalisation.

### Introduction

The need to break totality and an all-enveloping unity (in the form of Being, thematisation, ontology, essence) is a central topic for Levinas, yet, regarding this topic, the full relevance of his notion of fraternity has not been sufficiently investigated. Fraternity in Levinas' work is commonly evoked in relation to the political order of justice in the context of society.<sup>1</sup> To highlight the political side of fraternity seems reasonable, given the history of the word (i.e. the slogan of the French revolution), and since Levinas most often invoked the term when discussing plurality. Just like the notion itself, the resistance to totality that fraternity entails is frequently placed in the context of politics. Recognised at the intersection of the ethical and the political,<sup>2</sup> the notion of fraternity appears no more than as a defence strategy against a totalising political theory. In this paper I intent to take further these considerations by approaching fraternity from a different angle: its contribution as a notion to Levinas' efforts of resisting totality. By keeping this approach as a thread to follow throughout the paper, I start by addressing the development of the notion of fraternity and argue that its conceptual roots were changed. Then, I continue by

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<sup>1</sup> We find similar reading in several works that attempt an introduction to Levinas' philosophy, such as Peperzak, 1993, see especially Ch. V or Morgan, 2011, especially ChV.4.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding fraternity as a notion at the intersection of the ethical and political see Bernasconi, 1999.

highlighting “fraternity” as a notion between the intersection of the political and the ethical (fraternity resists political totality). Building on the argument presented in the first part, section two tackles the threat of totality through homogeneity, and argues that, instead of implying a homogeneous unity, the fraternal bond is the sharing of the un-sharable an-archical past (fraternity resists totality in the form of a unifying bond), Finally, in section three I propose to consider fraternity in the context of the Saying and the Said. There, I argue that reading fraternity together with Levinas’ notion of the Saying proves to be a fruitful way to reach a more complex meaning of fraternity: fraternity carries the un-thematisable into thematisation without turning it into a theme (fraternity resists totality in the form of thematisation).

### Part I

Let us start with discussing the development and function of the notion *fraternity* in Levinas’ work. This is a necessary step to take in order to assemble a general idea about the conceptual framework in which this notion emerges and Levinas’ intentions with its use. I will confine myself to underlining the aspects most significant for the goals of the present investigation: to reveal the notion of fraternity as an expression of resistance against totality (totality considers here as an all-enveloping unity). In doing this, I propose to start our examination with *Totality and Infinity* (1961), where fraternity as a notion has been extensively discussed for the first time, despite being mentioned in Levinas’ earlier writings as well.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, we shall recall how the problem of subjectivity is approached in Levinas’ second major work, *Otherwise than Being* (1974), and show how it replaces the early, more problematic conceptual roots of fraternity: fecundity and paternity.

Indeed, in *Totality and Infinity*, fraternity is presented as closely connected with the notions of fecundity and paternity. By the time of his work from 1961, Levinas has shifted his focus from

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<sup>3</sup> Fraternity as a term appears relatively early in Levinas’ work. It is mentioned already in *Existence and Existents* (Levinas, 1947a/1978) in the context of social relations and the irreciprocal relation with the other. There, Levinas still sees Eros as a relation with the other (autre) and emphasises that the reciprocal relation reflected by fraternity is ‘an outcome and not a point of departure, and refers back to everything implicated in eros’, (Levinas, 1947a/1978: 96).

the erotic towards fecundity<sup>4</sup>, a notion which opens up the dimension of transcendence through parenthood.<sup>5</sup> Although fraternity is kept as a notion in *Otherwise than Being* and later essays (see in particular Levinas, 1975/1998; 1980/1993; 1981/1998; 1984/1996; 1985/1993), from the 1970's on, its connection with a patriarchal language seems to weaken, and concepts such as fecundity and paternity slowly started to fade away from Levinas' writings. This might be due to Levinas' recognition of the problematical masculine language used in describing them, and the dangers carried by monotheism based on the 'father-son' model.<sup>6</sup> Levinas' account of fraternity and its surrounding concepts, as presented in *Totality and Infinity*, seems to be dominated by a masculine language: it is about "the son" and not "the daughter", "the father" and not "the mother", "fraternity" and not "sorority". When also taking into consideration how the feminine is described in *Totality and Infinity* (see especially Levinas, 1961/1969: 154-6, 256-66), it is not surprising that Levinas faced some serious feminist critique.<sup>7</sup> Besides a patriarchal language, the notion of paternity implies a strong association of fraternity with monotheism.<sup>8</sup> The father-son structure as a context of fraternity received critiques for its theological monotheism where 'the

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<sup>4</sup> In his early works Levinas privileged - the erotic, considering it a relation with absolute alterity (where alterity begins). See in particular Levinas, 1947b/1987. Later on, this idea was abandoned or, at least, essentially modified. See Levinas, 1982a/1998:174.

<sup>5</sup> The following passage illustrates well how Levinas turns away from the erotic as the relation with absolute alterity and re-orientes his interest towards fecundity and paternity: 'Like need, eros is bound up with a subject identical with himself, in a logical sense. But the inevitable reference of the erotic to the future in fecundity reveals a radically different structure [...] he [the subject] will be other than himself while remaining himself, but not across a residue common to the former and the new avatar. This alteration and identification in fecundity – beyond the possible and the face – constitutes paternity', (Levinas, 1961/1969:272).

<sup>6</sup> 'What I wrote in *Totality and Infinity* about the meaning of "the son" (*TI* 287ff./*TeI* 255ff.) has also become less important. The father-son structure is released from the biological relationship and forms an interpersonal relationship, namely that of "fraternity". The fraternal bond between people is not explained, as I feel now, by the fact that we are children of the same father. The fraternity of "All people are brothers" is prior to a pure biological brotherhood. I am taking more and more distance from the terminology related to the erotic that I used before. What was formerly central, has become marginal.' (Levinas, 1980-81/2008:20).

<sup>7</sup> Far from being unanimous, the views regarding the feminine in Levinas' philosophy and the masculine language that he employs divide between those who face him with quite harsh critique (See for example Irigaray, 1991), those who find it inspiring for feminist theory (See for example Chalier, 1991), and then again, those who do not find anything substantial that a feminist theory could gain from it (See for example Sandford, 2002 or Vilarme, 1996). For more on Levinas and the feminine, or Levinas and feminism see for instance Chanter, 1988; 1991; 2001; Katz, 2003; Sandford, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Here is one of Levinas' comments on fraternity and monotheism made before he had changed his mind about the importance of the father-son relation: 'On the other hand, it [human fraternity] involves the commonness of father, as though the commonness of race would not bring together enough. Society must be fraternal community to be commensurate with the straightforwardness, the primary proximity, in which the face presents itself to my welcome. Monotheism signifies this human kinship', (Levinas, 1961/1969:214).

universality of fraternity is assured through the passage to God' (Critchley, 2004:174).<sup>9</sup> Another understanding of the same context would be in the direction of "ethical monotheism" instead of a theological one (Llewelyn, 1995). According to this latter reading, fraternity is not sharing a common genetic relation to the father; on the contrary, fraternity disrupts the idea of a common genus. However, a deep connection to the father is still acknowledged, since 'the identity of each is in part defined by a relation to a self-identical father' (Llewelyn, 1995: 137). I argue that in order to understand Levinas' notion of fraternity we should take a different standpoint and examine its conceptual roots (fecundity and paternity) in relation to Levinas' account of subjectivity from his second major work, *Otherwise than Being* (1974). By this I attempt to reveal a more developed meaning of the notion of fraternity, detached from the earlier mentioned father-son patriarchal schema.

With the notion of fecundity Levinas describes a relation to the future - a future which is mine but at the same time an escape from the self; it is my (the self's) future through the child. Through fecundity I exceed my own possibilities, since my possibilities are both mine and not mine (they are also the possibilities of the Beloved and the future of my child).<sup>10</sup> In this way, fecundity opens up infinity in discontinuity; it gives the possibility of being another, transcending oneself while remaining oneself.<sup>11</sup> Through the discontinuity that fecundity enables, paternity signifies the transcendence of the self. The parent's relation with the child is a relation with *a stranger* other, but at the same time a stranger *who is me*. It is a relation with the self where I am other.<sup>12</sup> This is the way in which fecundity and paternity are portrayed in *Totality and Infinity* and already here we can find connections with Levinas' later thoughts on subjectivity.

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<sup>9</sup> In this sense see also Caygill, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, we can find in this idea a quasi-definition of fecundity. Levinas writes: 'Both my own and non-mine, a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other, of the Beloved, my future does not enter into the logical essence of the possible. The relation with such a future, irreducible to the power over possibles, we shall call fecundity' (Levinas, 1961/1969: 267).

<sup>11</sup> 'Fecundity opens up an infinite and discontinuous time. It liberates the subject from his facticity by placing him beyond the possible which presupposes and does not surpass facticity; it lifts from the subject the last trace of fatality, by enabling him to be an other' (Levinas, 1961/1969: 301).

<sup>12</sup> 'Paternity is a relation with a stranger who while being other[...] *is me*, a relation of the I with a self which yet is not me. In this "I am" being is no longer Eleatic unity. In existing itself there is a multiplicity and a transcendence' (Levinas, 1961/1969: 277).

The formula ‘I am another’ is very similar to the way substitution<sup>13</sup> is expressed in *Otherwise than Being*, where I is an other without alienation (the other that “I” is, does not represent an alter-ego born from myself) (Levinas, 1974/1999: 118). Further similarities are revealed when we look closer to the question of creation and discontinuity. We know from *Otherwise than Being* that the self is elected by the other, and this very election makes the self oneself (me). Similarly, in *Totality and Infinity* we find the son as unique, elected by the father. This election does not invest the parent with some kind of authority or dominating position over the child. Instead, it indicates transcendence, going beyond causality: it is not the *result* of something; it escapes a line of causality which through its synthesis would end up in totality.<sup>14</sup> Instead of causality between the parent and the child, Levinas speaks about creation. The child is created, just like the self in substitution is described in terms of creature.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the child is free from his parents; there is a discontinuity, a rupture involved in filiality and a recourse at the same time<sup>16</sup> – again, one can see similarities with the recurrence of the self in substitution (see especially Levinas, 1974/1999, Ch.IV.2.).

Now, if we turn to the notion of fraternity we find that in *Totality and Infinity* it is introduced with a twofold meaning: on the one hand, it expresses the uniqueness of the elected self, and on the other hand, the equality between the ‘brothers’. Fraternity conveys the encounter of the self with the other but also with a multiplicity of others simultaneously. Given all the connections that we have noted above between how the father-son relation (both paternity and filiality) is described in *Totality and Infinity* and the self in substitution from *Otherwise than Being*, and at

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<sup>13</sup> Substitution is a key concept in Levinas’ later work and it expresses the an-archical (see footnote 30) responsiveness of the self to the other, through which, the self itself is born. According to Levinas, there is no self-sufficient subject which at one point meets the other. Instead the other is calling the self into subjectivity by electing the self and giving its uniqueness. In this way, the subject is from the start responding to this call, from the start responsible for the other, and emerges as a unique subject from this very response/responsibility. The self just by being itself is never by itself, “I is another” and this is why Levinas often refers to substitution as “one-for-the-other”. See especially Levinas, 1974/1999, Ch. IV.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Creation contradicts the freedom of the creature only when creation is confused with causality. Whereas creation as a relation of transcendence, of union and fecundity, conditions the positing of a unique being, and his ipseity qua elected’ (Levinas, 1961/1969: 279).

<sup>15</sup> ‘the self is denuded in persecution, from which an accusation is inseparable, in the absolute passivity of being a creature, of substitution’ (Levinas, 1974/1999:121)

<sup>16</sup> ‘The converse of paternity, filiality, the father-son relationship, designates a relation of rupture and a recourse at the same time’ (Levinas, 1961/1969: 278).

the same time considering the fading away of the notion “filiality” or “paternity” in the latter, it seems that in his work from 1974, Levinas brings his earlier ideas to another level: what in *Totality and Infinity* signified the birth of the child is replaced by the “birth” of the self. Just as the son is unique for his father, the uniqueness of the self is given by the other. In both cases this election opens up the non-numerical<sup>17</sup> – it is a non-numerical multiplicity (a plurality which does not permit counting) both in the father-son relation and in substitution. So it is not surprising that when in his later works Levinas takes up the topic of fraternity, he presents it in close connection to substitution.<sup>18</sup> However, he adds that ‘the unique to unique relation is higher than fraternity’ (Levinas, 1988/2001: 108), and by this he indicates a certain priority of substitution. Hence, even though fraternity is associated with substitution, they are not synonymous notions. On the one hand, fraternity rooted in substitution, as we have seen, is outside of any fusion (Levinas, 1980/1993: 93), anterior to genus,<sup>19</sup> and on the other hand, as we are about to see, it introduces justice and equality among the “brothers”. Thus, reiterating my earlier point: although in Levinas’ later work fraternity is detached from the model of the family, the notion as such manages to keep its twofold character. Similarly to the son who is unique for his father (a non-numerical relation) but at the same time he is non-unique among his siblings (equality and calculation is introduced), the self is unique for the other, but at the same time is among the others, in a society that needs justice and the equality required by justice.

These two sides of fraternity point towards the relation between the ethical<sup>20</sup> and the political in Levinas’ thought. This is arguably one of the main reasons that Levinas has kept the term in his later work, after he distanced himself from fecundity and the father-son relation. We will not engage deeply in this discussion, since others have already shown how fraternity expresses the transition from the ethical to the political (see Bernasconi, 1999), but only sketch some main

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<sup>17</sup> ‘the son is a unique son. Not by number; each son of the father is the unique son, the chosen son’ (Levinas, 1961/1969:279).

<sup>18</sup> Levinas claims that the structure of the one-for-the-other (which in *Otherwise than Being* designates substitution) is inscribed in human fraternity, or that the one-for-the-other is the very signification of fraternity (see Levinas, 1974/1999:166-7, or Levinas, 1980/1993:92-3).

<sup>19</sup> ‘The unity of the human race is in fact posterior to fraternity’ (Levinas, 1974/1999:166).

<sup>20</sup> Levinas’ understanding of ethics is stripped from any normative or prescriptive character, and instead concerns the more fundamental question about the meaning of ethics as such. Or, as Levinas says: ‘My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning’ (Levinas,1982b/1985).

points necessary in order to grasp the full meaning of a more developed form of fraternity in Levinas' work.

The difficulty regarding the relation between the ethical and the political in Levinas' philosophy is due to the two sides of responsibility<sup>21</sup>: on the one hand responsibility for the other, corresponding to a unique-to-unique relation of the ethical, and, on the other hand, responsibility for the other's other, corresponding to justice. While the ethical ensures the asymmetrical and irreciprocal character of the unique-to-unique relation, the order of justice introduces equality and reciprocity and, in Levinas' later works, represents the political<sup>22</sup>. The ethical implies an irreciprocal relation simply because it represents an *inside perspective* – it must be me, and only me who is responding, since the “I” itself emerges through this response (the self is elected as unique by the other). The self has no choice; objectivity is not involved in this relation with the other. No one can take my place and I cannot take anybody else's place. On the other hand, when it concerns the political, responsibility for others is seen from the *outside perspective* (the third person's perspective). While it is still my responsibility, it is now *not only mine*, there are also responsibilities between others (the neighbour's neighbours) who become equals, and I am one among these equals – reciprocity is introduced. The plurality of the others in the order of justice and the political is a countable plurality, and allows comparison. Consequently, the question regarding the relation between the ethical and the political is translatable into the question about the relation between these two perspectives (inside and outside) upon the same responsibility for others.

Fraternity, as we have seen, expresses both uniqueness and equality. As such, it is neither exclusively belonging to the ethical, nor to the political; instead fraternity reflects the two perspectives simultaneously. In a sense, it reflects the two-sided situation of the self among

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<sup>21</sup> It is a rather commonly accepted interpretation that Levinas' notion of responsibility has to be detached from a prescribed of moral conduct and instead emphasise its association with responsiveness (responding to the other). Responsibility describes something deeply imprinted in the self: it means the response to the other who calls the self into uniqueness, response through which subjectivity itself emerges. Since it is not a matter of individual choice, responsibility is not categorizable in terms of good or bad, or in terms of altruistic and non-altruistic attitude or behaviour towards the other. See for example Levinas, 1982b, Ch.8.

<sup>22</sup> The differentiation between the two perspectives is quite clear-cut: ‘That is the principal idea: I pass from the order of responsibility, from mercy, where even that which should not concern me concerns me, to justice, which limits that initial precedence of the other from which we started’ (Levinas, 1986b/2001:214).

others: the “I” is responsible for the others as unique singularities, and also as equals. Fraternity thus reflects the responsibility for the uncountable others (the inside perspective of the ethical), and at the same time it reveals certain sameness that is necessary to justice and for the possibility of calculus (the outside perspective). Placed at the intersection of the two perspectives, fraternity means both the unique-to-unique relation and a fraternal “bond” which makes all the others and me equals.

Thus, for Levinas, fraternity is not simply the solidarity among equals expressed in the motto of the republic, but it carries the inside perspective of the ethical relation.<sup>23</sup> This is a very important point regarding the role of fraternity in resisting political totality. By holding in itself the unique-to-unique relation, fraternity does not promote the priority of the universal over the particular. Neither resembles biological brotherhood. Levinas is reassuring us several times throughout his work that the notion of fraternity, as he understands it, is not based on biological relatedness.<sup>24</sup> Instead it breaks the totality precisely by introducing the ethical in the political, and vice versa, and by transforming the two orders of responsibility into one responsibility with two intertwined facets.

## Part II.

However, the threat of totalisation is not completely solved with the intertwinement of the ethical and political. Fraternity, being at the intersection of the two, has to express the equality required by the political. Equality implies having something in common. But would not this shared common bring us back to totality? This is the question proposed to be addressed in this section.

Underneath the above question lies a difficulty regarding fraternity as a term: although, as we have seen, Levinas distances himself from the father-son schema and slowly displaces the notion of fraternity from the model of the family, he keeps the term ‘fraternity’ as such, and thus the

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Should not the fraternity that is in the motto of the republic be discerned in the prior non-indifference of the one for the other, in that original goodness in which freedom is embedded, and in which the justice and the rights of man takes on an immutable significance and stability, better than those guaranteed by the state?’ (Levinas, 1985/1993:125).

<sup>24</sup> See for instance Levinas, 1986a/2001:61, or even in *Totality and Infinity*: ‘The biological origin of this concept [fecundity] nowise neutralizes the paradox of its meaning, and delineates a structure that goes beyond the biologically empirical’ (Levinas, 1961/1969:277).

fraternal bond that it suggests. This calls for a critique similar with the one put forth by Derrida (Derrida, 1980/1991, Derrida, 1994/2005). Besides commenting on the patriarchal resonance of fraternity,<sup>25</sup> Derrida recognizes the homogeneity that the term could imply.<sup>26</sup> Fraternity as a notion might be detached from its strict biological meaning, but the term as such continues to imply a bond which unites the “brothers” based on their homogeneity – in this sense, the term ‘fraternity’ continues to rely on similarities.<sup>27</sup> Now, if the notion of fraternity through the equality required by the political leads to homogeneity that would create some serious difficulties: according to Levinas’ own logic, homogeneity would lead to annulling alterity since the alterity of the other would be assimilated in the unity given by homogeneity. The unity would form a totality encompassing the other – a totalising unity. This is exactly the danger of totalisation that Levinas describes in *Totality and Infinity*: no matter if it is the result of a relation with the other based on similarities, or a negative description where the other and the self form a dialectical couple, or even a definition forced upon the other that would make him/her knowable (thus, assimilated through comprehension), in all these cases the self would in fact remain in a relation with itself in the Same.<sup>28</sup>

The incompatibility between totalising homogeneity and the relation with the other which does not permit totalisation reframes our earlier question (whether fraternity leads to totalisation): *How can fraternity refer to any kind of shared common without leading to homogeneity and contradicting Levinas’ project of going against a totalising unity?* A possible solution to this problem would be if the fraternal bond itself corresponded to the very refusal of a totalising

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Brothers have named themselves brothers in so far as they issue from one and the same mother: uterine brothers. But what will one say of brothers (‘distantly related’ or ‘consanguine’) who are thus called because they issue from the same father? And what about the sister? Where has she gone?’ (Derrida, 1994/2005:96). ‘Is it that “son” is another word for “child”, a child who could be of one or the other sex? If so, whence comes that equivalence, and what does it mean? And why couldn’t the “daughter” play an analogous role? Why should the son be more or better than the daughter, than me, the Work beyond “my work”? If there were no differences from this point of view, why should “son” better represent, in advance, this indifference? This unmarked indifference?’ (Derrida, 1980/1991:39-40).

<sup>26</sup> Although Derrida does not explicitly refer here to Levinas, his critique calls for cautiousness regarding the use of the term fraternity, and in this sense, it needs to be considered also regarding Levinas’ use of the term.

<sup>27</sup> Derrida uses the name “fraternisation” to designate politics rooted in similarities (Derrida, 1994/2005:viii, Derrida, 1994/2005: 93).

<sup>28</sup> In this sense see especially Levinas, 1961/1969, Section I.

unity. On grounds of the earlier examined change in the conceptual roots of the Levinasian notion of fraternity, I argue that this is exactly the case.

As previously discussed, in Levinas' later works the notion of fraternity is detached from its connection with fecundity and paternity and instead it is brought closer to substitution and the election of the self. At the same time, in *Otherwise than Being* Levinas is 'placing' substitution in an an-archival past.<sup>29</sup> This means that the election of the self by the other (which has replaced the earlier notion of paternity) does not happen at a certain moment in time. The self in responsibility has no recallable moment of origin; its origin is in a past that can never be recovered. It is this context where Levinas asks what is the concrete case in which the an-archival past is "produced" without reducing it to immanence, how is this past "signalled" in the present? (Levinas, 1974/1999:10). Just a few lines below, we find Levinas' answer *in the notion of fraternity*:

"the relationship with a past that is on the hither side of every present and every re-presentable, for not belonging to the order of presence, is included in the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or the misfortune of others [...] in the astonishing human fraternity in which fraternity, conceived with Cain's sober coldness, would not by itself explain the responsibility between separated beings it calls for" (Levinas, 1974/1999: 10).

This is an extremely interesting moment regarding the problematic of the fraternal bond, for it shows that fraternity is both "everyday" and "extraordinary". Reading Levinas' notion of fraternity through his thoughts about the an-archival past, fraternity appears both as a continuous feature of human relations, and the reiteration of an extraordinary an-archival past: the very election of the self by the other. The fraternal link between the members of the society, and the reason for them being equal, would then be exactly the an-archival past of substitution, that

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<sup>29</sup> The an-archival past was never present and cannot be kept in consciousness or recalled by memory. Nor can it designate a beginning, an origin, since the origin would be a first past, thus it would be the first memory which has been once present to consciousness and anytime it can be re-presented through recollection – hence the name "an-archic", without origin (not to be confused with disorder). Levinas discusses the term in several writings. A helpful insight regarding this term we find for example in Levinas, 1974/1999, Ch IV.1.

makes the self *me* (through the election); or rather the “inscription” of the an-archival past.<sup>30</sup> Then, the bond in fraternity is the responsibility belonging to an an-archival past, and not a concrete common element; it is the an-archival response that elects the self and gives its uniqueness. Those in fraternal relation are neither defined by similarities (such as shared genealogy), nor by dialectical opposition, nor do they form an alliance through sharing an outside element (for example sharing the same space, belief etc.). The separateness (‘responsibility between separated beings’) from the above quotation means that fraternity is able to keep the unique-to-unique relation.

The an-archival past imprinted in fraternity points towards the interpretation that precisely the refusal of heterogeneity and of totalising unity is that which is shared (shared, not in the form of an abstract idea but as an-archival responsiveness\responsibility for the other). Although we are calling it “sharing”, this word does not fit anymore in the context of fraternity. It would only fit if we consider it in the paradoxical sense of sharing the un-sharable. Fraternity is extraordinary and also an everyday event; it shares the un-sharable. Instead of expressing a homogeneous unity, it precisely breaks up totality by introducing the unique to unique relation in everydayness.

### Part III

The previous sections have shown that fraternity read together with Levinas’ notion of the an-archival past expresses resistance to totality and manages to keep uniqueness. Now, let us see how the escape from totalisation transpires in a different way, which adds to the complexity of the notion of fraternity. In the following I argue that considering fraternity in relation to another Levinasian notion, the Saying, reveals its resistance to the totality brought by thematisation.

First let us clarify what thematisation means for Levinas, and why it calls for resistance. Levinas is not against thematisation as such, nor against the objectivity conveyed by language. What he is arguing against is to consider denominative language as the *only* meaning-giving system. Through denomination the other would be included in a theme; alterity would be designated as

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<sup>30</sup> The an-archival responsibility for the other is “inscribed” in fraternity, Levinas says (Levinas, 1974/1999:166).

something – and this goes against the very concept of alterity.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the thematisation which calls for resistance is in fact the disclosure in a theme. It implies presenting and the unifying synthesis that presenting requires. To be included in a theme means to be known, to be assimilated by consciousness.<sup>32</sup> Thematising alterity in this way inevitably leads to its annulation, since the very point of alterity is otherness and the impossibility of assimilating it through knowing. Including the other in a theme, in a system of meaning which not only shows its elements but also invests them with specific definitions (names), leaves no place for alterity that cannot be shown or named. In this way, thematisation becomes a threat of totalising through language. Language needs the ethical and the unique-to-unique relation that the ethical implies, since otherwise it would absorb the otherness of the other by placing it within a theme.

In order to show how the notion of fraternity is involved in escaping a thematising language, we need to introduce here two concepts employed by Levinas: the “Saying” and the “Said”.<sup>33</sup> When we consider language as a meaning-giving system, Levinas explains, the Saying becomes a mere theme in the Said. The Said is thematising a recovered time by showing what once the Saying was. Now, as we have seen above, this way of thematisation is totalising and it assimilates the other. For alterity to be kept, thematisation needs to be interrupted, and through this interruption prevented from becoming a totality. The Saying needs to escape the assimilation in the Said. In his attempt of solving this problem, Levinas re-defines the Saying and its relation with the Said. The Saying, according to this re-definition, is not a correlative of the Said, but exposing that which cannot be said. This exposure however is radically different from thematisation. Instead of showing something in the form of “this *as* that” characteristic to the denominative language of thematisation, the Saying exposes the very exposure of the self towards the other (i.e. the anarchical responsibility which gives the self uniqueness). In this sense, Saying means responding to the other.<sup>34</sup> Instead of denomination, the exposure of the Saying opens up towards alterity and

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<sup>31</sup> Or, in Levinas’ words: ‘This identification is a supplying with meaning: “this as that”. In their meaning entities show themselves to be identical unities. [...] The “identical unities” are not given or thematised first, and then receive a meaning; they are given through this meaning. The “this as that” is not lived; it is said’ (Levinas, 1974/1999: 35).

<sup>32</sup> ‘Consciousness is always correlative with a theme, a present represented, a theme put before me’ (Levinas, 1974/1999: 25).

<sup>33</sup> For more on this topic see Levinas, 1974/1999, Ch.I and II.

<sup>34</sup> ‘The responsibility for the another is precisely a saying prior to anything said’ (Levinas, 1974/1999:43).

refers back to an irrecuperable past (the an-archival past). Through re-defining the Saying, Levinas manages to save alterity from thematisation, and to place meaning outside a meaning-giving system.<sup>35</sup>

However, Levinas' discussion does not end with this solution to escape thematisation. He recognises that although the Saying cannot be turned into the Said, it needs to be revealed somehow in the space of contiguity. Contiguity, Levinas says, 'already presupposes both thematising thought and a locus and the cutting up of the contiguity of space into discrete terms and the whole –out of justice' (Levinas, 1974/1999:157). We are led here towards the self in quotidianity and its everyday relation with a multiplicity of others where that equality and the measuring required by the political would not be possible without thematisation; 'Justice requires contemporaneousness of representation' (Levinas, 1974/1999:159), Levinas adds, and contemporaneousness means synthesis, the inclusion into a theme. Thematisation is necessary for justice and the political sphere.

We needed to follow Levinas in his re-thinking of the relation between the Saying and the Said since, as we can see, the problem of thematisation takes a turn towards the equality required by the political, and with it the notion of fraternity as the intertwinement between the ethical and the political. Here, it is important to recall the argument from the previous section: the equality of the political is possible because the an-archival past is inscribed in fraternity (this is the "fraternal bond" without homogeneity). Nevertheless, fraternity cannot bring the an-archival to present. We should keep in mind that the an-archival is 'inscribed' but not presented in fraternity. By resisting homogeneity, fraternity also resists presenting and thus thematising the an-archival past in the present. Fraternity, through the unique-to-unique relation that it reflects, carries the signification of the Saying into the Said without losing the otherness of the other.

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<sup>35</sup> The unthematisable saying, the an-archival responsibility, the subject of substitution do they not constitute a theme when we discuss them? Is the whole investigation of these problems betraying itself by inscribing itself into the very thing that it is against? Levinas is well aware of this problem, and he points it out several times (see for example Levinas, 1974/1999:155). Thematising the unthematisable becomes a problem only if one continues to think in the logic of thematisation, by applying the rules of coherence which are valid if considered only in a thematising language (Levinas, 1974/1999:155-6). What Levinas is trying to underline is precisely the necessity to interrupt thematisation and to resist its totalising logic (see also Derrida, 1980/1991). A critique from the perspective of thematisation would miss the whole point of his project.

Although it is not so typical for Levinas to evoke fraternity in the specific context of the Saying and the Said<sup>36</sup>, it seems clear that bringing together fraternity and the Saying is a fruitful approach. It manages to disclose the complexity of a notion which by far exceeds a solely political interpretation. Fraternity makes possible the interruption of the meaning-giving system of denomination and it resists the tendency for totalisation. It is where the Said and the Saying, thematisable and the unthematizable, meet. The Saying is said in fraternity without becoming the Said. This complex meaning of the notion of fraternity is revealed only when considering it together with the Saying: Saying fraternity.

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<sup>36</sup> However, we can find some clues that support this interpretation. One of them is when he makes an explicit reference to the examination of fraternity from *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas, 1974/1999:158), or at another occasion he suggests that fraternity is where "the saying in its primordial enigma said" (Levinas, 1974/1999:10), thus showing that indeed his thinking permits such a connection and the interpretation of fraternity in this direction.

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