

Meanders of Vilém Flusser's Ethics of Alterity¹

Wanderley Dias da Silva

Abstract: *The name of Vilém Flusser is not usually associated with the philosophy of ethics, as the name of Emmanuel Levinas – not to drift too far beyond this generation – often is. But Flusser is a fully-fledged ethical thinker and, thus, should be inscribed in this tradition. The goal of this article is to stretch the supporting cable of the bridge for this integration, by outlining the intricacies of a typically Flusserian ethics of alterity; specifically, it considers the central place the ideas of transcension and affective responsibility play in the thought of the philosopher. In the process, it will be revealed that all of this leads Flusser curiously back to Hegel; this return to Hegel indicates, among other things, that any attempt to philosophize about the experience of otherness seems always to give the Swabian philosopher the last word.*

Resumo: *O nome de Vilém Flusser não surge usualmente associado à filosofia da ética, como acontece, por exemplo, com o nome de Emmanuel Levinas – para não irmos muito além desta geração. Mas Flusser é um pensador ético de pleno direito e deve ser inscrito nessa tradição. O objetivo aqui é estirar os primeiros cabos da ponte para uma integração, delineando, assim, os meandros de uma ética da alteridade tipicamente flusseriana; especificamente, o artigo considera o lugar central que as ideias de transcensão e responsabilidade afetiva ocupam no pensamento do filósofo. No processo, também será revelado como tudo isso parece levar Flusser curiosamente de volta a Hegel; esse retorno a Hegel indica, entre outras coisas, que qualquer tentativa de filosofar sobre a experiência da alteridade parece sempre dar ao filósofo suábico a última palavra.*

¹ This project has been financed by the Foundation for the Science and Technology (FCT), Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education, the Portuguese Republic.

Initial Considerations

The name of Vilém Flusser is not usually associated with the philosophy of ethics, in the same way the name of Emmanuel Levinas – not to drift too far beyond this generation² – often is. Of course, the reader should not take this opening statement for granted. Thus, here are some data. Since it first appeared to the public, in November 2005, *Flusser Studies*, one of the few – if not the only – international journals for academic research dedicated exclusively to the writings of Vilém Flusser, has published 33 issues, amounting to an impressive total of 320 articles discussing Flusser's complex ideas. Through a quick (yet careful) analysis of all of the 320 article-abstracts published, as well as the 1574 keywords related to them, we come across the crucial terms *moral*, *ethics*, or *morality* only 9 times.³ In comparison, the term 'media-theory' appears 210 times; 'language' appears 129 times; 'technical-image' is referenced 284 times; 'technology' appears 75 times; 'photography' pops up 250 times; and 'translation' shows up 131 times – just to give a few examples. Evidently, all these numbers will not surprise Flusser's usual reader or scholar; after all, the Czech-Brazilian philosopher has become renowned

² Although Levinas (1906-1995) was fourteen years older than Flusser (1920-1991), both are, in my view, part of the same generation of European philosophers of ethics of Jewish descent and marked by Nazi violence. We should also remember, in this context, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975).

³ What is more, seven of the nine times the words 'moral' or 'ethics' appear is in a single article from 2011, written by the same author of the present manuscript, which illustrates what I mean by 'Flusser's name is not usually associated with the philosophy of ethics'. That said, the primary purpose of this paper is exactly this: to outline a very particular moral theory, which I think permeates all of Flusser's writings.

internationally for his rich and vital contributions to the media-theory studies, for his philosophy of photography and technical-images, and for his translation and language theory.

However, I believe Flusser is a fully-fledged ethical thinker and, as such, should be inscribed in this tradition. With this goal in mind, I must first emphasize: this is a propaedeutic study. I.e., I seek, as the title of the article indicates, to outline the meanderings of Flusser's ethics of alterity. In short, and at the risk of anticipating my conclusion, my main point is this: despite Flusser's own claim that *The History of the Devil* was his attempt to develop an ethical theory⁴ (something that has never been obvious to most readers of and commentators on that book), Flusser is, in fact, primarily an ethical thinker; and all his ideas – media-theory, the philosophy of photography, translation, and so on – are permeated by this primacy. To put it differently: Flusser's ethics is in the marked sinuosity – the meanderings – of all his philosophical ideas.

To fulfil this objective, I first demonstrate – in a triangular conversation between Vilém Flusser, Benedito Nunes and Clarice Lispector – that the idea of transcension is the innovation with which Flusser sought to overcome the way of thinking of modern existentialism, especially the thought that culminates in the notion of Nothingness, as revealed by the experiences of *disgust of the world* and of *existential angst* as (supposedly)

⁴ This is a point well-known to most dedicated readers of Flusser. Cf. *Carta a Leminski de 20/9/1964*. I have raised this point in different contexts in other papers. Here I do not dwell in *The History of the Devil*, because that is not important to the purposes of this paper, as elaborated above.

addressed by Sartre and Heidegger, respectively. By considering these issues, I outline the intricacies of a typically Flusserian ethics of alterity; specifically, I consider the role the ideas of transcension and affective responsibility play in the thought of the philosopher. In the process, I show how this idea of transcension seems to take Flusser curiously back to Hegel. This return to Hegel indicates, among other things, that any attempt to philosophize about the experience of otherness always seems to give the Swabian philosopher the last word.⁵

⁵ The use of Hegel by queer theorists in this light also supports this argument. I thank one of my reviewers for kindly pointing this out. That said, I cannot pursue this particular angle here in detail. My primary task within the text is to show that Hegel seems to be the first (modern?) philosopher to bring the paradox of self-identity involved in the interrelationship of the 'I' and the 'other' to the centre of philosophical moral discussions – a philosophical task, or an aspect of Hegelian thought, which is often unrecognized. However, we should recall some of Judith Butler's contributions here: *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005); *Senses of the Subject* (2015); and *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020), for instance.

As Butler correctly points out: “although Hegel is sometimes faulted for understanding recognition as a dyadic structure”, implying that the ‘I’ is to be found always “outside itself, and that nothing can put an end to the repeated upsurge of this exteriority that is, paradoxically, my own”, this is, indeed, a partial (if not poor) reading of Hegel's account of recognition in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Hegel's first account of recognition, as portrayed in the ‘Lordship and Bondage’ fable (as it is typical of Hegel's first dialectical move), merely “reveals the inadequacy of the dyad as a frame of reference” for understanding self-identity, otherness, and the intricacies of social life. After all, “what eventually follows from this scene [the first battle for recognition between ‘master’ and ‘servant’] is a system of customs (*Sittlichkeit*), and hence a [fundamental] social account of the norms by which reciprocal recognition might be sustained in ways that are more stable than either the life and death struggle or the system of bondage would imply” (Cf. 2005, p. 27f). It is, after all, within this ‘more stable’ (social) framework of social norms and reciprocity that the “I must somehow [eventually] see that the other is like” itself, “and see that the other is making the same recognition of our likeness” (2005, p. 41). In other words, it is through a proper reading of Hegel's notion of recognition that Butler seems to find support for her idea that “the self who comes outside of itself” [in its interrelation with the other]... is a self “for whom no return to self is possible”, for it is a self “for whom there is no final recovery from self-loss”, except in reciprocity and ethical responsibility within the *Sittlichkeit*. In short, it is in Hegel that Butler finds (some) philosophical ground for her idea that the self-returning self is never a unity, but a threshold – i.e., upon its encounters with otherness, the self-returning self understands that “the openness to alterity... is definitional of the body [and, hence, of identity] itself” (2020, p. 21). This is a ‘proper’ understanding of Hegel's notion of alterity.

Flusser, Nunes and Lispector: A Triangular Conversation

What I have called 'nothingness' was so close to me that it was, in fact, my-self

Clarice Lispector

In "Benedito Nunes: 'O mundo de Clarice Lispector'" – Flusser's review of Nunes'

O mundo de Clarice Lispector – we encounter hints of why Flusser sometimes used to mention this philosopher as an example of an authentic thinker in Brazilian philosophy. Here we ought to summarize the specific points of Nunes' book that impressed Flusser; remembering that, in the book in question (first published in 1966), Nunes reads four of Lispector's works in the light of existentialism. Specifically, Nunes examines Lispector's writings through the lenses of the ideas of 'nausea' and 'existential angst' as (supposedly) discussed by Sartre and Heidegger, respectively. It is necessary to rehearse these concepts.

'Nausea' is the name Sartre gives to the existential anguish of discovering that "Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance" (Sartre, 2013, p. 172). Nausea is the *taste* of discovering the facticity and contingency of existence – it is 'being tasting itself' as immediate existence. Thus, in *Being and Nothingness* he will remark: "A dull and inescapable nausea perpetually reveals my body to my consciousness" (1992, p. 631). By 'taste', Sartre means that nausea is not a mere theoretical understanding of human contingency and facticity; it is a straight gut-punch; it is the basis of all concrete, empirical nausea (such as the nausea caused, for

example, by the smell of spoiled meat, excrement, etc.). Nunes, in turn, translates – correctly, but partially – Sartre’s conception of nausea as follows: nausea is the physical expression of anguish, understood as “the freedom of conscience, which contaminates being as such” (1966, p. 93).

As for Heidegger, Nunes observes that language, as the ‘house of Being’, represents an instance of refuge from the human condition. As I experience the meaning of the world through language, in the face of existential anguish and nausea – the abyss of nothingness – there arises, consequently, the failure of language: I am faced with the ‘Ineffable’ (the ‘Unutterable’). Thus, I become uprooted before the absolute silence of nothingness.

In Nunes’ words: under the burden of anguish, in Lispector’s work, and due to the alienation of self-consciousness, “[...] to a paroxysmal degree, which leads to a paradox in language, the introspective life is inverted” (1996, p. 298). Or, in Lispector’s terms: “What I called ‘nothingness’ was, however, so close to myself that it was *my self*. And therefore, it becomes invisible as I am invisible to myself, and it becomes nothingness” (apud Nunes, p. 298, italics mine). Nunes, of course, continues his existentialist analysis of Clarice Lispector’s works; but we must now return to Flusser’s review.

Flusser begins describing details of the content and structure of Nunes’ book as follows:

This is an analysis of four works by Clarice Lispector: 'Perto do Coração Selvagem', 'Laços de Família', 'A maçã no escuro', and 'A paixão segundo G.H.'. And the five chapters that structure Nunes' book also give a clear idea of this approach. The names of the chapters are: 'Nausea', 'G.H's Mystical Experience', 'The Structure of the Characters', 'The Absurd Existence' and 'Language in Silence'" (Flusser, 1966a, p. 1).

For Flusser, the very titles of the chapters clearly indicated the blatantly existentialist reading that Nunes makes of Lispector's writings. But the central thesis of Nunes' reading was also explicit. According to Lispector, as Nunes understood her:

The existential analysis of angst and nausea undertaken by Heidegger and Sartre lacks an urgently needed radicalism. For such analysts [Heidegger and Sartre], nausea is "the farcical way of repelling the fascination of the Absurd that makes the world unbearable and repellent." In Clarice Lispector's more radical interpretation however, nausea is the "beginning of a mystical experience script (extremely heterodox, of course), which culminates in the ecstasy of the Absolute identical to Nothingness, and ends, reticently, by the abandonment of language and understanding, which is a way of consecrating and divinizing silence" (1996a, p. 1).

From this summary of Benedito Nunes' thesis, Flusser understands that in Lispector we find "a voice that penetrates through the existential and phenomenological analysis of certain disgusting situations towards the realm of the ineffable"; and concludes that Nunes' reading of Lispector "is a proof of the maturity and universality of Brazilian philosophy" (1996a, p. 1). He concludes that Nunes' book deserved "not

only a wide readership in Brazil, but should also be translated into other languages” (1996a, p. 2).

Curiously, Flusser is not (particularly) interested in the reliability of Nunes’ existential analysis of Lispector’s writings. Thus, Flusser says: “The author demonstrates his thesis extensively, using passages from the four works cited. Nunes is convincing.” What really matters, Flusser insists, is that he (Nunes) articulated such a thesis – that, for Lispector, ‘nausea’ is also the beginning of a mystical experience, which culminates in the ecstasy of the Absolute identical to Nothingness, ending unforthcomingly in the abandonment of language and understanding. For Lispector, Nausea is also an opening to the clearing of transcension. For Flusser, “it is [Nunes's] thesis itself that shocks and excites” the most (1996a, p. 1).

Before we try to understand why Flusser thinks in this way, it is interesting to note in this context one of Lispector’s own observations about the ‘existentialist readings’ Nunes was making of her writings, as Nunes himself tells us: “In one of my meetings with Clarice Lispector, in Belém [Pará], after I had published *O Drama da Linguagem* – a book about Lispector’s *ouvré* – before the usual greetings, she said: ‘You are not a critic, but something else totally different, which I cannot yet name’” (2005, p. 289). Had Lispector, much like Flusser, discovered the original philosopher from Pará?

We can say the same regarding Flusser’s review: that it is something else... however we know exactly what it was – it was more of an opening to a philosophical

conversation Flusser would not throw away. For, if Benedito Nunes brings Lispector closer to Sartre and Heidegger, Flusser, recognizing the Wittgensteinian lesson that there is always something 'unutterable' in language, takes advantage of his review of Nunes' book to also bring Lispector closer to Wittgenstein (something Nunes would eventually do, some ten years later, with the publication of *O Dorso do Tigre* (1976).

In this regard, Flusser mentions the apparent abyss that seems to separate Sartre and Wittgenstein – existentialism and analytic philosophy –, and emphasizes that Nunes' reading of Lispector's work shocks precisely because it shows that this abyss is only apparent; that is, this abyss of difference does not inhibit a more radical analysis of language and reality. In other words, for Flusser, Nunes' thesis "erects a bridge between existentialist thinking and formalistic thinking, by demonstrating that both ways of thinking meet and merge once sufficiently prolonged" (Flusser, 1966a, p. 1). Of course, in this context, Flusser positions Sartre as an existentialist, and Wittgenstein as what he calls a 'formalistic thinker'. And he further explains: apparently there is an abyss that separates the two silent extremes posed by these two philosophies – the existential silence posited by the analysis of experience of disgust (Sartre) and the silence of Wittgenstein's linguistic analysis. Recall Wittgenstein's closing statement in the *Tractatus*: Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. Or, as dramatized by Wittgenstein's colleague, Frank Ramsey: "What we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either" (2001, p. 238).

However, in Flusser's reading, Lispector's approach radicalizes the 'double negation' (popularized both by existentialist thinking and formalistic thinking, as Flusser understands it). How? First, by embracing both 'silences': the silence posited by the existentialist analysis and the silence declared by the logical-linguistic analysis, i.e., the silence of the nausea, of the absurd, and, consequently, the silence of philosophy confronted by the presence of the Unutterable. In Lispector's own words, this is how the overcoming of this double negation takes place:

I have it as I designate it – and this is the splendour of having a language. But I have so much more as I cannot specify. Reality is the raw material; language is the way I look for it – and once I do not find it [...] Language is my human effort. By fate I still must search, and by fate I come back empty-handed. But I return with the Ineffable. The Ineffable can only be given to me through the failures of language. It is only when the construction fails that I obtain what it did not achieve (1997 apud Nunes, 2004, p. 96).

Flusser emphasizes this double negation highlighted in Lispector: "the defeat of experience by nausea and [the defeat] of thought by analysis." He also emphasizes that for Lispector (according to Nunes' reading), once they meet, "these two negative methods become positive" ... or, more clearly: for Lispector – as well as for Flusser – the double defeat of the intellect in the face of Nothingness and Silence, the double negation, is (always), invariably, also an "opening to the mystery of the Ineffable" and a way to transcension (1966a, p. 1).

I.e., in Flusser's reading of Nunes' analysis of Lispector, the writer seems to have managed to understand what (modern) existentialist thinkers – Sartre and Heidegger, specifically – and Wittgenstein together failed to understand: that all existential anguish and all silence of language and thinking, which arises with the absurdity of Nothingness and the failure of language “can be *Ueberholt*, [i.e.], surpassed and transcended.” As we come eventually to understand, this is one of the most fundamental theses of *Language and Reality* (2012, p. 73), Flusser's first book – written in Portuguese and originally published in 1963.

The merit of Nunes' thesis was, after all, to identify in Lispector one of Flusser's own theses in his first book, and thus continue the philosophical conversation. For Flusser, – and, according to Nunes' reading as Flusser understood him, also for Lispector – the chaos of the double negation of the unutterable, of existential nausea, angst, and the failure of language, can always be overcome, transcended, because, ultimately, the intellect is (always, essentially) the possibility of language, and the Ineffable is the very guarantee of the continuity of such possibility: the intellect consists [in] words, understands words, modifies words, rearranges words, and “transports them to the spirit, which, possibly, transcends them. The intellect is a product and producer of language” (Flusser, 2012, p. 57) – and the Ineffable, the Unutterable, is the unattainability

of the in-between words. And, against Heidegger (perhaps⁶), Flusser says that language is not a mere refuge of the human condition, or a mere 'house of Being'; it is the very condition of Being and, therefore, the condition of Da-sein and of reality. Flusser agrees with Lispector: "I have it as I designate – and this is the splendour of having a language. But I have much more as I cannot designate it" (apud Nunes, 2004, p. 96).

Language is, therefore, for both Lispector and Flusser, paradoxically the perfect conception of Being, the antithetical combination, the finite-infinite, the mutable-immutable realizing itself. As Flusser reminds us, the symphony of human civilization – which, of course, includes philosophy – has never silenced itself in the face of the abysses; and "One of the fundamental urges of the human spirit in its attempt to understand, govern and modify the world" – the abyss itself – is to "discover a cosmic order". Thus, in the face of the chaos of the double negation, the chaotic nature of the double Nothingness posed by both 'silences', "The [human] spirit, in its 'will to power', refuses to accept it", because "A chaotic world, though conceivable, is, nevertheless, intolerable." That is, in its will to power, Spirit "Searches in the background of the chaotic appearances, [an ordered] structure through which the appearances, though 'chaotically complicated', can still be explained" This positive attempt is, after all, "in line with the

⁶ As Flusser puts it, in *Língua e Realidade*, it is not language itself (as Heidegger seems to maintain) that is a refuge of the human condition, but, rather, one's love and attachment for his or her mother tongue. In Flusser's terms: "The Self does not simply think in the mother tongue, it also loves it. And it is this love that reveals itself as the last refuge before the relativity of reality. It also explains, in part, the irrational power that nationalism exercises over our minds" (Cf. *Língua e Realidade*, 2012, p. 73f).

heritable that was bequeathed to us by the Greeks. It is through this inheritance that philosophy, religion, science, and art become “methods by which the spirit tries” to transform chaos into cosmic order (Flusser, 2012, p. 37-38).

Still, Flusser insists, “Despite its antiquity, and despite its vastness, these [positive] efforts are subject to serious objections, and these objections accompany, as a secondary theme, the symphony of human civilization” (2012, p. 39). Given the didactic clarity of Flusser’s writing, here is the passage in full:

[The objections] are of different orders, but we can roughly distinguish three types of objections: those that deny the spirit’s ability to penetrate appearances (skepticism), those that deny “reality” (nihilism), and those that affirm the impossibility of articulating and communicating the penetration (mysticism). The first type can be called “epistemological objections”, the second “ontological objections”, and the third “religious objections”. Although coming from different directions, each of these types of objections undermines the edifice of civilization and threatens to plunge it into chaos. Chaos, being an unbearable state, renders the objections practically unacceptable. That is, epistemological skepticism, ontological nihilism, and religious mysticism are all impractical teachings. They are practically refuted by the continuation of life, that is, by the experience we have of knowledge, reality, and the communicable revelation of truth as we exist. The objections are [therefore] positions that [only] can be assumed precariously, for fleeting moments, by isolated spirits (2012, p. 39).

Like Lispector, Flusser is not surprised by chaos, by the abysses of thought and reality, by the unutterable, disgust, anguish, Nothingness. Spirit cannot escape these various disgusting situations as it exists. There is, however, “the possibility of facing them, of acclimatizing, of living in them” (2012, p. 40). And for Flusser “What transforms

chaos into cosmos is the possibility of conversation, it is the rebounding of language” (2012, p. 58). And this is how Flusser rejects the objections in the forms of epistemological skepticism, ontological nihilism, and religious mysticism: talking, philosophizing, existing. In this regard, perhaps no one has summarized this fundamental lesson of *Language and Reality* better than Flusser’s former student, the poet Paulo Leminski, who ends one of his letters to Flusser, in which he confesses to having read the book twice, with the following alliterative:

*Conversamos / conversemos / conversumos / conversomos.*⁷

A literal translation of the alliterative into English is almost impossible, thus I leave it as it is. The crux of the matter, however, is simply this: to Flusser, as Leminski aptly understood him, we become ourselves through conversing with others. In fact: ‘conversation’ is the sacred ground of the Flusserian Dasein, as he says elsewhere:

Conversation is a field in which I meet others, in the climate of reality. Conversation is the foundation of my being-here in reality. I am really myself because I concur with others, conversing – we *are* conversing. The foundation of my reality is an accord [in conversation] with others (1966b, p. 172, italics mine).

Why, for Flusser, is conversation so crucial? In short: in Flusser’s eyes, all of reality appears always, exclusively, in the form of language – of different languages, to be more

⁷ Letter from Paulo Leminski to Vilém Flusser of June 1, 1964, apud Alonso Jr. 2018, ‘Conhecer, Flusser’ – doctoral dissertation, Federal University of Santa Catarina.

precise; therefore, “there is no reality prior to languages, there is no Self prior to languages, and there is no language prior to languages.” Paraphrasing John the Apostle, for Flusser in the beginning, the Word was the possibility of Being... as the possibility of itself. And the spirit, the (Flusserian) Dasein, because it is always a possibility, because it is invariably a process, converses to become what it must become. In other words: “I am really *myself* because I agree with others, conversing – we are conversing” (1966b, p. 172, italics mine).

These observations of Flusser’s in *Language and Reality* (and elsewhere), regarding the fundamental role of intersubjectivity for Dasein’s unfolding, encourage us to consider the principle of alterity in Flusser’s overall ideas. It is around this principle that we will also consider Flusser’s idea of transcension. In the impossibility of analysing (here) every Flusserian notion of transcension – of language, of history, of the Self, of place, of reality, and so on –, and duly tracing their interrelationships, I will direct the reader to the analysis of a notion of transcension directly linked to the spirit of alterity of Flusserian ethics, namely: the idea of *transcension of nationalism*. It is here that some of the Hegelian veins in Flusser’s thought begin to emerge.

Alterity, Transcension of National Identity and Affective Responsibility

[...] *the transcension of homelands is my concrete experience*

Vilém Flusser⁸

As I have argued, the idea of “transcension” is at the heart of Flusser's immanent ethics of alterity. And it is certainly the innovation with which Flusser sought to overcome the limits of modern ‘existentialist’ thinking – of Heidegger and of Sartre in particular. This attempt seems to ‘force’ Flusser, invariably, towards Hegel – a philosopher Flusser, curiously, does not list among the thinkers who influenced him the most. Whenever Hegel’s name appears in Flusser’s texts, it appears as a target of (negative) criticism, especially in relation to Flusser’s criticism of nationalism (cf. *The History of the Devil*, for instance). What is more, in a letter to Leminski, Flusser explained his philosophical influences, which excluded Hegel, in the following terms:

The philosopher who most excited me (if I still recall correctly) was Schopenhauer; the one who disturbed me the most was Wittgenstein; the one with whom I wish I could agree was Kant; and with whom I most agree is Camus... Heidegger is without a doubt (with Husserl and Dilthey) those whom I would most like to surpass and is [are], in this case, the most important.⁹

⁸ The original Portuguese word used by Flusser is “patricidade”, pointing to the characteristic relative to the country or nation to which the individual belongs. The root word is, of course, ‘Pátria’, commonly translated as the homeland. At times I prefer the term *national identity*, of the feeling one has of belonging to a nation, at times I use “nationalism” to replace Flusser’s term ‘patricidade’. Not ideal translations, however they convey Flusser’s idea.

⁹ Cf., for one, ‘Vilém Flusser: uma história do diabo’. Master’s thesis (in Portuguese) by Ricardo Mendes (2001). Available at: ([carta de VF a AHA, 08 \(fotoplus.com\)](#)).

Every attentive reader of Flusser ends up noticing the striking influences Camus, Heidegger, Husserl, and Wittgenstein had on him. More complicated is, however, realizing how exactly the enthusiasm for Schopenhauer marked Flusser's thinking – except, perhaps, for the idea of Will (highly explored in *The History of the Devil*, as 'Vontade Criadora', the *creative will*). Dilthey is, in a fundamental way, present in Flusser's conception of history and post-history. And the (frustrated) influence of Kant is also not particularly evident. Let us remember, however, that Flusser was never a mere 'interpreter' of philosophy. As he himself states here, a little immodestly, his intention was to 'surpass' these thinkers. For this, Flusser used the ideas of these philosophers to catapult his own philosophical projects.

That said, there is no mention of Hegel here. But these are questions that a critical and more detailed study of Flusser's philosophy as a whole, and of his ethics in particular, ought to resolve, since, it seems here too, due to the frustrated desire to be able to concur with Kant, Flusser places himself, consciously or not, closer to Hegel. We will return to the issue of the Hegelian elements in Flusser's thought – somewhat concisely – shortly. It is worth noting, first, the notion of transcension of homelands. It is from the exposition of this idea that the intricacies of Flusser's ethics of alterity start to emerge.

As Flusser states in “‘Apátridas e Patriotas I’: the transcendence of homelands is my concrete experience” (1985, p. 1). In the article, a discussion of the virtues and setbacks of the phenomenon of migration, Flusser underlines the positive and negative aspects of nomadism. He confesses, first, that: “Whoever leaves his/her homeland, out of necessity or choice, suffers invariably, because a thousand threads connect them to the homeland, and when these [threads] are amputated, it is as if a surgical intervention had been performed.” In a deeply personal tone, he illustrates the idea thus: “When I dared to flee Prague, I experienced the collapse of the universe: it is because I confused my inner self with the outer world. I suffered the pain of having the threads amputated” (1985, p. 1f.). To better understand the issue here, we need to consider Flusser’s nomadic itinerary – by necessity or choice.

In mentioning the daring decision to flee Prague, Flusser is referring, of course, to his escape from the 1939 German invasion of Prague – Flusser was around 19 years old then. The young philosopher managed to escape the Holocaust that eventually consumed the rest of his family, and moved to England, where he stayed for six months – a relatively short period, as Flusser himself remarks, but he insists “it took place at a time in one’s life in which the mind is definitively formed”, and, therefore, the short stay in London would also leave deep marks (threads) on Flusser’s personality. From here, as we know, Flusser settled in Brazil in 1941, where he would live for the next thirty-odd years and would contribute immensely to the development of a genuinely Brazilian

philosophy. About this period in particular, he says: “For most of my life, I was engaged in an attempt to synthesize Brazilian culture with Western, Levantine, African, indigenous and Far-Eastern cultures – and this continues to fascinate me” (1985, p. 1).

However, with the different governmental reforms regarding the education system in Brazil during the military regime of the 1960s and 1970s, and the consolidation of the structural method of investigation of the universities, aimed at a more technical training of research and teaching of Philosophy in Brazilian universities, thinkers like Flusser, members of the imaginative strand of Brazilian philosophy, *filosofantes* – philosophy-makers without a Philosopher’s academic credentials – would lose the prospect of any teaching position. And this is what happened to Flusser. Thus, in 1972, he travelled with his wife, Edith Flusser, to Europe, eventually settling in Robion, southern France, where they resided until Flusser’s death in November 1991.

It is, most certainly, these nomadic experiences, imposed by forced exiles, that led Flusser to the understanding that: “Migrating is a creative but painful situation. A whole body of literature deals with the relationship between creativity and suffering.” And with the expatriations, Flusser continues, he realized that the pain “was not surgical, but of bearing a child.” In a cycle of birth and rebirth, he says: “I realized that the cutting of the threads that had fed me and were projecting me towards freedom. I was taken by the vertigo of freedom, which is manifested by the inversion of the question ‘free from what’

to 'free for what?' And so we are all migrants: beings taken by vertigo" (1985, p. 2f.). He further says:

The abandonment of the homeland allows such an analysis, but does not end the mystery of the threads. This is because the threads are connected to the place of all prejudices (infra-conscious concepts) and prejudices are difficult to eradicate. But whoever cuts patriotism like a Gordian knot, and does it through self-analysis and self-criticism, will see how much patriotic threads constrain oneself. First, one realizes that all the homelands are equivalent: they all limit the Self; and second, one will understand that, by cutting through the infra-conscious mystery of the homeland, one opens oneself up to a higher and deeper mystery: the mystery of the existence with others in the face of the Other (1985, p. 3).

The expression of order here is, of course, what Flusser considers to be 'the highest and deepest mystery': that of the existence with others in the face of the Other – a formula that takes us straight into Levinas' principle of alterity. Even more curious is the use of 'Other', capitalized by Flusser, as a third principle of mediation. Levinas himself uses both typographies – other and Other. To be sure, there is much debate as to whether the Levinasian *Other* is synonymous with the phenomenal other (the person) or whether it can mean, in a metaphysical sense, the 'totally Other', God. With no pretence of being exhaustive, I would like to expand on the issue a little further.

Levinas himself, in *Otherwise Than Being* (2011), gives us, at first, some reason to interpret his 'Other' phenomenologically. But even here, the distinction between the other and the Other remains unclear, since later, in the same text, he says – against

Heidegger – that “[...] the appearance of being is not the ultimate legitimation of subjectivity.” Thus, he continues,

It is here that the present labour, ventures beyond phenomenology. In the subjectivity, the notions, and the essence they only articulate, lose the consistency that the theme in which they manifest themselves offers them [...] that notions and the essence they articulate break up and get woven into a human plot. The emphasis of exteriority is excellence. Height is heaven. The kingdom of heaven is ethical” (p. 183).

If that is not enough, later Levinas reinforces the metaphysical – supra-phenomenal – aura of the (capitalized) Other a little more:

[*Otherwise than Being*] claimed to describe a third condition or unconditionality of an excluded middle. Subjectivity is not here aroused by [Heidegger’s] mysterious housekeeping of being’s essence, where, despite all of Heidegger’s anti-intellectualism, the gnoseological correlation: man called forth by a manifestation, is found again. Here the human is brought out by transcendence, or the hyperbole, that is, the disinterestedness of essence, a hyperbole in which it breaks up and fall upwards, into the human. Our philosophical discourse does not pass from a term to the other only by searching the ‘subjective’ horizons of what shows itself. [...]. According to the word of Jehuda Halevy, with his eternal word ‘God speaks to each man in particular’ (p. 184).

Such a description attests to the depth of the principle of unconditionality – a third condition of mediation, possibly of a divine nature – in Levinas’ notion of intersubjectivity: Here the human is brought to the fore by transcendence, the hyperbole. I am not interested in resolving this issue here. What I can say, though, roughly, is that

Flusser's thought also seems to be haunted by a transcendent hyperbole of some sort, a 'mysterious' third condition of mediation, or unconditionality, through which the human element – spirit – is summoned into existence. In *Language and Reality* and *On Religiosity* (2001), for example, this mysterious Flusserian hyperbole has a definite name, as we have already seen: the Ineffable. This Ineffable, Unutterable One, is an unreachable goal. Thus, Flusser agrees with Lispector: "I go, and I return empty-handed" (apud Nunes, 2004, p. 96). But this unattainability is, at the same time, the very guarantee of continuity of discourse and existence (thinking and being – language and reality). And the dialectical game of the search – the back and forth of the Self – is Da-sein's fate.

What is more, if we remember that, for Flusser, "I am really myself, because I agree with others, talking, that the foundation of my reality is an agreement with others" (1966b, p. 172), and that the "higher and deeper mystery is the existence with others in face of the Other" (1985, p. 3f.), we have good reasons not only to inscribe this Portuguese-speaking philosopher into the tradition of the great philosophers of contemporary ethics, but also to demonstrate that for Flusser, as for Levinas, Ethics is First Philosophy – and, as such, it is confused with what philosophy (traditionally) takes as its primary object, i.e., Metaphysics. That such an Ethics is, in Flusser's case, an ethics of alterity and immanence, we have already seen. And, putting the question of otherness in terms of transcension, it is also the means Flusser found to overcome modern existentialism. Because all existential anguish and all silence of thought, the double

negation which arises with the absurdity of Nothingness and the failure of language and understanding “can be *Ueberholt*, [i.e.], surpassed and transcended” (2012, p. 73).

In this process, however, Flusser has to appeal, inevitably, to elements of Hegelian thought. For one, all of Flusser’s renditions of transcension presuppose the possibility of an opening to spirit – a Hegelian term Flusser himself uses repeatedly – mediated by a complex dialectic of self-overcoming towards the Ineffable, as a guarantee of the continuity of the possibility of the unfolding of Da-sein. Let us illustrate this dialectic through Flusser’s conception of transcension of national identity.

Flusser sums up his logic of the misfortunes of patriotism thus:

Patriotism is harmful because it assumes and glorifies the threads imposed [by the foetal layers anchored in a certain geographical place], and it despises the threads [freely] created. Here is what truly matters: I am not responsible for my ties of neighbourhood or of ‘soil and blood’, but for my friends and the woman I love (1985, p. 5).

And thus Flusser justifies the need to transcend patriotism and the dialectical (affective) conditions involved in the process. But he also admits the intricate thickness of the ontological layer of the existential dialectic involved in the process:

Things are more complex. The created threads rest upon the imposed ones. To be free is not to hover irresponsibly above the scene. It is necessary to assume the imposed threads. If I did not love my mother, how can I love my wife? Thus, I learned that in order to create intersubjective threads, it is necessary to assume the imposed ones. I must not repress my condition as a Prague citizen, as a Jew, a German, an Anglo-Saxon, a Paulistano, a Robion resident, and so on. Yet, I must assume these threads in order to deny them and transcend to the level of my intersubjective relationships (1985, p. 5f.).

And the idea of the ontological movement of an immanent dialectic of transcension-in-intersubjectivity is reinforced a little further:

This is what I have learned: at birth, I was thrown into the fabric that tied me to people. I did not choose such fabric. Growing up, and above all, migrating, I personally wove the threads that bind me to people, and I did it in collaboration with them. I have “created” loving relationships and friendships, hatreds, and antagonisms – and it is for these threads that I am fully responsible. Cutting the Gordian knots of patriotism in the unconscious is a task we learn. Having cut the threads of Prague, my intestines churned inside me, by cutting São Paulo, I suffered in my flesh; but if one day I have to cut Robion, it will be like loading the car with books and driving off elsewhere (p. 4).

There is, however, an addendum here. It is in the conception of ‘the encounter with the other in the face of the Other’ that any similarity between Levinas and Flusser ends. Even without mentioning the Franco-Lithuanian philosopher in ‘*Apátridas e Patriotas I*’, the message is nevertheless clear. Flusser makes it clear that the foundation of alterity and affective responsibility in his ethics (even if he does not call it as such) should not be confused with cosmopolitanism, humanism, philanthropy – predicates of Levinas’ ethics. Says Flusser in this regard: “My neighbours [others] are not all the members of the human species: I am not responsible for a billion Chinese, but for my ‘neighbours’ to whom I feel connected.” That is: the guarantee of the horizon of the migrant's being, the nomad, the expellee, in Flusser’s view – certainly inspired by his

own concrete experience – is reaffirmed in the hyperbole: “the homeland of the stateless person is the other... in the face of the Other” (1985, p. 6).

Still, for Flusser, ‘my others’ I myself choose. Clearly, there is a strong communitarian element in Flusser's notion of alterity. But this does not mean that Flusserian ethics is elitist. The problem of elitism, as related to communitarianism, is a complicated, ongoing debate within ethical and political theory. In a nutshell, it can be argued that *communitarian moral perspectives* turn out to be quite ‘elitist’ at times, since the idea of the importance of asserting one’s primary obligations and identity in connection with a particular community (the overall assumption of communitarianism itself) might foster one’s belief in a hierarchy of communities, presuppositions, and actions, meaning that certain values should prevail over others – a belief based on the priority of communitarian ties, on the importance of historical and cultural baggage, traditions, and so on, and not on the moral/ethical values *per se* of such actions, beliefs, cultural practices, etc.

That said, it is important to remember: for Flusser, as we have already seen, as postmodern beings, we are all *migrants*, beings taken by the vertigo of existence, nomads thrown into the space of absurdity, into exile – which is the human existence itself. For Flusser, in this existential condition, affective responsibility – a kind of virtue of Flusserian ethics as freedom, becomes my ontological shelter. This was, it seems, also the way Flusser found to transcend his own existential condition, the sometimes absurd,

nihilating, nullifying, condition of exile and expatriation, either out of necessity or by choice. That is, transcension and affective responsibility is the way Flusser – the human being – ‘chose’ to resolve his own sometimes crippling, paradoxical, existential condition of a Prague citizen, of a survivor of Nazism, exiled, naturalized Brazilian citizen, expatriate and, finally, European repatriated; to put it differently: Flusser's notion of transcension – the foundation of his philosophical thinking – was not a purely theoretical, abstract idea... it is confused with the concrete experience of the thinker's own existence. It is an idea woven through the fabric of his personal life.

After exposing, albeit very roughly, some of the likely facets of a peculiarly Flusserian ethics of alterity, I approach a conclusion, calling Flusser's notion of transcension his *only* thought. Of course, what I mean by this is that all of Flusser's most fundamental philosophical thoughts are, necessarily, guided by his idea of transcension. In this context, the Ineffable is the guarantee of infinite possibilities of thinking and being... and discourse-experience – language-reality – is the dialectical game that manifests these infinite possibilities.

Final Considerations: The Return to Hegel

How distant is Flusser from Hegel, then? To be sure, we could enter here into a tug of war between traditionalist *versus* revisionist Hegelian interpretations to complicate

things further... however for the time being, that is not my intention. I only hope to highlight an overlooked dimension of Flusser's philosophy.

If we consider Hegel's identification of language and Spirit, through which language is posited as a historical phenomenon that preserves the memory of Spirit, i.e., language captures the spiritual evolution of the universe and the individual, and that Spirit's forms of self-revelation – art, religion, science, philosophy – are different manifestations of the Spirit's verbal expression, and distinct historical steps towards the maturity of language and Spirit, we are very close, it seems, to the vision of 'language as reality', and to the plurality of realities given to the multiplicity of languages proposed by Flusser in *Language and Reality* (and elsewhere). Flusser certainly does not speak of an Absolute Spirit. He speaks, however, as we have already seen, of an Ineffable, which – as we have also seen – is the guarantee of the very condition of the possibility of the unveiling of language-reality (thinking and being). But if we take Hegel's Absolute Spirit not to signify (as is commonly the case) some kind of substantive entity, but rather a space or a position of movement determining language as reality – movement through which Spirit knows itself – and this place is none other than the plane of immanence, existence itself, then the direct link between Flusser and Hegel proves to be closer than initially imagined.

It can, of course, be argued that the issue here is no longer ethical, but ontological. But for Flusser the ethical and the ontological are inseparable layers, neatly woven

together. The *Self* talks to continue existing and transcending – because, fundamentally, the *Self* is, for Flusser, from an epistemological point of view, a void, and is, from an ontological point of view, a lack – hence we are, ontologically,¹⁰ beings taken by vertigo, by nausea, by angst (1985, p. 2f.). In Flusser's model of language-reality (thinking and being, in Hegelian terms), we can say that, from an ethical point of view, experience is a discourse mediated by the other in the face of the Other, the Ineffable: which is, analogously, the guarantee of the continuity of discourse and of existence itself.

And perhaps this is where the greatest correspondence between Flusser and Hegel lies. Among other things, recall that Hegelian logic is a system in which thought and being (language and reality, in Flusserian terms) form a single and active unity, where the absolutes of each domain make up a dialectical metaphysics in which each absolute leads to the other, forming a set, which Hegel called 'a circle of circles': and, therefore, "all philosophy thus resembles a circle of circles" (Hegel, 2010, p. 751).

Hegel's insistence on the image of the geometry of the circle – a curved line that departs from linearity in curvature, and curves even further in on itself – is part of Hegel's project to move away from what he believed to be Kant's fear of erring. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel says that error is an integral part of the path of consciousness towards absolute knowledge, and the so-called Kantian distrust of

¹⁰ To Flusser – yet another Hegelian influence – we are 'ontologically' taken by vertigo; i.e., this *is* the human condition. It is through relationships and affective responsibility that we may overcome such vertigo.

metaphysics, or “the so-called fear of error [of Kant] is, rather, fear of the truth” (1992, p. 64). For Hegel, in the face of error, the correct way for consciousness to restart is by restarting; and thus the Swabian philosopher was opposed to the idea of grounding knowledge – and therefore all of philosophy – on a so-called indubitable foundation, an axiomatic initial principle. Because, to Hegel, a philosophical system constitutes a whole in which each element is equidistant from the centre, where knowledge appears not as an “instrument to seize the absolute” (p. 65); it is, rather, part of the process towards the absolute – the Ineffable – which is always unattainable.

For Flusser, however, language itself *is* the circle of circles, the absolute, so to speak. The Flusserian philosophical system is language itself. Hence, he says: “Language, as we are, and as it was poured out upon us to form us, is the accumulation of all wisdom, all creative effort, all victories, and all defeats of the intellects that preceded us” (2012, p. 236). Hence, in essentially existentialist language, Flusser says, as we have seen earlier, that ontological nihilism, epistemological skepticism and religious mysticism – fruits of the failures of thinking and being – are inevitably refuted by the very character of existence; life itself is the *locus* of dissolving contradictions; therefore: “spirit, in its ‘will to power’, refuses to accept them [the contradictions]”... and, moved by this will to power, in its positive aspects, philosophy, religion, science, and art have always endeavoured to transform chaos into cosmic order. In other words: the *objections* “are refuted, practically, by the continuation of life, by the experience we have of knowledge,

reality and the communicable revelation of truth”, through the positive aspects of knowledge – philosophy, religion, science, art, etc. (p. 38). Because the “great conversation that we essentially are, and that began, historically, in the initial babbling of the intellects, continues its advance towards the ineffable in an ever wider front” (p. 235) – another clearly Hegelian thesis. Which is equivalent to saying that: “The flow of words, conversation, is the river that drags us away from our origins, and because of the Ineffable hidden between words, we are always close to our origins” (p. 43f.).

In short: this conception of a single and active unity where thought and being make up an (ontological) dialectic of self-overcoming – which Flusser calls *discourse* – is the hallmark of the systems of both thinkers: Hegel and Flusser. It is no coincidence that, to illustrate this dialectic of self-overcoming by which Being, when moving away from its origin, bends further and further over itself, both Hegel and Flusser make use of the allegory of the expulsion from Paradise in the Hebrew myth of the fall of man (Genesis 3).

For both thinkers, the story of the fall paints (metaphorically) the end of paradise, the end of spirit’s naivety – and the launching of spirit into its vertiginous condition, into exile, into the nothingness of the absurd, the expulsion, the divine silence. But it is also the beginning of spirit’s transcension towards the completion of the dialectical process through which it ought to become itself. In Flusserian terms, the sickening situations, which include the error and failure of the language, are isolated moments of a process

that begins with the appearance of consciousness-itself in the here-and-now, and is a position that can only be assumed, precariously, for fleeting moments and by isolated spirits, because by the very character of existence, spirit always and invariably seeks the unique and active unity of itself. Yet, as Hegel has it, the process is not easy: spirit is “driven back to the standpoint of that painful feeling which humanity experiences when thrown upon itself” (2012, p. 322).

That said, in Hegel, despite all the advances he makes against Kantian restrictions, reason goes from a mere metaphysical being to ‘the’ supreme metaphysical being. Reason becomes the subject... and the subject is what remains invariable in all predications. In Flusser, after the existentialist lesson, conversation in existence with others is the ‘only’ supreme metaphysical being. And the Other, sacred but Ineffable, is the guarantee of the self-movement of the totality of being and reality.

At the risk of claiming that what in Hegel is metaphysics becomes an immanent ethics of alterity in Flusser, it is clear that fundamentally both systems are disguised ontological teleology. For both thinkers, primordial Da-sein finds itself in an imperfect state, but can become more perfect over time; and this movement from imperfection to perfection is the very destiny of Da-sein. For both Hegel and Flusser, spirit is not born in a perfect ontological state; Da-sein must, therefore, progress to a more perfect state throughout its existence. But, at least for Flusser, this movement, essentially of transcension, is a possibility of choice, as is the case with the affective responsibility for

the bonds of alterity; hence the interrelation between transcension and freedom in Flusserian thought: “to be free is not to hover irresponsibly above the scene. It is necessary to assume the imposed threads. But I assume them in order to deny them and elevate them to the level of my intersubjective relationships” (1985, pp. 3-5). Existence with the other is the very reason of Da-sein’s existence; and transcension – the dialectical-existential movement of acceptance-denial-elevation of the facticities – is the guarantee, so to speak, of this intersubjectivity. The entire Flusserian philosophical project is, therefore, fundamentally an ethical project. For Flusser, the ethical is Da-sein’s very way of being. But not even with this statement – and as the reader who is familiar with Hegel will have already understood – can we definitively separate Flusser from Hegel. On the contrary. Remember that also for Hegel the ethical is the very conception of freedom. What Hegel called *Sittlichkeit*, i.e., the ethical community – a present world where Da-sein “has in self-consciousness its knowing and its will, and, through the action of self-consciousness, also has its actuality” – is the very ideal of freedom (2001b, p. 132).

Both philosophers seem to agree on another matter: self-consciousness is possible only through the mediation of a community. For Hegel, however, the becoming of the human spirit and, consequently, intersubjectivity, is only possible through a nation... and this justifies the fundamental position that politics and the idea of the State – as objective spirit – occupy in Hegel’s system. For Hegel, freedom ultimately culminates in political freedom. For Flusser, as we have already seen, freedom imposed by the concept of a

people – of a Da-sein delimited by national identity – is no freedom at all. And in this, says Flusser, *all homelands are the same*. Political freedom conceived in this way is a *poor version*¹¹ of the traditional religiosity that modern humanity pretends to have renounced, a frustrated form of religiosity. In such attempts to escape, *Spirit* remains insatiably hungry for some form of religiosity: “Which is to say that we are transitional beings in search of the future” (2002, p. 21).

Back to our initial thesis: the idea of transcension is the fulcrum of a peculiarly Flusserian ethics of alterity, and all of Flusser’s philosophical ideas must be understood under the influence of his ethics. However, as already said, Flusser’s name is not usually associated with the philosophy of ethics, as the name of Levinas is. My goal in this article was to raise the suspicion that the placement of Flusser in this tradition is not at all extravagant, since Flusser is a fully-fledged moral thinker.

¹¹ Indeed, at times Flusser describes ‘political freedom’ as a ‘perversion’ – and not just as a ‘poor version’ – of traditional religiosity. I have discussed this point elsewhere: [O DIABO \(QUASE\) DESMASCARADO DE VILÉM FLUSSER | PRISMA - Revista de Filosofia \(ufam.edu.br\)](https://ufam.edu.br/revista-prisma). However, to Flusser ‘political freedom’ is a *perversion of religiosity* because, as happens with other forms of ‘secularised’ religiosity, it perverts the idea of the Devil (or Evil), present in most traditional religions in one form or another. One of Flusser's fundamental points in bringing the ‘Devil’ under the spotlight throughout his writings is precisely to contest the ‘perversion’ of the character by secular ideologies. So, for instance, to ‘perverted religiosities’ such as Nazism, the Jews (and others non-Aryan beings) *were* the devil. And that is exactly what Flusser means by *perversion*, (Cf. *Da Religiosidade*). In short, it is a case of Da-sein posing another Da-sein as the Devil, as ‘Evil’, and not the Devil as transcending Da-sein (as Time, or History, as Flusser does).

However, substantiating Flusser's moral philosophy is no simple task. First, because of the diversity and the complexity of Flusser's thinking and writings. Second, and more importantly, because we will not find Flusser's ethics synthesized in any of his works – despite Flusser's own claim that *The History of the Devil* had been his attempt to develop an ethics. It appears that Flusser's ethics is in the marked sinuosity – the meanderings – of all his ideas. And thus I conclude with a provocation: like Levinas, Flusser is fundamentally a philosopher of ethics; and a more careful and profound analysis of his *ouvrage* will support this claim. My goal here, as mentioned before, was only to stretch the supporting cable to raise the bridge for this integration.

All that said, a final remark on the communitarian character of Flusser's ethics of alterity is in order. That Flusser's ethics differs drastically from Levinas' model we have already seen. For, to Flusser, to a certain extent, I choose my others: "My others are not all members of the human species... [I am responsible]... for my 'neighbours', to whom I feel connected." That is to say, my other is always the other for whom I choose to be affectively responsible... be they my friends or my enemies: "I am responsible for my love connections and friendships, hatreds and antagonisms" (1985, p. 6). This shows, among other things, that Flusser recognized, consciously or not, a lesson that Levinas is not willing to accept: that any attempt to philosophically overcome the dialectics of intersubjectivity – the idea of a constitution of subjectivity through the relationship between the Self and the Other (the Same and the Different) – is always doomed to

collapse the Other back into the Self. Hence, trying to philosophize about the experience of otherness seems to always give Hegel the last word. Every authentic encounter with otherness returns to sameness; and thus, we return to the orbit of Hegelian dialectics. Consider, in this context, Hegel's harsh criticism of Fichte's (and the German Romantics') 'subjectivity formula'.

In Hegel's reading, Fichte tried to resolve the (Kantian) subject-object dichotomy by shifting everything to the side of the subject, the Da-sein active. For Hegel, one of the basic mistakes of the German Romantics was to start from Fichte's notion of subjectivity, the idea of an absolute self. "Fichte establishes the self and, in fact, the totally and constantly abstract and formal self, as the absolute principle of all knowledge, of all reason" (2001a, p. 81). However, every relationship is inevitably mediated. There is no 'I' that is a total and constant formal foundation of all knowledge, of all reason, etc. Thus, in the opening of *The Science of Logic*, Hegel writes: "...that *there is* nothing in heaven or nature or spirit or anywhere else that does not contain just as much immediacy as mediation [...]" (2010, p. 46, italics mine).¹² This is to say that, for Hegel, there is no self that is not mediated by the Other and the objective reality. Therefore, I = I – Fichte's (and the Romantics') formula of subjectivity is, for Hegel, the depth of the night that neither distinguishes nor knows anything else besides itself. Thus, for Hegel, *infinity* is placed in

¹² Hegel is quoting himself from his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*.

the in-itself mediated, and not *in the Other*, as Levinas seems to suggest. That is, for Hegel, the abyss of the infinite is always mine. In agreement with Hegel, Flusser adds: what the 'I' finds once it returns to itself is never the I-itself. In returning from the dialectical encounter with Otherness, in the face of the Other, the Self never returns to a totality, because the Flusserian 'I' is always, by destiny, an epistemological void and an ontological lack.

All that said, there appears to be an apparent misreading of Hegel on the part of Levinas; and, in a way, a – perhaps deliberate – misreading of Sartre and Heidegger on Flusser's part. For, it can (must) be argued that, in different ways, Hegel, Sartre and Heidegger will all in the end agree that the *in-itself* is never a sufficiency and/or a totality. Much like Levinas and Flusser, Hegel, Sartre and Heidegger also seem to reject the idea of a totality above multiplicity – except, of course, as an unreachable aim, and/or as a guarantee of the possibility of existence. Still, in Flusser's case, the encounter with otherness will always lead Da-sein “to that point (to resort to the myth) at which the expulsion from paradise took place, that is, the moment of alienation that is our thought” – exile, consciousness itself (2002, p. 39).

For Flusser, the idea of moral responsibility found in Levinas is surely an attribute of the Self. But not just responsibility: contradiction, vertigo, disgust, anguish, are also all attributes of Da-sein. Thus, *de*-substantialization, the deposition-of-the-self, is also an attribute of the (Flusserian) subject, which is always to be exiled, i.e., an expelled being.

However, every exile is also a possibility of transcension. Therefore, transcension is, likewise, one of Da-sein's fundamental attribute. The Flusserian *being-there* contains within itself the very principle of infinity. The possession of this principle must not, however, be confused with self-sufficiency, as far as Flusser is concerned, since Da-sein is itself the unveiling of the abyss, the metaphorical (yet living) evidence of the expulsion from Paradise.

Thus, Flusser need not reject, like Levinas, what we might call an *existential ontology* – a type of (philosophical) thinking that (apparently) illegitimately forces the structures of reason upon others – simply because, for Flusser, the vertigo of the original sensation of an expulsion – which is the nature of thinking and the absurdity of existence itself – will always be there to remind us of our ultimate condition: to be exiled creatures.

References

Butler, Judith. (2005). *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Butler, Judith. (2015). *Senses of the Subject*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Butler, Judith. (2020). *The Force of Nonviolence: an Ethico-Political Bind*. London and New York: Verso.

Flusser, Vilém. (1985). “Apátridas e Patriotas I”, conferência [apresentada] no II Seminário Internacional “Kornhaus”, Weiler, Alemanha. Available at [FlusserBrasil](#)

Flusser, Vilém. (1996a). ‘Benedito Nunes e o mundo de Clarice Lispector’. Available at [FlusserBrasil](#)

Flusser, Vilém. (2002). *Da Religiosidade*. Editado por Edith Flusser. São Paulo: Editora Escrituras.

Flusser, Vilém. (1996b). 'Filosofia da linguagem', in *Revista do Departamento de Humanidades*, 2. São José dos Campos, Brasil: Instituto Tecnológico da Aeronáutica.

Flusser, Vilém. (2012). *Língua e Realidade*. Coimbra/São Paulo: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra & Annablume.

Hegel, Georg W.F. (2001a). *Cursos de Estética*. Traduzido por Marco Aurélio Werle. Vol. 1. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo.

Hegel, Georg W.F. (1992). *Fenomenologia do Espírito*. Traduzido por Paulo Meneses, com a colaboração de Karl-Heinz Effen. Parte I, 2ª edição. Petrópolis, Rio de Janeiro: Editora Vozes.

Hegel, Georg W.F. (2001b). *Philosophy of Right*. Translated by W. Dyde. Kitchener, Canada: Batoche Books Limited.

Hegel, Georg W.F. (2012). *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by J. Sibree. Mineola, New York: Dover Publications.

Hegel, Georg W. F. (2010). *The Science of Logic*. Translated and edited by George di Giovanni. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Levinas, Emmanuel. (2011). *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press.

Nunes, Benedito. (2005). 'Meu Caminho na Crítica', in *Estudos Avançados*, 19(55), pp. 289-305.

Nunes, Benedito. (2004). *O dorso do tigre*. São Paulo: Editora 34.

Nunes, Benedito. (1966). *O Mundo de Clarice Lispector*. Manaus, AM: Edições Governo do Estado do Amazonas.

Ramsey, Frank P. (2001). *The Foundations of Mathematics and other Logical Essays*. Edited by R. B. Braithwaite. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd.

Dias da Silva, Wanderley. *Meanders of Vilém Flusser's Ethics of Alterity*.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1993). *Being and Nothingness: a phenomenological essay on ontology*. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (2013). *Nausea*. Translated by Lloyd Alexander. New York: New Directions.