

## THE IMPLICIT PRESENCE OF THE PROBLEM OF NOTHINGNESS IN TWENTIETH CENTURY FRENCH PHILOSOPHY

Héctor Sevilla Godínez

**ABSTRACT:** The objective of this article is to refer to and identify the implicit presence of the concept of nothingness in the central philosophical proposals of last century's French philosophy. Even though the authors are not considered Nihilistic in themselves, there does exist in them an identification contained in their reflections that point towards a particular conception of nothingness, or to one of its analogies. The study commences arguing the idea of a great puppet master as a metaphor of nothingness that is implicit in Sartre's thought; following, that unseen region that man cannot come to contemplate, according to Merleau-Ponty, will be boarded; afterwards, reference will be made to the idea of shadow contributed by Levinas and its implications in philosophy that were passed on to us; lastly, the focus will be on what Derrida denominated as "veils", which do not allow us to see what is.

**KEYWORDS:** Nothingness; Shadow; Veil; French Philosophy; View

### INTRODUCTION

What this text intends to demonstrate is that the reflection about nothingness, regardless of it being called such, has been present in French philosophical reflection from the end of last century. I will strike up a discussion with Sartre about the topic of liberty, and I will allude to some of his conclusions to refer to Nothingness as the great Puppet-Master. Further along, I will center the attention on Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his descriptions about the corporality of our knowledge, as well as in the ineludibility of the uncertainty about the known due to the look. In the line of the look, I will continue on with Emanuel Levinas and his conception of the shadows which hide the Being. Such shadows are considered veils of reality in Derrida,

reinforcing with it the impossibility of real contact with things and people. It is clear throughout all of it, the reference to Nothingness as a disabler of all certainty, as propitiator of everything we see and don't see.

#### 1. SARTRE: NOTHINGNESS, EVIDENCES OF THE PUPPET-MASTER, OR FURTHER THAN FAITH

Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) tried to forge a method that would synthesize idealism and realism, on the basis of assuming them as a combined reality. Sartre cannot be assumed as an idealist thinker since he did not empathize with the idea of an "interior self", or of a life forged by immaterial issues. It should be recognized, however, that the French philosopher didn't doubt that man is something more than the rest of the material objects. However, the difference was clearly centered on the conscience, which arose in the heart of human matter.

With works like *Lo imaginario* [*The Imaginary*] and *la imaginación* [*The Imagination*], as with *La trascendencia del ego* [*The Transcendence of the Ego*], Sartre defines his fundamental support in regard to the topic of the conscience, and to which he returns with his magnum opus *El ser y la Nada* [*Being and Nothingness*]. Among the issues which Sartre profoundly faces, is the irresponsibility of the conducts, to which he alludes as a "bad faith"; this is to say, the one had by any individual who tries to deny his responsibility of being who he is. The Sartrean effort to propose and favour that man should assume his responsibility of being who he is, is understood. However, when this man, who we are supposed to be, is not supported by anything more than Nothingness, it becomes complex to be as Sartre supposes; it turns into an almost impossible mission. In other words, to be the person I say to be, that is precisely necessary; to have an idea of who I am, supposes at least a partially structured definition. Now, since everything I may say about myself is erred, for I only define myself based on suppositions, then it is difficult to assume who I am, since it is a scarcely reliable task to truly know who one is.

If I understand that I am in relation to the things that I do, I run the risk of supposing that I only am what I do. It is imperative to mention that many ideas related to transcendence are bound to what one does or does not do. But even the idea of transcendence centered on acts is mistaken, for I do not need to transcend by doing something; but rather by being, by existing, I have already transcended the not-being, at least in an instant form (for the duration of life).

This being that has transcended is not an explainable or different being than the rest, but instead it is the fact of being that transcends the Being. Sartre affirms pejoratively, with regard to the intention of humans of bad faith, that: "it is about

constituting human reality as a being that is what he is not and who is not what he is”.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, all theoretical construction which attempts to explain the human being is implied in this supposed perversion. Contrary to Sartre, I think that there are no ideas about humanness that are not already condemned to vulnerability. If human nature is vulnerability, a product of contingency, then whatever deals with or is derived from humanness, is equally contingent. Having said this, the Sartrean proposal sustained on the idea that man is freedom, could also be questioned; for, is perhaps man really freedom? Is that not an explanation which attempts to construct human reality with a being that is not what it is?

Sartre affirms that we must be what we are but, why should we be something we are already? How is the duty implied in this sense? What already is does not have to be searched for if it already is. We never say, “This moment must be the present” for precisely, it already is. What Sartre sees as a need – to be oneself – is nothing more than the affirmation of the self’s nullification, since I cannot strive to be something that I already am. In any case, I strive to be something that is not. So, either I should turn into something that I am not; or, that which I am is not that which I should be. Sartre asks us, “What are we if we have the constant obligation of making ourselves be what we are; if we are in the way of being of the should-be that we are?”<sup>2</sup> But if I strive to be myself, can I not be? The objective of being me supposes that I am not? And who decided that I be that which it is supposed I should be? It is implied that the Being is given and that I should be what it is. Thus, the effort to be oneself in the idea that such *oneself* is always and remains, cannot be assumed. In other words, it is not about being me in the idea that I can be it, but rather in the understanding that I am not something already in itself; that I am even Nothingness; I am an illusion. To say that I am myself is nothing more than to affirm the illusion of my identity.

The relationship with others does not escape this “liberating prison” of the not-being. Sartre establishes about the other, that: “He is a representation for the others and for me, which means that he cannot be it other than in representation. But, precisely, if I represent him for myself, I am not; I am separated from him like the object of the subject, separated by nothing, but this nothing isolates me from him”.<sup>3</sup>

However, in contrast to the Sartrean idea, I affirm that this difference which I have towards the other is a difference which is also in the root of my relationship with myself, or with whom I have believed I am, or with that which is in me that I understand I am. And it is because for the conscience – even my *self* is grasped as

---

<sup>1</sup>Jean Paul Sartre, *El ser y la Nada*, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 111.

other for it – I am the object of myself. Thus, if the only thing I know about the other is what he does, and that which he does is not his own noumenal reality, then, before myself I am in equal circumstances: I am something which is not what I believe to be, in the understanding that that which I believe to be, I believe because it is the only thing that I have made evident of me; and it is the only thing that I have made evident of me, because the conscience is what transmits it to me. But – we must admit – the conscience does not grasp everything; it only grasps what is shown to it. Furthermore, what is shown is already grasped as a representation; therefore, it is not that presented or shown what I see but, instead, only the representation. What I see is not what it is, even when that which I see is me, in other words, my representation.

Sartre seems to agree with this part by saying that: “I am never any of my attitudes, never any of my conducts [...] in all places I escape the being and yet I am”.<sup>4</sup> But this being which Sartre mentions is in the sense of the not-being, which means that I am in the manner of not-being; in other words, the manner of the representations. Now, can I be free in the manner of not-being-so? This is to say, can I be free without being? Evidently not for that which would be free would not be free from the not-being, to begin with.

Furthermore, emotions are representations of me. The emotion is created; *it is* upon not being, in such a way that “if I make myself sad, that means I am not”.<sup>5</sup> Emotion is the most tangible example that we are not what we believe with emotion, for emotion as such is another representation. We are not what we think either, for the thoughts themselves are representations of something else.

If emotions and thoughts are not evidence of my Being since I create them and I am not always them, then what happens with the topic of freedom? Do I make myself free? If not, how then to be free if it is not in the acts? Feeling free doesn't mean to be free either but only to grasp a supposed freedom, such as an emotion is grasped. Sartre affirms that I am free in the conscience of freedom, but such conscience is not always present which is why I am not free. I am not freedom in the sense that it be my essence; therefore, if it is not my essence, then I am not free but, rather, I *have* freedom. But to have freedom is only possible in the manner of a phenomenon and representation. Now, since what I do is a representation of me and it is not my being, then I neither am nor show myself to be free, nor do I have freedom. To this we must add that free acts, or those which would suppose freedom, will always be distinct in accordance with the classification that we can make of it. In other words, what

---

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 113.

freedom gives, that which constitutes it, has never been a common consensus. Then how could I assume myself as free based on phenomenon? On which ones would I base myself and which ones not? Isn't freedom only an idea centered on a representational parameter?

In the same manner, what I show to the other with the condition of it – to have shown it – is already a distorted representation. The other and I can do no more than see of myself, my acts; which, upon being representations, are never reality, in such a way that, “the conscience of the other is what it is not”.<sup>6</sup> Hence, to grasp the representation I make of the other is to grasp his not-being, never what he really is.

Due to the aforesaid, since what I understand about the other is not him, neither is what I see about him towards me – as a limit to my freedom – necessarily a limit which he imposes on me. The other does not lay limits on my freedom; freedom, as an idea in me, is what limits itself due to the representation. Certainly, then, such representations occur in some act of the other which I see. All hermeneutic is a hermeneutic of Nothingness in the sense that I make interpretations of the things, I search for its connection with the Being starting out from what it is not. It is not about an apodictic method but, in reality – more than seeing everything that is not something to later see what it is – I always see what it is not; and then what truly is may never be seen, or what mostly appears to not be, may effectively *be*. The hermeneutic of Nothingness is an infinitum of possibilities.

We can understand all of this as evidences of Nothingness; a Nothingness that plays with us as if it was a Puppet-Master. Though Nothingness does not have a will, the metaphor of the Puppet-Master helps to conceive that what we are in the end, the puppets, is outlined by our union through the cords, which is our Being with Nothingness. The Puppet-Master has many games up his sleeve; he astounds us with his prose, with the continuous veils. In such circumstance what generates more tenderness than the man who believes himself as free? Could any greater innocence possibly exist than the belief that we are the architects of our own destiny? Just how hard is it to defraud the boy when he believes that Santa Claus exists? The Puppet-Master is Nothingness; his strings, our conscience; the puppet is the Being. Who wants to lose consciousness under the risk of becoming immobile? Is anybody perhaps interested in being by not being? Well, despite this not being our wish, it is our reality. The only thing that is added in such a case, is our appearance of being; our supposition that in reality we are something when we are nothing more than beings for death, in the sense of being beings for Nothingness.

---

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 114.

The aforesaid, further than being an unnecessary pessimistic posture, supposes a realism that opens up possibilities for human development. Congruent with this, we find ourselves with Sartre's following affirmation: "The conscience must-be its own being; it is not ever sustained by the being, for it sustains the being in the bosom of subjectivity; which means once more, that it is inhabited by the being but that it is not the being; it is not what it is."<sup>7</sup>

Since the conscience doubts itself and it can be and not be, and it does not show us everything, Sartre asks himself: "How then can we reproach the neighbour for not being sincere, or please ourselves in our sincerity, since this sincerity appears to us at the same time as impossible?"<sup>8</sup> It is derived from there – and I coincide – that even sincerity is an act of bad faith. I am never sincere. That is a categorical situation; an act. How could I be sincere if we have understood this construct as the being in reference to the content of truth, and truth is the unpronounceable Nothingness? Furthermore, if every act is not real, how does one be free? If freedom were ontological it would be, therefore, a concept of freedom which would transcend the phenomenal, but this is not possible. Not only can one not be sincere but neither can what we are, be; we are with Nothingness in the noumenal and condemned to not see ourselves in the phenomenal which we do possess. Real sincerity is to recognize the impossibility of it.

I am Nothingness in regard to the conscience of Nothingness but, then, what is the conscience of the conscience? It could be that the conscience of the conscience is precisely the contact of the conscience with the possibility of its nothing, with the Nothingness itself that it is. There is no real conscience that does not suppose the presence of Nothingness, the Nothingness which one is and which is possessed upon being possessed by it. If what I decide is not what I am, then there is no possible guilt. Guilt is to the extent that I believe that I am what I have done, but this is further away from reality. Not only am I not the combination of my acts, but I am much less only one act from among all of those. People are not their own fruits. How then to explain anguish? In the following manner: I am not anguish in as much as I make myself anguished. Instead, I possess anguish or, momentarily, the anguish is in me without being me. And, furthermore, the anguish is the product of the belief of something false: my guilt.

I only understand that I am something if I have defined that something and I comply by the characteristics which supposedly make that which has been defined be

---

<sup>7</sup>*Idem.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 115

as has been defined. But I never am if I understand that reality escapes all definition by behaviours. I am not what I believe I am, nor am I what I consider to be evidence that shows me that I am. My being escapes my knowing and my Being is not mine.

Now, if I am not what I am in accordance with the descriptions and connotations of it: can freedom as well be a biased manner of being? For Sartre, freedom is man's essence but, unless he refers to an impractical freedom, that can't be freedom. Now, neither is there an impractical freedom; in other words, a freedom that is not shown in acts, a freedom that is not conscience of freedom due to the same, and that does not suppose any change in itself. So, either Sartre proposes freedom differently to how we understand it, or simply an ontological freedom. In this last case, I couldn't agree either because there is no motive to unite the categorizable with a category; this is to say that freedom cannot be if it is not through he who is free. There is no freedom but, rather, free beings, which is distinct to the Being being freedom. Therefore, freedom cannot be ontological as Sartre supposes. If there are no free beings and the Being is not freedom, where does it end up but in Nothingness?

Hence, man is unable to not be of bad faith, according to what Sartre sees in such concept. We are beings for the lie; or, better yet, the lie is the truth. Everything is deniable, I am newly determined; but it is an ontological determination. I cannot be something I am not but, at the same time, Nothingness is the Being, therefore infinite potentiality; though, being so, we would have to recognize anyway that that which is potentiality is not my identity but, instead, my identity possesses potentiality. In this manner, to define myself is to treat myself as an object. For example, to recognize myself as a sinner is to not recognize myself, to become nothing. What is demanded of the victims is that they recognize themselves as things. The other is always a thing. Every relationship is the act of treating as an object; therefore, every relationship is, in great part, victimizing. There is no relationship in which the conscience does not play its role, in which stereotypes, expectations, images, or representations are not generated; and this pushes my Being farther away from the represented. Furthermore, regarding my relationships with others, they only see their representation of me.

If our starting point is that whenever we speak we err, that whenever we emit words we lie, and that whenever we self-define ourselves we move farther away from ourselves, then, in the same manner, all definition of bath faith or sincerity is to lie. When I believe that the other understands what I say, I do not understand that he understands only what it seems to him, based on what I say. To say what I know is not to say the Being. Sartre remains very close to it in the following affirmation: "If the bad faith is possible in the manner of the simple project, it is due to the fact that, justly, there is not such a sharp difference between being and not being when it is

about my being”.<sup>9</sup> Either we assume that we always lie or we assume that there is no possible truth. Here, “to tell the truth” is not understood as “to say what I know”; it is instead understood that “to say what I know” makes it impossible for me to possess *the* Truth in it. It is not the same to say what we know, or to say that which is correct, than to say *the* Truth.

If I attempt to believe myself as brave (by the bad faith of denying myself a coward), then I want to think of myself as something else which I am not (being brave), in such a way that I am not either. If I assume myself as cowardly, it may possibly be – though it sounds paradoxical – for fear of recognizing myself as brave; so, either there is still bad faith, it is always there, or there isn’t any. Since I always have the not-being (in the manner of not knowing something) then I cannot hide my own Being from myself (for I do not know it), with which the inexistence of the supposed bad faith is understood.

There is no denial that does not suppose the affirmation of the denial and the affirmation of that contrary to the denied. So, in the same manner, there is no affirmation that does not suppose an *a priori* denial that is now contradicted (if it was not this way, there would be no need of any affirmation) and the denial of the contrary to the affirmed. Our perceptions are always between these opposites that are one at the same time. This supposes that everything that we have believed at any given moment can also be false; and that, in fact, all our constructs, upon being bound to linguistic conditionings, are personal gestations with an ample spectrum of fiction.

If I decide to be of bad faith since “one makes oneself of bad faith”,<sup>10</sup> I am not truly – of bad faith – for we have said that this is a representation and the representations are not the Being. Bad faith is a label and, as a label, it is not the Being which is projected, even upon attempting to project the Being.

In the same manner, if “believing is knowing that one believes, and knowing that one believes is no longer knowing”,<sup>11</sup> then, likewise, knowing that I lie to myself is no longer a lie for I break it upon knowing it. He who has faith does not know that he has faith; he believes he knows that of which he only has faith. Knowing I am not breaks my eagerness upon being, in the same way that being the consciousness of the unconscious makes this no longer the unconscious. The consciousness is to control and I cannot control it without having control. In other words, “I could not pretend to myself that I believe in order to not believe and that I do not believe in order to

---

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 123.



believe”.<sup>12</sup> What I know, I know. In the moment that I want to believe myself as intelligent, it could be since I believe I am ingenuous<sup>13</sup>, but I am really not intelligent or ingenuous. Everything is a belief; and if all belief is false, then believing to be free is also false. When I become aware of the game which life implies, which supposes being part of a Puppet-Master – as I have said –, then I know that I believe which is why I cease to believe. In this manner, when I cease to believe I begin to let myself loose from the Puppet-Master’s cord, for I am leaving the consciousness aside. But I cannot completely let go for the consciousness of not believing is also a consciousness; I cannot live without letting go of the Puppet-Master’s (Nothingness’) string; I need it. Furthermore, it is a Puppet-Master which does not necessarily have a will. If I advance to the highest grade in which I free myself from the need to be free, in which I have let go of more than the consciousness, I can then free myself from the need to live and from the need of the consciousness. When this occurs I am ready to die, to be let go once and for all from the bond with the Puppet-Master. The tragedy is that the consciousness will never grasp such freedom. This is the manner of telling the truth with a lie.

Science itself is limited in this sense. The truth of science is a situated truth, the noumenal escapes to it like Nothingness escapes the totality of the consciousness. Sartre supposes that there is a constant risk of the consciousness being of bad faith. My idea is that it cannot be in any other way. In the end, the conscience “is not the totality of the being but rather the instant nucleus of that being”;<sup>14</sup> only the spark which, as a culminating experience, allows the individual to day-dream that he truly is and that, furthermore, he is freely. It is then understood that man is a contingent being and that he is constituted as a being-in-relation.

Nothingness is not the denial of the Being, it is its affirmation. Furthermore, “nothing is the structure of the real since the being has Nothingness within it”.<sup>15</sup> Bad faith, in any case, is: believing that the Being is and that the not-being is not. It would be “forgetting the nothing that each one is in the movement of transcendence”.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>15</sup> Sergio Givone, *Historia de la nada*, pp. 228-229.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

## 2. MERLEAU-PONTY: THE NOTHINGNESS WE DON'T SEE UPON LOOKING

Merleau-Ponty's (1908-1961) analysis is centered on the evidence that never is something that has not previously occurred by sight presented to our intellect and that, at the same time, nothing is in it that has not been presented to our surroundings. He affirms that "we only see what we look at",<sup>17</sup> and yet, we do not look at everything but only that which our eyes present to us. Eye movement, the fact that our eyes are not stable, allows us to look at more things which suppose sight movement. It is not the mind which sees, but rather the eye that presents the seen. It would seem that Merleau-Ponty attempted to return, in part, to the classic ocularcentrism<sup>18</sup> of ancient France, for it is understood that it was his starting point. And it is because it is not the eye in itself which completes the process of the look, but rather that the mind that has the eye as a collaborator and finishes the job.

Stated differently, I see everything that is in my reach; the situation dominates the panorama. I am only able to know that which for some reason is in my surroundings. The enigma is that the person who sees is, at the same time, the image of others who see. He is found within the field of vision; he is an image that is presented to the look. The eye "sees itself by seeing, touches itself by touching, is visible and sensible for itself".<sup>19</sup> It is not removed from the world of the visible, which is why it is not above it but within it.

Now, the images are closer than that what is real for man since they have a similarity with something internal that makes sense when it is found in the exterior; the interior associates itself. However, the image is also far from that which is real in the sense that, precisely, it only exists as a similarity due to its distinction, which Derrida would call "differance"<sup>20</sup> and is the starting point of equivalency. This supposes, therefore, that "the imaginary is much closer and farther away than the real";<sup>21</sup> and that the image is not only something external but also something internal: the innerness of the exterior and the exteriority of the interior.

Vision learns by seeing; this is to say, creating constant equivalencies to find itself based on what it sees. Hence, it is understood that even if an artistic painting is complete, in another sense it is always partial. The image of himself which man sees is also a way of contacting himself to himself. The only way for me to see myself is as if I

---

<sup>17</sup>Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "El ojo y la mente", en Osborne, *Estética*, p. 103.

<sup>18</sup>Cfr. Martin Jay, *Ojos Abatidos: la demigración de la visión en el pensamiento francés del Siglo XX*, 2007.

<sup>19</sup>Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>20</sup>Vid. Jaques Derrida, *Márgenes de la filosofía*, 1989.

<sup>21</sup>Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

were someone else. Therefore, what I see of me is also a representation; my own look is also a partial look, an equivalent in the world of supposition and inequality. The only way to know myself is based on seeing what I am not; and in that sense, it is that “man is man’s mirror”<sup>22</sup> and we are condemned to not see ourselves more than the image. Not only the painter is to confuse the imaginary with the real, but also knowledge itself supposes such a confusion which, at the same time, is innocently reproduced in an interminable manner throughout the centuries.

The eye is not enough but it is “the thought which strictly deciphers the signs given on the body”.<sup>23</sup> In that sense, similarity is the result of the perception, not its origin. If perception does not exist, neither will the similarity of my interior with the seen, be understood. Now, the manner in which it is possible to perceive is due to eye movement. The mind, however, remains at the expectation of what is offered to it by sight. In Merleau-Ponty, one does not arrive at the radical affirmation that “we see with the mind or with the body in the Bergsonian anti-ocularcentrist sense”<sup>24</sup> for example, but it is affirmed that without mental work, the eye would only be an eye that doesn’t see and, therefore, not an eye but something blind.

Anyhow, the body determines my look, at least in what corresponds to spaceness, dimensionality, and thus perspective. Though I could suppose that things are behind other things, in reality each thing occupies a space that, in relation to the space that is occupied by the thing I am – my body –, is conceived in the look in a particular manner.

Perception is enslaved by the space which, at the same time, is enslaved by one’s own look; which, in turn, intrinsically depends on the body’s position. Finally, the mind depends on the eye and the representation, in turn, on the mind. Hence, the conception of reality is a contingential issue. So, behind all of it, it is derived that there is no vision without thought, nor thought about the seen without vision; which is why “everything we say and think about vision has to make a thought of it”.<sup>25</sup>

It would also have to be added that the body that possesses the eye that looks, and that enables the mind to think about vision, is a body which is found situated, besieged, fenced in, and surrounded in the world. And not a world at man’s mercy but rather that man is at the mercy of the world, for “the world is around, not in front, of

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>24</sup> Jay, *op. cit.*, 156.

<sup>25</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

me”<sup>26</sup> and I do not control it. I only control what is left for me after that control of the world over me.

Vision is not a certain way of thinking about things but, rather, “is the medium which has been given to me for being absent from myself, for being present in the fission of the Being from within; a fission upon the ending of which, and not before, I return to myself”;<sup>27</sup> which is why it can be affirmed in tune with Levinas<sup>28</sup> that it is in the looking at what is around my body that I find myself as a seeing body.

The eyes are, in that sense, so essential that whoever doesn’t have them “would deprive himself of the knowledge of all the works of nature”<sup>29</sup> leaving himself in a dark prison. The eye opens the spirit’s contact with the different and, in spite of it, a Cartesian would remain in the idea that the world is nothing more than simply a light of the mind; but for Merleau-Ponty, the world is there, incompletely seen through the representation, but seen at last. Vision is “precedence to what is over what one sees and makes seen over what is”.<sup>30</sup> In the end, what I don’t see is more than what I see; and something that I don’t see directly is Nothingness which, however, even so is reflected in what I can see.

There is no doubt that what one knows depends on what one sees. There is also no doubt that what one represents based on what one sees depends, in turn, on what one knows. Doubt exists, in any case, towards what subjectivity supposes: the being of the Being, the truth. If the terrain on which both the scientist as well as the philosopher move is already moveable in itself, how to make affirmations that contain universal un-timeliness and validity? Such notion is then not possessed more than as spurious fantasia. The truth ends up being slippery, like a vain prostitute who doesn’t let herself be completely possessed and only flirts to make of men naive dreamers, whose intellectual lust allows us to keep living a little.

The eye and the mind are accomplices among each other, paladins of the representation of the looked upon. Knowing is benefitted from the symbiotic union between both elements, for it is never possessed in its totality. Truth turns unreachable, the unseen, what escapes the trivialities of language and is further from any symbol, though by the symbols themselves is partially dismembered, lightly approached. The Lacanian Brunnian link leaves the real in supremacy, which lays itself over the symbolic and imaginary as the unreachable that permits the existence of

---

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>28</sup>*Vid.* Levinas, *La realidad y su sombra*, 2001.

<sup>29</sup>Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 146.

---

the other pair. While we remain in the process of the assumed mundaneness, due to corporality, we will have to keep on recurring to the eye and the mind in order to partially understand. And, after that: Nothingness.

### 3. LEVINAS AND THE SHADOW OF NOTHINGNESS

The thought of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) manifests an initial sentence which is the starting point of all reflection: that the forms and attributes with which we conceive the Being do not show us its primordial essence. Every attribute drags a shadow which contravenes with, and hinders its, discovery. The aforesaid supposes that there are no pure objects, unless purity is found between what the object is and the shadow that complements it, and is. The term of the shadow in Levinas doesn't differ too much from that attributed by the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung to that which we hide from ourselves through masks; the counterpart of which, latent, is always constituted together with the Being, hidden behind the shadow.

The image hides a kingdom of shadows from us. Understanding that world is only possible with a border vision, something similar to that set forth by the Spanish philosopher Eugenio Trías, in the sense that the structure of the appearing<sup>31</sup> does not show what the Being locks in and, thus, a vision in other dimensions and open to other perspectives is necessary.

Likewise, the concept of shadow referred to by Levinas is associated with that presented by Plato in the allegory of the cave; this is to say, that what we observe in this world, so far from the world of the ideas, is a distorted reflection of them. Reality, therefore, is always accompanied by a shadow. Plato's world of ideas perhaps may be closer than we think, maybe on top of our neck. But, it would have to be said, that such conceptions are not demiurgic ideas, much less innate, but rather only representations with which is established the communication with the mortal world that belongs to us.

The forms are not only two-faced beings which are multifaceted and, so, we are to ask ourselves: which face is it that we are seeing when we direct the look towards something and what do we still need to see, if that is possible? Levinas denounces the "tyrannical monopoly of the categories"<sup>32</sup> adducing that these blind our perception more in the supposition that they span reality, enclosing it in humanly limited concepts.

---

<sup>31</sup> Vid. Trías, *La razón fronteriza*, 1991.

<sup>32</sup> Levinas, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

The shadow, however, is as necessary as the light. We are to begin reconciliation with the concept of darkness; we have thought it so far from us that then it darkens us. If it is accepted that the shadow also belongs to us we could see more of the light, or at least see a little more through it. This supposes the immersion into a type of notion that is different than that offered by science or technicalities, for “there where the common language abdicates, speak the poem or the picture”.<sup>33</sup> Of course music is not left out, as Plotinus observed, who understood it, together with philosophy, as a way towards the knowledge of all divine things.

Art does neither belong to the order of revelation, nor to that of creation; in any case, to that of expression. The esthetic element is, according to its etiology, sensation and not knowledge.

In the same manner, us people have the cartoon of our own Being on our face. It generates sensations, hardly knowledge. The person is not his image, but that is what we see of him. The thing is itself and its image. The image is not the thing, but the relationship it has with its own image is the similarity. Finally, “the image, it can be said, is the allegory of the being”;<sup>34</sup> and when one is conscious of this game of representations, one recognizes that the object is not there. The Nothingness of the representations is recognized.

Hence, “similarity is the structure itself of the sensible”<sup>35</sup> and such similarity only exists if we prove what Jacques Derrida called the *differance*, since that which does not have a difference is not similar but instead is equaled. Before the non-equality, what remains is the evidence of the difference, therefore of the similarity. At least, one is similar in the sense that one is not the same. When a person sees a piece of art through the look, he permits himself, in the allegory of that same piece, to understand from the perspective of the spectator, which will always be distant from that of the author. The author manifests himself and the spectator rescues in the expression which is foreign to his own manifestation. It is Nothingness which is observed, an empty space, free to be filled in a thousand ways, infinite space.

Furthermore, beauty – it could be said – is the Being faking its cartoon, covering or “absorbing its shadow”<sup>36</sup> in the same way, as in Derrida’s manner, like the denial of the not-being which is simulating the Being. Beauty is, then, a product of simulation.

---

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>36</sup>Levinas, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

#### 4. DERRIDA: THE VEIL OF NOTHINGNESS

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), in conjunction with Hélène Cixous, presents for us a true approach toward the impossibility of contacting reality by way of the look. Both with regard to the texts, as well as to that which refers to the encounter with others or that which is different in oneself, the look is diminished by the impossibility to contact the seen, since we obtain from it – as a starting point – only representations.

Firstly, in Derrida and Cixous' text titled *Sa(v)er* [Savoir] is where the process of the defeating, or death, of myopia is found. The poet speaks of herself as someone who was continually prevented from seeing, or at least never saw with security. Seeing was a limping belief. Everything was a maybe and, due to it, "seeing found itself in a state of alert".<sup>37</sup> The question is: if behind the possibility of using her eyes, she can now completely see or if somehow we always continue with a relative myopia. If this is so, there is no laser to cure it and we remain in an unending world of representations, in an uncontainable symbolic interactionism.

Myopia is the start of confusion. Its limits generate contradiction for it is the forger of error and preoccupation. We are people with myopia since we are accustomed to seeing what is and not what is not. Could it be that seeing is the supreme pleasure; in other words, ceasing to not see? Perhaps it is only ceasing to see *less*. On a different note we could ask: am I who sees? Or perhaps vision only comes to me as an imperfect instrument of contact with space? Is it myself who sees or the eyes? There are no guarantees; and, in that sense, "each day the imprecision of the imprecision diminishes".<sup>38</sup>

Neither is it denied that not seeing oneself allows the experience of some peace. This, since the conflict of seeing one's own self supposes the responsibility of outlining what one sees; tags in the end; concepts which lock man up, hence free from himself upon not seeing himself. If the look is an imperfect connection to reality due to our translation of the seen, then, as a cognitive subject, the human is never parted from the sphere of the haze. Seeing myself will always be a not seeing myself, far more tragic, additionally, than the not-being. If I don't see myself it is not that I don't exist, it is simply that I exist without being an object – or a "for what" – decanted by the conscience. To not see, the possibility of seeing would have to exist. If there is no existence, then not only does one not see, but one does not know that one does not see oneself, for there is no possible vision.

---

<sup>37</sup>Derrida y Cixous, *Velos*, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 28.

Therefore, to affirm that one does not see oneself and that, due to it, there is tranquility, is more of a placebo before the uncertainty and anguish of knowing that at some moment one will have to see oneself again. The not previously seen perhaps could take pleasure in utter peace, but not the man who at some point has seen himself already, for that supposes that he has catalogued himself; that the knowing lead him to conceptualize and, hence, he outlined himself, thus jailing himself. Peace is very temporary; so brief that it only allows breathing a little before returning to the abysm.

In fact, if one sees oneself without distancing oneself, perhaps one is not seeing with real sense. Is seeing close-up seeing? I need distance and the difference aroused by it (and the inverse) to be able to see. Without it I could not see. Now, since everything is different to me, but I don't essentially see everything, then I only see the differences. How to explain from this perspective what I see of myself? How do I explain the fact of seeing myself? I see, then, what I am not; again it is nothing that I see, due to Nothingness.

With regard to the presence prior to the world, who has seen it? We could accompany Derrida in the question about the presence after the world. Once again – as has been mentioned lines above – only what exists is not seen. It is not that what doesn't exist is not seen, it is simply not conceived. We can conceive Nothingness in spite of us not seeing it; it is because, precisely, its existence supposes our blindness before it. Contrary to the Gestaltic suppositions, contact is always partial. In the writings of Fritz Perls, the pre-contact is conceived as a haziness of that which one has before oneself. Contradiction arrives when the term “totality” joins Gestalt in the hypothesis that full contact is possible. There isn't any. If the look is diminished and, on the other hand, the caress is only possible in the differences, then it is not possible to find a full contact since contact is only possible precisely in the difference. There is no unity; there is no communion, only proof of distance.

To specify, truly, is to diminish. To specify the observed is to diminish the observation of the not specified. In such a way that, in what corresponds to the look, the diminishment becomes focalization, which is a reduction of the visual frame to center myself on that which I am to better understand for I have diminished it. The diminishment centers my look on a specific point, thing, or person – if I am in an encounter as per Levinas' manner – to then understand it more, diminishing it. The diminishment will generate that I never see it in reality, but that I do see it partially. I conceive it, at least, and this is better than not conceiving. If seeing is not possible, the not-see seeing is preferable to not conceiving that seeing could be possible. This supposes accepting, with regard to human interaction, that it is only possible for us to see ourselves upon distorting ourselves. Upon distorting you, I see you; but it is better,



or preferable, than not to have ever been able to conceive the possibility of the contrary about you. Mutual understanding is recognizing that we are not recognized, that the other escapes my world as I escape from his, and equality in it.

If the veil is what covers, how can I perceive the veil of the veiled? In which manner can I come to understand that I have not come to understand it? How to see that I don't see, to understand that I don't understand? How to discover that I don't discover something? It is about unveiling the veil, seeing the veil; not in the logic of always seeing it, but in the perspective of knowing that the veil is seen, not that which is veiled, beginning with understanding that the veil is. Merleau-Ponty would have to implicate for us this sense of the phenomenal possibility in us, the distinction between the eye and the mind, to then recognize that there is no visible reality, only shadows, veils everywhere. Recognizing it is the first step to penetrate the knowledge of the veil and not suppose it as the veiled.

Behind the exercises of unveiling – and the long unveiling nights that this implies – a sustained tiredness is obtained; tiredness from the veils of the truth before the necessary irreducibility of the truth to comprehend it, and from the ineffable fact of the loss of it in the intention of possessing it.

Tired of believing that one knows when only what has wanted to be seen is seen: the veil. The unveilings that do not tear the veil are placebos. They do not cure the need of knowing; when knowing is something, even believing that there is no veil; when it is even thought that one knows, in spite of not believing in that itself. Aporias and contradiction, finally veils over the crystalline table and nothing on the table, only the possible unveiling that never arrived and wasn't seen, nor is seen.

Now, reader, I find myself together with my veiled part which tells the person who supposes he tears the veil: and you still believe in the possibility of knowing things without the veil that supposes them? The difference between reality and perception is not only an imaginative issue. It is not possible to absolutely know; knowledge will always be a distortion. Why, then, to know if in the end the known will never be properly the cognoscible object (it is now uncognoscible)? Isn't it better to humbly retreat to the cave of complete unknowingness? Perhaps intellectual masochism? What is the pleasure derived from attempting and never finding oneself with truth? What is the name of this miserable sentence? Humanity?

And yet, small advances are possible; the mourning of an eye that turns into another eye. In the end, also listening depends on the look; for to listen, one has to see well. To a great extent listening is also a seeing. If I don't know how to see, I cannot listen. Never has communication been truly verbal. What I do when I listen to you is explore my world, rediscover it (unveil it), and generate my own images. I hear what

you say, I listen to what I understand, and I see what I desire. The “non-contact lenses”<sup>39</sup> are finally ineludible; I require a lens in order to focus, but this focus separates me from the focused on. To touch the world with eyes is precisely to caress the difference (there is no caress without it) derived from the difference.

We only look to diminish our not-being in the appearance of being something. How to diminish the not-being but by being? But how is one to be if one is not? What is left is to conceal the not-being; and what better manner to do so than not seeing? We have, then, a concealing blindness.

Your look allows me to see you see me. Your look unveils the undeniable fact of the veils that possess me. Nobody will see me without the veil of the visual representation and verbal interpretation. To see you see me and allow you to see that I see you, is nothing more than ensuring the impossibility of knowing each other; a knowledge which isn't possible either towards myself, for I cannot see me seeing myself. I only see the image that is shown and reflected in objects. I cannot see myself as you see me, in the sense of the position of being a looker, and also in the sense of that which is contained in the look, of the cognitive consequence in you of looking at me.

In a different manner, language is the ineludible instrument to be able to understand texts, to read. In the end, “knowing how to read is only accomplished from the given garment”<sup>40</sup> and, thus, I owe the twisted meaning to the given. To be able to contradict one veil with another veil does not consist only in placing it in front. “It is not enough to have use of concepts, one has to know how to place them, as the sails of a boat are placed, clearly sometimes to escape, but in the condition of taking the wind in the sails”.<sup>41</sup>It is an issue of force. The sails are the words; their placement transforms them into concepts. To be dialectic means to have the force of history's wind in the sails. In the end, the consensus is given by the concordance with the said. Discrepancy generates turmoil, for it supposes an unveiling, but there is also a likely advance.

What knowledge doesn't know is what happens; what happens in this moment or what happens in another. Hence, one needs to know another *voir*, the *voir* of the other; a knowing which allows seeing and not the knowing that makes those who know blind. Finally, death is the moment in which I cease to look. Death removes every veil but we can no longer see the unveiled for we have been unveiled ourselves before death: the death that liberates, the Nothingness that is; the final unveiling.

---

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 84.

## CONCLUSION

The veil of the Truth which intends to communicate – though it was never had – are the words. What is true about Truth is unreachable, not due to an issue of distance but of closeness. I cannot see what is not separated from me. From being so close it is infinitely far away; nothing further away than that which is in front of me. And in the end, the manner of looking at oneself supposes a comparison with what one is not; never a real contact, only representations, continuous veilings of the supposed knowledge. All of this, in the same manner, occurs with Nothingness, since it not only is near the visor that each one is, but that each one is it in himself. As if it were not enough, we have inherited a tongue because it has never been really ours. Language is the way of distorting what had already been distorted by sight. The veil is multiplied.

In French philosophy of the beginning of century XX, the problem that originates the consideration of nothingness is present, as are the efforts that Sartre undergoes in order to demonstrate an ontological freedom and deny the constant contingency that precedes us and accompanies us in life as humans; in his philosophy, the same impulse to achieve it, is glimpsed in the emptiness of freedom. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that our gaze is conditioned by the body, a carnal instrument that at the same time enables contact with a type of exteriority that also impedes contact for us with what is alien to us as humans; that unlimited space of possibilities is a modality of nothingness that, precisely, presents itself to us as nothing. In Levinas, that concept becomes a noun and ends up denominating itself the shadow, which, as an evident distortion of things, alienates us from the things themselves of which we know little or nothing. This constitutes the idea of the veil proposed by Derrida; that with which we can observe things when they are not what they are and they end up reduced to a visual fantasy.

Nothingness, or its consequential empty spaces derived from our human condition, are a foundation of the French philosophical vision that recognizes, in a humble exercise, that knowledge is a fraction of illusion and that what we know is less than what we don't know. The latter, unknown in itself, will forever keep on being a nothing in our order of the world.

Universidad de Guadalajara  
Mexico  
hectorsevilla@hotmail.com

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Derrida, Jacques, *Márgenes de la filosofía*, Madrid, Cátedra, 1989.
- Derrida, J.&Cixous H., *Velos*, México, Siglo XXI, 2001.
- Givone, Sergio, *Historia de la nada*, Buenos Aires, AH Editora, 1995.
- Jay, Martin, *Ojos Abatidos: la denigración de la visión en el pensamiento francés del siglo XX*, Madrid, Akal, 2007.
- Levinas, Emmanuel, *La realidad y su sombra*, Madrid, Trotta, 2001.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, “El ojo y la mente”, en Osborne, H., *Estética*, México, FCE, 1976.
- Sartre, Jean Paul, *El ser y la Nada*, Buenos Aires, Losada, 2006.
- Trías, Eugenio, *La razón fronteriza*, Barcelona, Destino, 1999.