Chapter Two

The Totalizing Violence of the Same

Hey, hey… Where is everybody…? (It is evident she is not bothered) […] George?
(Looks about her) George? (Silence) George!
What are you doing: Hiding, or something?
(Silence) GEORGE! (Silence) Oh, fa Chri.…
(Goes to the bar, makes herself a drink and amuses herself with the following performance)
Deserted! Abandon-ed! Left out in the cold like an old pussycat. HA! […] (Baby-talk now)
Daddy? Daddy? Martha is abandon-ed. […] I cry alllll the time; but deep inside, so no one can see me. I cry all the time. And George cries all the time, too. We both cry all the time, and then, what we do, we cry, and we take our tears, and we put ’em in the ice box, in the goddamn ice trays (Begins to laugh) until they’re all frozen (Laughs even more) and then… we put them… in our… drinks.
(Albee, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? 185-86)

This monologue takes place at the beginning of Act Three in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. The narrator in the above epigraph is Martha, who has committed adultery with Nick at the end of Act Two. Two of the most important men in Martha’s life, George and Daddy, are mentioned in this paragraph. Martha’s father is a college president. Although he never shows up in this play, his influence is tremendously significant. Martha’s father stands for the all-pervading violence in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. The first part of this chapter will elaborate the concept of ontology by exemplifying Emmanuel Levinas’s critique of Western tradition as a totalizing
philosophical system. Through an analysis of numerous examples of the totalizing violence, the issue of the ontological self in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* will be more clarified in the second part of this chapter. The totalizing violence is made manifest through Martha’s father’s reduction, Nick’s assimilation, and Martha’s negation.

**Levinas’s Critique of Ontology as a Philosophy of Power**

In the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas remarks the theme of his book: “Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality” (*Totality* 21). Levinas believes that morality is not an aspect or perspective at all but “first philosophy” (Peperzak 123). The way Levinas introduces the key concepts such as war and peace, violence and freedom in the Preface confronts us with two major concerns in *Totality and Infinity*: the violence of totality and the transcendence of infinity. The violence of totality will be the linchpin in this part of discussion.

Totality here refers to any philosophical system associated with totalizing power. In his introduction to *The Levinas Reader*, Seán Hand notes: “*Totality and Infinity* is the book which most explicitly criticizes the totalizing version of previous philosophical systems in the West” (5). In an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas explains this “totalizing version of previous philosophical systems in the West” as follows.

In the critique of totality borne by the very association of these two words [totality and infinity], there is a reference to the history of philosophy. This
history can be interpreted as an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought. The consciousness of self is at the same time the consciousness of the whole. There have been few protestations in the history of philosophy against this totalization. (Ethics 75)

Through his extraordinary keen observation, Levinas indicates that the history of philosophy can be summarized as “an attempt at universal synthesis” or “totality” (Ethics 75). Philosophy is, or should be, the love and pursuit of wisdom. However, this discipline has gradually narrowed down into the discussion of the self’s consciousness or the self-identification. Totality becomes the absolute thought in the history of philosophy.

Since philosophy has become the study of the conscious self, its main focus is always the self. The totality which dominates Western philosophical systems is characterized by Levinas as an ontology: “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being” (Totality 43). By definition, “ontology” is the study [logos] of Being [ontos] (Atterton and Calarco 5). Ontology is Levinas’s general term, which refers to “any relation to otherness that is reducible to comprehension or understanding” (Critchley 11). It can be found in the history of Western thought ever since the Greeks. Briefly speaking, ontology is a self-centered philosophy in the Western tradition. Ontology can be traced from the ancient Greek to
the present: “Being as one” in Parmenides of Elea,5 “same” and “other” in Plato, “I” and “not-I” in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “ego” and “an alter ego” in Edmund Husserl, and even “the primacy of Being over beings” in Martin Heidegger (Atterton and Calarco 5-17). The ontological Western tradition manifests itself in many different forms but its central thinking revolves around the term “same” or “I” or “ego.” The privileged term in the history of Western philosophy has always been the Same. The following discussion aims to examine three major ontological thinking and Levinas’s critique of them—I and not-I in the Hegelian dialectic, ego and alter ego, and the Heideggerian primacy of Being.

The process of establishing personal identity can be summarized as the universal thought—“I think” (Totality 36). “I think” in the Hegelian dialectical sense could be understood by the differentiation between I and not-I. To being with, the concept of I is to have one’s own identity. However, this identity of I does not always remain the same. The goal of the self-identification is to try to integrate or reject the encountered propositions and counter-propositions and hence the self redefines its identity. Levinas perceives a similar “self-consciousness” in the Hegelian dialectic (Totality 36). The Hegelian dialectic consists of three stages—thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. On the discussion of the development of personal identity, the three Hegelian dialectical stages can be interpreted as follows: “I” encounter the “not-I” and find this contradiction of “not-I” “nothing other than I” and then “I” become “I” once again. The Hegelian dialectical unification of I is achieved by overcoming the not-I.

5 Parmenides of Elea was an ancient Greek philosopher and poet. In his poem, Parmenides describes the division of “appearance and reality”—“the way things merely appear to our senses and the way they are in themselves” (Atterton and Calarco 5).
Therefore, the Hegelian dialectic is a self-related and self-centered philosophy “because it is but the play of the same” (*Totality* 37). Against this pretense of I and non-I division, Levinas contemplates: “If the same would establish its identity by simple *opposition to the other*, it would already be a part of a totality encompassing the same and the other” (*Totality* 38). The knowing subject “I” develops its identity by realizing that what supposedly to be other than itself ("not-I") to be *nothing* other than itself (emphasis added, Atterton and Calarco 11). Through the thesis-antithesis-synthesis model, the “I” successfully integrates the “not-I” into itself and becomes one single totality.

The Other is perceived solely in its relation to the Same. As Colin Davis points out: “In the phrase *alter ego* only the word *ego* has been thoroughly examined, whereas the *alter* has been suppressed” (31). In the totalistic thinking, an alter ego has been divided into two parts: the alter part has been purposely suppressed, while the ego part is transformed into another ego. The other person, or an *alter ego*, is just another *ego* like me (the word alter is crossed out to emphasize the suppression). The Other is forced to be “ultimately reconciled with the Same” (Davis 40). The hidden purpose of ontology is always to find a means of incorporation of the Other into the Same in the hope of “offsetting the shock of alterity” of the Other (Davis 40). Reduced to another *ego*, an *alter ego* falls into the category of the Same and then becomes another “I”.

“Heidegger’s thought is a very important version of ontology” (Peperzak 138). Instead of exploring the relationship between self and other, Heidegger’s thought turns its insight into Being. Nonetheless, Heidegger’s thinking of Being is still an
ontological totality. The Heideggerian ontology concerns the mode of existence of individual human beings. The question of human existence is also the question of Being. Attributing every relation with human beings to the relation of Being, the Heideggerian ontology favors the term Being. Indicating that Heidegger affirms “the priority of Being over existents,” Levinas writes: “In subordinating every relation with existents to the relation with Being the Heideggerian ontology affirms the primacy of freedom over ethics” (Totality 45). The Heideggerian ontology subordinates all relation, including the relation with the Other, to the relation with Being in general (Totality 46). Since “understanding or thinking is obedience to Being” (Perperzak 139), the understanding of the Other consequently falls under the category of the domain of Being. The Heideggerian ontology privileges Being and thus is a tyrannical totality.

As illustrated above, the three major ontological philosophical systems—I and not-I in the Hegelian dialectic, ego and alter ego, and the Heideggerian primacy of Being—manifest different forms of ontology. The history of philosophy is the history of the affirmation of self-identity. “The relation with the other,” Levinas argues, “is here accomplished only through a third term which I find in myself. The ideal of Socratic truth thus rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same. […] Philosophy is an egology” (Totality 44). The relation with the Other turns out to be the reduction of the Other. Associating the Other with a third term as “not-I” or “alter ego,” the Western thought is in fact an egology. Philosophy has thus become a self’s egocentric meditation on the world, instead of the genuine relationship between I and the world. This self-affirmation is accomplished through “neutralizing the existent in order to
comprehend or grasp it” (*Totality* 45). In the process of neutralizing the existent, an act of violence is suggested by Levinas:

Thematization and conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable, are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other. For possession affirms the other, but within a negation of its independence. “I think” comes down to “I can”—to an appropriation of what is, to an exploitation of reality. Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power.

(*Totality* 46)

Neutralizing the existence of the Other is a way for ontology to comprehend and control it. Treating the Other as a concept or an object, “I think” is transformed into “I can” or “I possess.” The establishment of ego is the source of all meaning and knowledge, while the Other is acknowledged only in order to be suppressed or possessed by the ego (Davis 40). Ontology is an egology and a philosophy of power.

To Levinas, ontology as first philosophy is “a philosophy of injustice” (*Totality* 46). He endeavors to “solicit the ethical within ontology” (Caygill 96). The ontological self has always constructed its identification through the opposition to the other. Incorporated into the selfsame totality, “the Other is only other in a restricted sense” (Davis 40). For that reason, Levinas posits ethics as first philosophy. However, one thing needs to be noted here. Levinas does not promote that “the Other dislodges the primacy of the Same, or infinity abolishes totality;” instead, his aspiration is “to elaborate a philosophy of self and Other in which both are preserved as independent and self-sufficient, but in some sense in relation with one another” (Davis 41). As the title of *Totality and Infinity* alludes to, it is totality and infinity, not totality or infinity.
The conjunction **and** here designates that neither one term has the upper hand over the other. To privilege the Other rather than the Same will reproduce another violence similar to the totality of Being. The effort of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* is to achieve a better understanding of the difference between the Same and the Other (Peperzak 138), along with a preservation of these two terms (Davis 41).

The focus of discussion will shift from the investigation into the violent essence of ontology to the characteristic gestures of ontology. In the modes of reduction and possession, the self demonstrates its violent totalization through negation, assimilation, and manipulation of the Other. For Levinas, the whole tradition of Western philosophy is “to acknowledge the Other in order to incorporate it within the expanding circles of the Same” (Davis 40). Consequently, the relation between the Other and the Same is merely a “reduction of the other to the same” (*Totality* 46).

Acknowledging the Other as not-I is a way of negation. Regarding the Other as alter ego reveals a desire for assimilation. Both negation and assimilation are means for reduction that leads to the suppression of the alterity of the Other.

In addiction to reduction, the ontological self secures its own primacy through possession. Refusing to be alienated by the Other, the ontological self reduces the Other to a theme or an object (*Totality* 42-43). “I think” extends to “I can” or “I possess.” In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, Simon Critchley writes, “Ontology is like the movement of the hand, the organ for grasping and seizing, which takes hold of (*prend*) and comprehends (*comprend*) things in a manipulation of otherness” (16). In an attempt to comprehend the Other, the self perceives the Other in a way like a hand grasping an object. In the process of
comprehension, the otherness is digested by the self like food and drink and gradually dissolves into the totalization of ontology.

As discussed above, ontology is a philosophy of power that privileges the self (or Being) over the Other (beings). Ontology, the philosophy of injustice, is often accompanied with domination and violence. In his Introduction to *Totality and Infinity*, John Wild announces:

> There is a strong tendency in all human individuals and groups to maintain this egocentric attitude and to think of other individuals either as extensions of the self, or as alien objects to be manipulated for the advantage of the individual or social self. (12)

> I may simply treat him as a different version of myself, or, if I have the power, place him under my categories and use him for my purposes. But this means reducing him to what he is not. (13)

Through this egocentric thinking, the Same subsumes the Other. “It is this outwardly directed but self-centered totalistic thinking,” Wild explains, “that organizes men and things into power systems, and gives us control over nature and other people” (17).

Ontology as a philosophy of power only leads to violent destruction such as war suggested in the opening remark in Levinas’s Preface to *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas’s insightful critique of ontology thus helps analyze similar totalizing violence in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

### The Totalizing Violence in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

In Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, ontology that is criticized by
Levinas takes in many forms. The violence of ontology is demonstrated in several aspects of reduction and possession. The ontological self’s totalizing inclination to assimilate, suppress, and incorporate everything into its supremacy will be thoroughly examined through various examples of violence. There are characters, who are present in this play; however, there are also other characters, who are absent but whose presence is also felt in the play. Besides the imagined child, there are several absent characters in this play: Martha’s father and mother, and Honey’s father. These characters never show up in this play but they live in “the discourse of others” (Rosefeldt 4). Characters in this play, both absent and present ones, are rather influenced by the violent totalization. A good example of such character is Martha’s father; however, Martha herself best exemplifies the character of this violent totalization. Having internalized the totalizing ontological thinking, she seduces and subordinates Nick so as to secure her power.

A college president, Martha’s father, illustrates the notion of the ontological self in this play. Central to the dramatic action but never appearing on the stage, he is constantly mentioned by other characters. Every dialogue referring to him insinuates his absolute power. The play begins with George and Martha arriving home at two o’clock in the morning and Martha suddenly announcing that they have guests coming:

GEORGE. […] But why in God’s name are they coming over here now?

MARTHA. (In a so-there voice) Because Daddy said we should be nice to them, that’s why.

[…]
GEORGE. But why now? It’s after two o’clock in the morning, and….

MARTHA. Because Daddy said we should be nice to them!6 (10)

Martha’s response reveals not only her dominating personality but also her father’s penetrating influence. To Martha, her father’s commands should be obeyed without questions. Another illuminating instance for the deifying image of Martha’s father is shown as follows.

HONEY. (To MARTHA) And your father! Oh! He is so marvelous!

NICK. (As Above [Attempting enthusiasm]) Yes … yes, he is.

HONEY. Oh, I tell you.

MARTHA. (Genuinely proud) He’s quite a guy, isn’t he? Quite a guy.

GEORGE. (At NICK) And you’d better believe it!

HONEY. (Admonishing GEORGE) Ohhhhhhhh! He’s a wonderful man.

GEORGE. I’m not trying to tear him down. He’s a god, we all know that.

MARTHA. You lay off my father! (25-26)

Compared to George’s description of Martha’s father as a god for pure sarcasm, Martha’s respect for her father is genuine and sincere. The image of Martha’s father presented in this conversation is god-like. Even if Martha’s father never appears in the play, his presence is felt throughout the play. Martha’s father maintains an almost god-like presence in this play in that he stands for the absolute power that conditions and controls other characters.

A comparison and contrast of Martha’s father and other absent characters helps analyze the notion of the ontological self in Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?. Paul

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6 Edward Albee, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (New York: Pocket, 1962), p. 10. All subsequent references to this play will be noted parenthetically in the text.
Rosefeldt provides an excellent discussion on the absent characters in modern drama in this book *The Absent Father in Modern Drama*. In this thoroughly well-presented analysis, Rosefeldt identifies that the absent characters “exist in story but not in plot, or in discourse but not in presentation” (3). The presence of absent characters is perceived through discourse and representation. According to Rosefeldt’s categorization, the absent character may be dead or alive, a supernatural being like God or an animal like a dog, the skeletal remains or a mysterious being or even imagination (4-5). Although Rosefeldt does not include Albee’s play in his review, his examination of the absent characters in other plays could be applied here to better understand the totalizing characterization in Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.

Two other absent characters, Honey’s father and Martha’s mother, reinforce the totalizing characterization of Martha’s father. While Martha’s mother is presented as a foil character, Honey’s father, Nick’s father-in-law, serves as a parallel character to Martha’s father. When Nick and George chat about their father-in-laws, Nick mentions his father-in-law’s profession:

NICK. […] My father-in-law … was a man of the Lord, and he was very rich.

GEORGE. What faith?

NICK. He … my father-in-law … was called by God when he was six, or something, and he started preaching, and he baptized people, and he saved them, and he traveled around a lot, and he became pretty rich.

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7 Story is “the basic narrative outline,” which includes actions before or during the play, and plot means “the narrative events” that happen within the play (qtd. in Rosefeldt 3). According to this definition, absent characters never show up in the play so that they do not exist in the plot but in the story. Therefore, their importance and influence may be exhibited through discourse and representation.
famous … not like some of them, but he became pretty famous … and when he died he had a lot of money.

GEORGE. God’s money.

NICK. No … his own.

GEORGE. What happened to God’s money

NICK. He spent God’s money … and he saved his own. He built hospitals, and he sent off Mercy ships, and he brought the outhouses indoors, and he brought the people outdoors, into the sun, and he built three churches, or whatever they were, and two of them burned down … and he ended up pretty rich. (108-09)

Being “a man of the Lord,” Nick’s father-in-law is a representative of God and exercises God’s power. Similar to Martha’s father, Nick’s father-in-law is elevated to a godly position and possesses great material wealth. Nick’s description of his father-in-law interestingly correlates with the god-like image of Martha’s father. Whether dead or alive, both fathers see themselves as gods endowed with godlike power.

In contrast to paternal power exhibited above, Martha’s mother is a foil character. The role of Martha’s mother seems to be insignificant in Martha’s life:

MARTHA. All right, now. Mommy died early, see, and I sort of grew up with Daddy. (Pause-thinks) … I went away to school, and stuff, but I more or less grew up with him. Jesus, I admired that guy! I worshipped him … I absolutely worshipped him. I still do. And he was pretty fond of me, too … you know? We had a real … rapport going … a real
Martha uses only one sentence to describe her mother, “Mommy died early” (77). Yet she outwardly shows affection towards her father. “I worshipped him,” Martha not only once but repeatedly shows her intense love and admiration for her father (77). Martha’s confession reveals two things: her indifference to her deceased mother and her total devotion to her beloved father. Being an absent character, Martha’s father is constantly mentioned by Martha and George. However, Martha’s mother is excluded from the discourse. Martha’s mother “are not just absent, but missing” (Rosefeldt 4). The absence of mother character might suggest “ideological implications in a play about wounded motherhood” (Rosefeldt 4). In Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the absence of Martha’s mother and her exclusion from discourse strengthen the absolute power of the father figure.

Rosefeldt points out the way toward the mechanism of patriarchy in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. These absent father figures might represent paternal authority as well as patriarchy, which privilege the position of the father (Rosefeldt 6). The godlike position of Martha’s father exhibits a phallocentric and patriarchal society. When Nick talks about his plan to stay in the college temporarily, George gives him this advice:

GEORGE. Well, don’t you let that get bandied about. The old man wouldn’t like it. Martha’s father expects loyalty and devotion out of his … staff. I was going to use another word. Martha’s father expects his … staff … to cling to the walls of this place, like the ivy … to come here and grow old … to fall in the line of service. (41)
In Martha’s father’s opinion, the faculty members in this college are supposed to dedicate their lives to the school. “[T]he absent father,” Rosefeldt concludes, “not only controls the dynamics of the plot but also influences the trajectory of the other characters” (10). Having high concern for one’s own interests and low concern for other’s, this self-supremacy thinking of Martha’s father articulates patriarchal ideology that “organizes men and things into power systems” and takes “control over nature and other people” (Wild 17).

This pervading patriarchal thinking is implied in Martha’s following utterance: “And Daddy built this college,” Martha states, “it’s his whole life. He is the college” (77). The scenes in this play take place in the living room of a house on the campus of a small New England college. Martha’s father is the college president and he stands for “his” college. He plays the role of god in this kingdom and his words are like god’s words. According to Martha’s narration, the college is equal to Martha’s father. The school and Martha’s father seem to merge into one unity and wholeness.

The equation “He is the college” reveals totalistic violence. The consciousness of self as a whole can be interpreted as a philosophy of totality. This totalizing philosophical system or the violence of totality is characterized as ontology by Levinas. Ontology is a philosophy, whose concern is to assure its wholeness through the reduction and suppression of the other. Levinas notices the violent aspect of ontology and specifically indicates that ontology is not only a philosophy of power but also “a philosophy of injustice” (Totality 46). Martha’s father embodies Levinas’s concept of the ontological self. His self-sufficient synthesis is a desire to become one whole totality and thus results in conflicts and violence.
In Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* ontology disguises itself in many forms. Various instances related to the self’s totalizing violence demonstrate the characteristic gestures of ontology—the reduction, assimilation, and negation of the otherness or alterity of the Other. In this play, Martha’s father, Nick, and Martha correspond to the aforementioned three characteristics respectively. The totalizing violence is elucidated by the reduction of Martha’s father, the symbolic assimilation of Nick, and the self-destructive negation of Martha. To begin with, the boxing match episode serves perfectly as an excellent example to unveil the true face of ontology in that Martha’s father, the ontological self, intends to incorporate George into his idea of masculinity. This episode starts with Martha’s telling Nick and Honey a story about the boxing match she and George had twenty years ago:

MARTHA. It was wartime, and Daddy got the idea all the men should learn how to box … self-defense. […] Anyway, so Daddy had a couple of us over one Sunday and we went out in the back, and Daddy put on the gloves himself. […] And he asked George to box with him. Aaaaannnnnd George didn’t want to … […] and Daddy was saying, “Come on, young man … what sort of son-in-law are you?” … and stuff like that. […] and I snuck behind George, just kidding, and I yelled “Hey George!” and at the same time I let go sort of a roundhouse right … […] … and George wheeled around quick, and he caught it right in the jaw … POW! […] and he was off balance … he must have been … and he stumbled back a few steps, and then, CRASH, he landed … flat … in a huckleberry bush!

(54-56)
When the subject of their conversation switches to muscles and body, Martha brings up this boxing story. According to Martha’s narration, Martha’s father asks George to box with him. Being prudent or cowardly, George refuses to fight with his father-in-law and gives up this great opportunity to exhibit his masculinity. Nevertheless, George ends up with getting flat on the floor by Martha’s “just kidding” punch.

Like the ontological self, Martha’s father tries to force George to box with him—a way to incorporate George into his idea of masculinity. When Martha starts to tell this anecdote, George gives a sick look on his face and exits (54). “I think it’s colored our whole life,” Martha happily concludes her story, but George finds it annoying (57). The reason why George feels uncomfortable may relate to the ideological implication in this boxing match. Boxing is one of the oldest forms of competition. The sport is exhausting and brutal. People fight one another with their fists. Boxing is regarded as a performance of masculinity. In this boxing match, George’s choice to decline battle makes him less masculine in the eyes of his father-in-law. When George disobeys the president’s command that his faculty all learn how to box, Martha’s father shows his discontent: “what sort of son-in-law are you?” (56). Through incorporation and negation, the ontological totality “reduces the other to the same” (Totality 42). Martha’s father forcing George to box is a desire to incorporate George into his concept of masculinity and thus displays his strong tendency of totalizing nature.

Besides the incorporation of the other, the ontological self suppresses the other through assimilation and in this play the subject Nick studies symbolizes this
assimilating force. Nick’s violent aggression is suggested by his name. In the chapter “Edward Albee” of the book *A Critical Introduction Twentieth-century American Drama*, C. W. E. Bigsby makes comments on the naming of characters in this play: “[Nick], named, apparently, after Nikita Khruschev, lacks George’s moral sensitivity. He is a totalitarian interested in power” (267). Being “a totalitarian interested in power,” Nick stands for the aggressive force. When Nick and George chat about Nick’s future prospect, Nick talks about his big plan: “Take over a few courses from the older men, start some special groups for myself … plow a few pertinent wives…” (112). These statements may sound like a joke, but they reveal Nick’s ambition to take control of the school.

Besides Nick’s vivid ambition, the subject Nick studies might also suggest his dominating inclination. While George is a History professor, Nick is a Biology professor. The subjects they study insinuate their different concerns. Compared to George’s humanistic compassion, Nick’s interest lies in scientific facts. George offers his opinion on the chromosomes business and he portrays the future of genetic screening.

GEORGE. [T]his young man is working on a system whereby chromosomes can be altered … well not all by himself – he probably has one or two co-conspirators – the genetic makeup of a sperm cell changed, recorded … to order, actually … for hair and eye color, stature, potency … I imagine … hairiness, features, health … and *mind*. Most important … Mind. […] Everyone will tend to be rather the same…. Alike. Everyone … and I’m sure I’m not wrong here … will tend to look
George’s vision of the future pictures is that scientists will make people all look the same and control our thinking. The responses of the ladies present to this vision are “How exciting!” and “That’s not a bad idea” (65). Although Nick himself does not advocate this making-people-all-the-same chromosomes business, he acquiesces in George’s vision. He claims himself to be “the wave of the future” (68) and “a personal screwing machine” (69). The young and ambitious Nick “represents a direct and pertinent threat” to George (111). Through George’s words and Nick’s acquiescence, the playwright insinuates that Nick represents the future dominating force.

The suggested chromosomes business symbolizes another feature of ontology—assimilation of the Other into the Same. Afraid of “the shock of alterity,” ontology aims to eliminate the otherness or alterity of the Other (Davis 40). Ontology is an inclination of “the assimilation of otherness into Sameness, where the other is digested like food and drink” (Bernasconi and Critchley xi). If ontology takes over the world and makes people all look the same, the variety and the multiplexity of individuals will disappear. There will be no individual personal trait. No creativity. No culture. No difference. With the chromosomes research to make all look the same, Nick, the one who is aggressive and eager for power, is transformed into the ontological self assimilating the otherness or alterity of the Other into the realm of totality.

Among all the characters in this play who are endowed with the power to totalize other people, Martha is the one that has internalized the ontological thinking. Like a pious believer in her father’s totalizing inclination, she explains to Nick how
she wishes to continue her father’s legacy.

MARTHA. And I got the idea, about then, that I’d marry into the college … which didn’t seem to be quite as stupid as it turned out. I mean, Daddy had a sense of history … of … continuation. […] A sense of continuation … history … and he’d always had it in the back of his mind to … groom someone to take over … some time, when he quits. A succession … you know what I mean?

NICK. Yes, I do.

MARTHA. Which is natural enough. When you’ve made something, you want to pass it on, to somebody. So, I was sort of on the lookout, for … prospects with the new men. An heir-apparent. (Laughs) It wasn’t Daddy’s idea that I had to necessarily marry the guy. I mean, I wasn’t the albatross … you didn’t have to take me to get the prize, or anything like that. It was something I had in the back of my mind. […] (79)

The patriarchal thinking has deeply rooted in Martha’s mind. Her declaration of marrying into the college is the best proof. Her life goal is to find a husband as a successor to her father’s business. In the article “The Theater of Edward Albee,” Lee Baxandall comments on Martha’s personal tragedy: “Martha isn’t stupid. She is capable of criticizing her own actions, and she can be very affectionate. But she has no realistic hope of becoming more than a Discontent Housewife while her imagination remains derivative” (91). Being born a woman, Martha has been deprived of her right to be the heir apparent. In fact, Martha is a smart, capable and ambitious woman. She is a college graduate (78) and she knows what she wants pretty much.
Moreover, her dominating and aggressive personality suits with her father’s expectation for the successor to his job. If Martha were a man, there would be no problem at all.

On the one hand, Martha is victimized by the confines of patriarchal society, and on the other hand she also internalizes this ontological thinking. The patriarchal continuum is a reduction of the female. Privileging the male sex over the female, the mechanism of patriarchy belongs to the ontological system Levinas opposes to. As Critchley expounds Levinas’s notion of ontology as “any relation to otherness that is reducible to comprehension or understanding” (11), the patriarchal empire of Martha’s father is also the ontological empire. Martha’s father’s patriarchal empire labels women as the “Other” and favors the male self only. Indeed, Martha, who is excluded from her father’s legacy, could be regarded as a victim of the patriarchal ontological empire. However, her wish to find someone to be the heir apparent illustrates her internalization of the patriarchal values. Martha has inherited the thinking of her father and she best articulates the character of the totalizing violence.

Having internalized her father’s ontological violence, Martha asserts her power over George and Nick by negating them in an extreme way. Through her abusive language and attempted adultery, she negates not only George but also Nick. The discussion of Martha’s totalizing violence will start from her negation of George as “not-heir-apparent.” Many critics have ascertained that the marital verbal dueling between George and Martha is fierce and destructive. However, this verbal abuse in marriage is in fact another totalizing violence of ontology. Martha constantly uses the

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8 For discussions of verbal dueling, see Hirsch 24; Amacher 78; Bigsby 267; Roudané Understanding 65.
abusive language with the intention of hurting George. Martha feels let down by George’s less competitive personality and she complains: “He’s an old bog in the History Department, that’s what George is. A bog…. A fen…. A G.D. swamp” (50).

While George is a professor in the History Department, Martha expects him to run the History Department and even the whole school.

GEORGE. Martha tells me often, that I am in the History Department … as opposed to being the History Department … in the sense of running the History Department. I do not run the History Department.

[...]

GEORGE. I did run the History Department, for four years, during the war, but that was because everybody was away. Then … everybody came back … because nobody got killed. (38)

Instead of being the Chair, George is a member in the Faculty of History. George’s career hits its peak during the war time because no one else competes with him. It disappoints Martha and her father that George cannot take over the History Department and succeed her father in the presidency. Martha reveals her great dissatisfaction with George’s little accomplishment:

MARTHA. George didn’t have much … push … he wasn’t particularly … aggressive. In fact he was sort of a … (Spits the word at GEORGE’S back) … a FLOP! A great … big … fat … FLOP!

(CARSH! Immediately after FLOP! GEORGE breaks a bottle against the portable bar and stands there, still with his back to them all, holding the remains of the bottle by the neck. There is a silence, with
everyone frozen. Then.....)

GEORGE. (Almost crying) I said stop, Martha. (84)

Martha calls George a flop and outwardly despises him, who is “almost crying” and begs her not to continue. Blaming George for his inability, Martha finds many ways to hurt him. She constantly accuses George of being a loser, calling him a “cluck” (3), “dumbbell” (4), “simp” (14), etc. Even the boxing match story mentioned above is brought up by Martha purposely with the cruel intention to embarrass and humiliate George as well as for her own amusement and fun.

Negating George as “not-heir-apparent,” the ontological self of Martha minimizes George’s self-esteem. George fails to meet the expectation to take over the college and thus he is regarded as a mere failure in the eyes of Martha and her father. Ontology in Levinas’s concept is “a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being” (Totality 43). Since George could not succeed to the role of the heir apparent to Martha’s father’s college, Martha and her father consequently associate George with “not-heir-Apparent.” In the perception of Martha and her father, George becomes a complete loser. Martha even takes George’s failure as an excuse to humiliate George. The equation “not-heir is a loser” demonstrates the violent ontological thinking. “Not allowing itself to be alienated by the other,” the totalizing self intends to reconcile the otherness with itself (Totality 42). The totalizing self regards the Other as “not-I” and thus reconciles the otherness with itself. Martha and her father represent the tyrannical self that minimizes George’s self esteem by negating George as “not-heir-apparent.” It is by negating George’s work performance that the ontological self of Martha secures
Along with the abusive language to negate George, Martha’s intentional adultery demonstrates her violent negation to George and Nick. Martha’s adultery is an act to provoke George and to subordinate Nick to herself. The process of her seduction is like hunting prey and her changing clothes preludes the open season. When Nick and Honey show their intention to leave, George urges them to stay:

NICK. (Softly, to HONEY) We’ll go in a little while.

GEORGE. (Driving) Oh, no, now … you mustn’t. Martha is changing … and Martha is not changing for me. Martha hasn’t changed for me in years. If Martha is changing, it means we’ll be here for … days. You are being accorded an honor, and you must not forget that Martha is the daughter of our beloved boss. […] (46-47)

Martha’s changing dress is an obvious act to George, who knows exactly that Martha’s interest is not in him but their guest Nick. The description of Martha’s re-entrance is significant. According to the playwright’s stage direction, “Martha has changed her clothes, and she looks, now, more comfortable and […] most voluptuous” (47). Reappearing voluptuously, Martha becomes an ontological hunter, whose target is to catch and possess Nick.

Like a hunter setting traps, Martha step by step lures Nick to her totalization. First of all, Martha uses direct body compliments to please Nick, which displays her inclination to possess other characters. As Honey proudly announces that Nick is a middleweight boxing champion, Martha immediately turns the subject of their conversation to Nick’s body figure. “You look like you still got a pretty good body
now, too … is that right? Have you?” Martha asks, and “unselfconscious … almost encouraging her”, Nick replies “It’s still pretty good. I work out” (52). The later interaction between Martha and Nick foreshadows their adultery:

HONEY. Oh, yes … he has a very … firm body.

MARTHA. (Still with that smile … a private communication with NICK)

Have you! Oh, I think that’s very nice.

NICK. (Narcissistic, but not directly for MARTHA) Well, you never know … (shrugs) … you know … once you have it. …

MARTHA. … you never know when it’s going to come in handy.

NICK. I was going to say … why give it up until you have to.

MARTHA. I couldn’t agree with you more.

(They both smile, and there is a rapport of some unformed sort, established)

I couldn’t agree with you more. (53)

Complimenting Nick’s firm body, Martha is not afraid of showing her great interest in Nick. She repeats the sentence “I couldn’t agree with you more” as a confirmation of the secret “rapport” established between she and Nick (53). This rapport insinuates the forthcoming adultery between them. As Richard E. Amacher expounds in the chapter “Battle of the Sexes—New Style,” Martha’s admiration for Nick’s body exhibits a “shameless worship of the male body” (73). With her unconcealed worship of body, Martha unleashes the true face of her ontological self that desires to possess other characters.

Second, Martha makes jokes with sexual connotation to humiliate George and
to encourage Nick. The incident of George’s re-entering with a toy gun increases the tension among characters and discloses Martha’s intention to hurt George and to possess Nick. When Martha ignores George’s appeal to stop telling the box match story, George exits and then reappears with a shotgun, aiming it at the back of Martha’s head. The shotgun turns out to be a toy gun and Martha says to Nick: “You don’t need any props, do you, baby?” (61). Without answering, Nick “smiles at Martha” (61). The attraction between them becomes clearer and greater. “Props” here mean a tool or a fake gun, with the connotation of “the male sexual organ” (Amacher 75). This question has two purposes. First, it implies Martha’s suggestion that “George is sexually impotent” (Amacher 75). Second, it contains Martha’s sexual encouragement to Nick. Martha’s vicious joke appears to be motivated by the hope of hurting George and her impulse toward totalization is gradually transformed into a real act of adultery.

Third, Martha dances and flirts with Nick; in terms of Levinas’s concept, her ontological self reaches “its hand” out toward Nick. The dancing scene in Act Two offers the opportunity for body contact between Martha and Nick. While George and Honey sit and watch, Martha and Nick dance and flirt:

MARTHA. (To NICK) Hey, you are strong, aren’t you?

NICK. Unh-unh.

MARTHA. I like that.

NICK. Unh-unh.

HONEY. They’re dancing like they’ve danced before.

GEORGE. It’s a familiar dance … they both know it …
MARHTA. Don’t be shy.

NICK. I’m … not. …

GEORGE. (To HONEY) It’s a very old ritual, monkey-nipples … old as they come.

HONEY. I … I don’t know what you mean.

(NICK and MARTHA move apart now, and dance on either side of where GEORGE and HONEY are sitting; they face each other, and while their feet move but little, their bodies undulate congruently....

_It is as if they were pressed together_) (130-31)

This dance symbolizes the mutual attraction between Martha and Nick. Their dance is a courtship dance, a very old ritual as George describes it. After this intimate physical contact, Martha’s courting behavior is bolder. Martha blows Nick a kiss twice (162). When the two are left alone, Martha takes the final action to incorporate Nick into her totalization. She asks Nick to hand her a cigarette and calls him lover. When Nick approaches, she “slips her hand between his legs, somewhere between the knee and the crotch, bringing her hand around to the outside of his leg” (163). This gesture of her hand reaching out can be read literally and figuratively. Literally, she intentionally uses her hand to touch the important part of Nick’s body. Figuratively, the ontological self of Martha finally reaches “its hand” out toward Nick. As Critchley comments, “Ontology is like the movement of the hand, the organ for grasping and seizing” in an attempt to comprehend and manipulate the otherness (16). Martha’s hand both literally and figuratively grasps and seizes Nick, which exemplifies her totalizing
inclination to possess Nick’s otherness.9

Martha’s violent totalization, her adultery with Nick, is a deliberate act to possess Nick and to provoke George. Martha’s desire for Nick reveals a sense of ontological possession. After Martha slipping “her hand between [Nick’s] legs,” Nick get nervous and uncertain (163). Martha urges Nick to go further:

MARTHA. … you won’t get hurt, little boy. …

NICK. … not so little. …

MARTHA. I’ll bet you’re not. C’mon. …

NICK. (Weakening) But what if he should come back in, and … or …?

MARTHA. (All the while her hand is moving up and down his leg) George?

Don’t worry about him. Besides, who could object to a friendly little kiss? It’s all in the faculty.

(They both laugh, quietly … NICK a little nervously)

We’re a close-knit family here … Daddy always says so. … Daddy wants us to get to know each other … (163-64)

While Nick still worries about George, Martha tries to convince him, “Daddy wants us to get to know each other” (163). Through their adultery, Martha satisfies her desire to possess Nick’s young body. Since she has achieved her goal, she loses her interest in him. When the door chimes chime, Martha asks Nick to go answer the door:

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9 This example aims at showing the suggested ontological violence in this play. Martha’s attempt to grasp Nick, both literally and figuratively, demonstrates the totalizing violence of the Same to comprehend and incorporate the otherness of Nick. However, the alterity of Nick cannot and will not be incorporated into Martha’s ontological totalization in that Nick remains as the Other in Levinas’s propositions. Further discussion on the issue of the Other will be included in Chapter Three.
NICK. Look, lady, I’m no flunky to you.

MARTHA. (Cheerfully) Sure you are! You’re ambitious, aren’t you, boy?

You didn’t chase me around the kitchen and up the goddamn stairs out
of mad, driven passion, did you now? You were thinking a little bit
about your career, weren’t you? Well, you can just houseboy your way
up the ladder for a while. (194)

Martha exercises her power of being the daughter of the college president. Calling
Nick a houseboy, Martha subordinates him to herself. The relationship between
Martha and Nick is now redefined as master and slave. “Thematization and
conceptualization, which moreover are inseparable,” Levinas states, “are not peace
with the other but suppression or possession of the other” (Totality 46). Regarding
Nick as her servant, Martha manifests her power to manipulate Nick and her desire to
suppress Nick’s otherness. Martha’s intentional adultery with Nick and her
subjugation of Nick present an act of ontological violence.

Deliberately committing adultery is Martha’s extreme way to hurt George.
When Nick gives in to Martha’s seduction, she pushes him away asking him to wait.
Martha is waiting for George to act, but she gets irritated when she sees George
reading a book. “Her anger has her close to tears, her frustration to fury” (113).
Asking George to pay attention to her, Martha is offering him chances to stop her
would-be infidelity.

GEORGE. (Swinging around to her again ... loud ... loathing) SO WHAT,

MARTHA?

MARTHA. (Considers him for a moment ... then, nodding her head,
backing off slowly) O.K. … O.K. … You asked for it … and you’ll
going to get it

GEORGE. (Softly, sadly) Lord, Martha, if you want the boy that much …
have him … but do it honestly, will you? Don’t cover it over with all
this … all this … footwork.

MARTHA. (Hopeless) I’ll make you sorry you made me want to marry you.

(At the hallway) I’ll make you regret the day you ever decided you come
to this college. I’ll make you sorry you ever let yourself down.

(She exits) (173-74)

Martha will stop her would-be infidelity if George shows any concern for it. However,
George’s seeming indifference makes Martha feel hopeless. Blaming George for all
disappointment in life, Martha deliberately commits adultery to hurt George.

Through Martha’s adultery, the totalizing ontological self of Martha negates
both Nick and George. In the whole process of courtship, Martha’s body compliments
and flirting dance work well to lead Nick to the final catch. Martha uses her words
and hands to lure Nick and to hurt George step by step. This ontological totalizing
violence is fully achieved by the action Martha takes—committing adultery. Martha’s
infidelity has two totalizing effects. First, Martha subordinates Nick to herself in order
to suppress Nick’s otherness. Second, Martha humiliates George, who fails to show
his masculinity. Having internalized her father’s ontological inclination, Martha
eventually fulfills her wish to negate both Nick and George.

Levinas’s notion of the ontological self in Albee’s Who’s Afraid of Virginia
Woolf? is embodied by Martha’s father’s reduction, Nick’s assimilation, and Martha’s
negation. Both present and absent characters in this play are rather influenced by the
totalizing violence of the ontological self. Absent in this play but central to the
dramatic action, Martha’s father, illustrates the notion of the ontological self that
favors the male self and reduces women as the “Other.” In the boxing match episode,
the ontological self of Martha’s father tries to incorporate George into his idea of
masculinity. Also, the subject Nick studies symbolizes the totalizing violence of
assimilating otherness into Sameness. Moreover, having internalized her father’s
ontological inclination, Martha uses abusive words and intentional adultery to negate
George and Nick. Reduction, assimilation, and negation are characteristic moves of
ontology that take control and manipulate people and things. Levinas’s abiding
concern is the primacy of the ethical relationship between the Same and the Other in a
genuine way so that both terms preserve their alterity. Levinas’s propositions, the face
of the Other and one’s responsibility to and for the Other will be explored in the
following chapter.