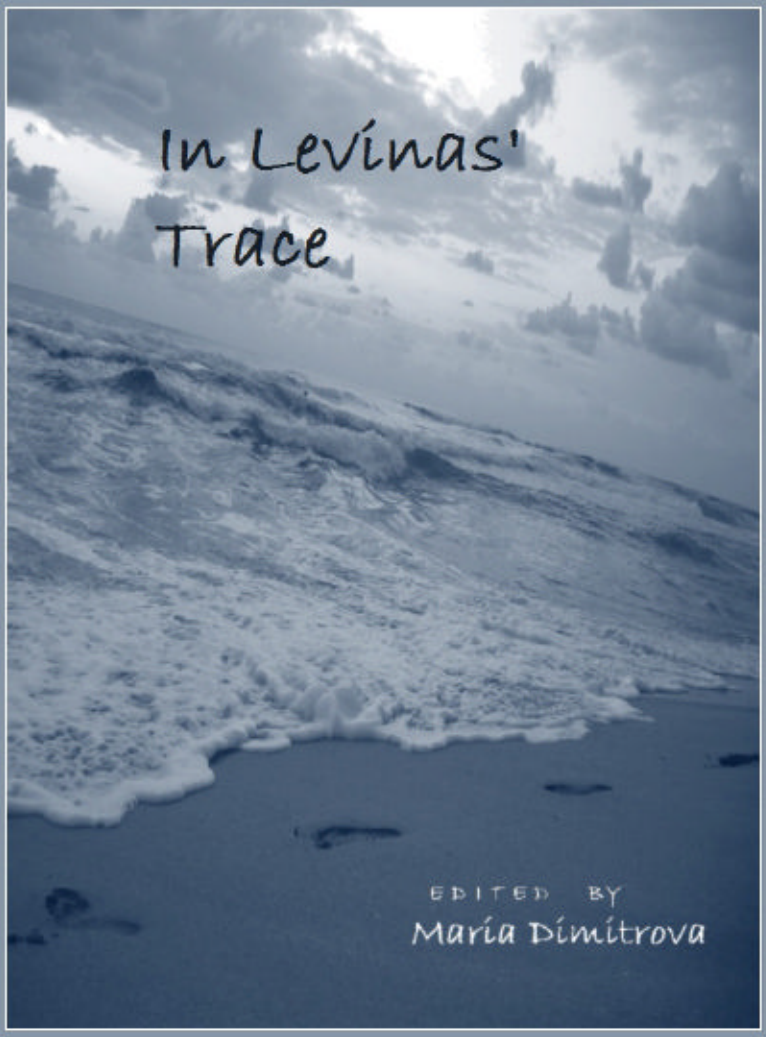
In Levinas'
Trace
EDITED BY
Maria Dimitrova

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FOREWORD

MARIA DIMITROVA

The format of this book is not at all like the systematic philosophical expositions of such heavy and voluminous treatises as Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism*, Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, Fichte's *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, Locke's *Two Treatises on Government*, Hume's *A Treatise on Human Nature*, or Kant's *General History of Nature and Theory of the Heaven*, etc. In the age of optimistic modernity philosophers have strived to create a system of knowledge that is compatible with the totality of the world - the unity of nature and society. Paradoxically, they have faced something unexpected which can be called the original and eternal incompleteness of the experience of the world. It is as though the completeness of the experience and the completeness as such, for us mortals, can not be actual but, in the best case, only potential, only possible. Consequently, the idea that modernity coincides not with the completed period of history but with the everlasting project of modernization has come to the fore. Modernity concurs with the very process of its construction, which remains open toward Transcendence, again and again.

Modern authors were motivated by their metaphysical uncertainties and strove to overcome any limit and transcend any horizon. But how could they accomplish this? Their solution was through expanding the finite to the size of the infinite. The task was to establish an unshakable beginning to that process of development. They believed they would reach alterity by means of extrapolating some universal origins and principles on the other; their wish was to capture the Other in categories and in this way to reduce it to the Same.

But, apparently, the situation has turned upside down. In the postmodern situation, the naïve expectation that otherness can be ignored or, reversely, assimilated within the totality—cultural, cognitive, practical, interactive, social, historical, etc.—is frustrated. This state of frustration has been perceived as a decentralization of the experience which the modern man organized around "*'I think' that accompanies all my representations*". This sense of disorientation that has emerged when the univocal perspective

is missing (determined earlier by the presence of the thinking Self as a point of departure of any movement) is neither pleasant nor encouraging but rather disorganizing and depressing. However, this is exactly the reason why we are asking ourselves whether in this threatening and boundless ocean of the pluralistic postmodernity, where we helplessly swim in the turbid waters of confusion, pluralism, multiculturalism, hybridization, eclectics, profanation and demoralization, Levinas' philosophy, declaring ethics as first philosophy, could not be a saving remedy.

For Levinas, the notion of totality (understood ontologically by a traditional philosophy as the sum of all possible elements and their relationships identical with the Being or existence as a Whole) is derived analytically from thinking, which is viewed as the highest instance of synthesis of knowledge. Levinas opposes this philosophy with the idea of ethics prior to ontology. He questions the departure from the thinking subject and gives priority to the moral subject and to the relationship with Exteriority or Transcendence, understood as *autrement qu'etre*, that is, *beyond Being*. According to Levinas, Transcendence reveals itself prior to the objectifying thinking and summons me by the face of the Other to give a response to the incessant challenge of his otherness.

The otherness of the Other is not determined in relation to the items inside the world system, but is the absolute otherness—otherness outside any context. The face of the Other occupies a starting point in Levinas' philosophy and it means the pure exhibition of the Other in his human vulnerability, finiteness and mortality, which can be read in his naked eyes. By his very presence, even if it is silent, the Other is appealing to me to not ignore him and to not kill him with indifference, relegating him to the level of mere object. The Other is calling me to respond to his humanness. The encounter with the Other takes place even if I turn my back to him and try to avoid him because I have witnessed the revelation of his face even before showing indifference. In Levinas' words, this encounter with the Other (not in his capacity of social role performer inside the system of society but as a human face - and the face cannot be anything else but human) throws into doubt totality wherein each relation is dominated by cognition and power. Through the moral relationship with the Other, the subject is transcending its being in the process of irreversible ageing, whose human (and not naturalistic) sense is an expiation for the Other. In response to the otherness of the Other, the moral subject becomes aware of the existence of Infinity and, correspondingly, his own finitude.

But how can the finite human being comprehend the idea of Infinity? He somehow cannot but grasp Infinity as something that exists and, in this sense, as something commensurable with the other existents and/or at least with existence as such. Immediately, I hurry to stress that Levinas' intention is more radical than Heidegger's. The issue here is not just to shed some light on existence, which is veiled by the existing items, but to overcome the Being itself, which is also dependent in its meaningful structure—in the very core of the "*ontological difference"*— on the logic of cognition and truth, that is, upon the idea of Totality.

On this issue, Levinas goes back to Descartes, who assumes that the idea of Infinity is not created by us but is rather instilled in each of us. For Levinas, the idea of Infinity is not a product of our constitutive faculties, nor a goal of our projects. It is also not a compensation of our weakness by expanding our own narrow-mindness to a cosmic size and even to Eternity. The very idea of Infinity occurs to us originally each and every time we encounter the otherness of the Other. This is the reason that in Levinas' philosophy the relationship between the Other and me is the initial horizon of any reflection, including the philosophical one, upon existence, cognition, action, communication, the finite, and the infinite.

If the face of the Other is radical otherness, if it is always beyond my perception (a perception that turns it into an object), the very fact of its manifestation provokes its inclusion in the totality of consciousness. This, however, annuls its otherness and the Other is turned back into the bosom of identity, as an element of the system that has submitted to its necessity. That is why in Levinas' philosophy, the otherness of the Other is defined as absence from the world horizon, as that which is beyond. It is transcendence, which can never be reduced to immanence nor expressed with the names of existing items. It can also not be subsumed under the concept of existence itself. In this sense, Levinas argues that the otherness of the Other is disclosed only as something past—as a trace.

While in *Totality and Infinity* attention is paid to the descent of the Other into my world, which gives me a chance being-for-him to-be-myself, in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* Levinas deals with the withdrawal, disappearance, or escaping of the Other from the totality of the world in which I willy-nilly encapsulate him. The face of the Other withdraws to what is beyond the world—not the kind of world behind our world but in what is beyond the entire dramatic dilemma of "being—nothingness". In the totality of the world the face is veiled with expressions, masks, roles, images, appearances, and functions inside the system. And of course, when he withdraws from them, what remains for

us is just his absence. Levinas, however, does not agree that the absence is as simple as it seems.

From the most remote past, we know that the Other has been, is, or at least can turn, into my hell. But recently we have learned—probably together with Sartre—that the Other is the hole in the being and through it the entire experience, the whole world can flow out. Then, the Self remains alone in the absurdity of its lonely naked existence in this frontier situation. Levinas' lesson reminds us that after the withdrawal of the Other the world does not disappear forever but is transformed into irretrievable past. As the Other's freedom is not equal to mine but is superiority - in this sense in spite of all efforts—it cannot be closed in the framework of totality; the Other escapes from my power. After his disappearing from view, after being hidden behind the horizon of the world, still something remains of the Other: it is his absence and his trace. While causes produce effects, people leave traces.

It is necessary, however, to take a clear and sober account of the fact that when we begin reading and reconstructing traces, the people who left the traces no longer remain. That is why the Other is never in the here and now but is always given as passing, in his trace, which is not a sign like other signs but points exclusively at the absent one whom no reconstruction could restore to life in a capacity of my contemporary inside the present time. A human being relates to the Other always in the past tense. The saying—my immediate relation to him—always precedes what is said, i.e. what is objectivized according to the logic of being and is always late, is always lagging behind. Levinas highlights that there is such a difference in any discourse. After the saying what is said is stopped and fixed in a certain way. But at the same time, nothing already said—what is articulated, written down, or memorized—can claim the last word. Everything said can be put under question by a new saying which denies its pretence to put an end to the infinite conversation. The otherness summons us again, provokes, and surprises, and in our attempt to capture it, to enclose it in the scope of totality, we realize that it evades, passes, withdraws beyond the boundaries not only of what is given, but of what is possible.

The radical discourse by itself is inseparably linked with the boundary. It is here, at the very place of frontier, that Levinas makes us aware of something, that might be more important than the correspondence between the truth of the discourse and the status of the items in the world, and the separation of what is here from what is there; indeed, a discourse aiming to categorize cannot exist without addressing, even implicitly, the Other. Language is *logos*, but also an *appeal*.

This is the exact reason why this book is not a monolithic, didactic, deductive, monological exposition of logos peculiar to the author's interpretation of Levinas' position. It is a collection of commentaries that have provoked the response of the author and have received the author's comment. Eventually, it gives us something more than a simple attempt, among the many others already published, to step in the deep trace left by Emanuel Levinas in our conversations and meditations. The intention of its editor does not go beyond her desire that this book be viewed by the reader as a gesture of respect and as an evidence of gratitude for Levinas' deed.

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I would like to express my thanks to the colleagues whose names I am not going to mention here because they will appear inside the book along with their corresponding contributions to this volume. My special appreciation goes to Sofie Verraest and George Christov for their translations and to Karim Mamdani for his final proof reading.

CHAPTER ONE

ETHICS IN AN EXTRA-MORAL SENSE

JERARD BENSUSSAN

To present in a single conference a line of thought as strong, as original, and as peculiar as that of Emmanuel Levinas involves a major difficulty. How indeed do we know where to begin, from what point of view to enter the subject, from which angle to introduce it? Every decision runs the risk of seeming arbitrary, every determined choice of seeming exclusive or forced. However, a choice has to be made, a mode of exposition has to be decided upon. If we reflect upon it somewhat, it does not seem the least judicious option to depart from that which is not Levinas's thought, but which it is nevertheless often unjustly held to be. Maybe, in this way, we can shed light upon a paradox which is so surprising that it seems to lead to some redoubtable misinterpretations here and there. Perhaps to signal them is not the worst possible way of broaching an oeuvre burdened with disdain and overwhelmed by simplified yet dominant readings.

The register in which this line of thought is deeply inscribed, the space in which its actuality has seemed to impose its motifs is, as we all know, "ethics". As far as this term of ethics and its dominant uses is concerned, we have to be careful from the outset not be misled. The reception of Levinas's oeuvre – understood in a broad sense, i.e. by a public of non-philosophers in the strict sense of the word, a public of non-specialists – had to deal with a conceptuality that is so new that it has had, and continues to have, the reputation of being difficult. In this reception, the theme of ethics and the theme, more or less concomitant with it, of responsibility have come to be added to one another as it were spontaneously, and with good right. In Levinas' own time and its outdated modalities, the reception of his work was largely reactive. If one were to reconstitute its history in the mobile panorama of philosophical ideas, one would notice that Levinas, for a good thirty years, was neither read nor heard, except by a few "amateurs" who went to listen to him at Jean

Wahl's Collège philosophique, or at the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale for his Talmudic Saturday morning lectures. Marked by marxism and existentialism, and then by structuralism, over-determined by the political context (the Cold War, colonial wars, the mobilizing theme of "changing the world"), the great debates in France after the Second World War took no notice of him, whereas he most certainly had knowledge of them, as his articles show us very clearly. If we take some distance, we can more easily understand this silence surrounding his oeuvre in its ecumenical reception.

The sixties and seventies were highly sensitive to history and its movements, that is to say, to what Levinas defines as "totality." His times were concerned with urgent and collective affairs in which the individual could only give "meaning" to itself by subordinating itself to a project which exceeded and encompassed it, to a universal and a worldwide revolutionary project. A meditation on the nature of Levinas, concerning my responsibility for a singular other, whatever the latter does, to the point that I can be held responsible for his very responsibility, and focusing on the absolute uniqueness of responsive subjectivity, could not but appear misplaced and in need of actualization in the context of that time. The climate which subsequently allowed Levinas to be read was marked by a general recession of the human sciences, especially of the marxism and structuralism which dominated the seventies – a recession which is itself tied up with world history, with global political events and, specifically, with the fall of communism. The new ideological landscape resulting from these conditions can be described as the condemnation to death of the death of the subject. According to "structural-marxist" themes (or sometimes the structural-marxist vulgate), man is acted upon rather than acting, and subjects merely appear as bearers of functions, as an assembly of discourses and dispositions, as organizations, that is to say, as the expression of a process of which they are nothing but the unconscious and determined bearers. Putting forward a quasi-paroxystic form of responsibility, of my ownmost responsibility, exceeding all determinations to which I may be subjected, Levinas seems to authorize – against a line of thought which has been dominant all along, and at a specific moment in intellectual but also in political, social, ideological history – some sort of a self-reappropriation of the subject, of its acting individuality, of its capacity for autonomous initiative.

But, while Levinas's thought appears credible, from several perspectives a real and profound contradiction seems to exist. Levinasian responsibility in no way results from an active "I want." It rather constitutes an original predetermination of the subject by means of which the subject is, upon closer look, more determined than it is by the unconscious or by the

relations of production. In the light of this contradiction, the Levinasian body of ideas runs the risk of being simplified, schematized and fixed as a moral quasi-ideology corresponding in a Hegelian manner to an era of universal history (whose necessity and legitimacy is, by the way, understandable), to a determined moment of this history which today is itself revolutionized. This intermediary era is that of altruistic and humanitarian morals, that of the verbal inflation of a divided ethics confused with deontological codes, that of the rediscovery of enterprise, the market, but also of human rights. An era of "an exhibition of ethics," as Plato describes constitutions concerning democracy. An era where one could, for example, speak of an ethics of journalism, a medical ethics, an employer's ethics, none of which is hardly linked to another. Consequently, the theoretical panorama in which they are inscribed, with its disassembled and often chaotic elements, appears as a Tower of Babel. Ethics of discourse, communicational ethics, neo-aristoteliansm, utilitarianism, contractualism, communitarianism, differentialism, meta-ethical reflection, applied ethics – so many moral positions which are practical, regional and competitive, which undoubtedly have their effective importance from a theoretical and practical point of view, from the point of view of foundation and of the question of comportment, but all of which have nothing in common with the ethics which Levinas constitutes as the pivot of all thinking about subjectivity.

The ambition of the author of *Otherwise Than Being*, indeed, is not to put forward (within the accustomed range of philosophical disciplines, from epistemology to anthropology through hermeneutics) a new theory of ethics as the study of *ethos*, an analysis of average and general human behavior. Reacting against a number of prejudices or established readings, we have to begin by emphatically stating that Levinas does not propose a moral philosophy. He even enjoins us to be careful never to fall "victim" to it; those are the first words of *Totality and Infinity*. In order to read him well, then, we have to keep ourselves apart from the hurried and the dangerous, and – let us say it as it is – attempt to find in his body of ideas a prescriptive ethics comprising laws or normative regulations capable of improving the moral quality of a given historical community. This preliminary clarification is necessary and very important. Levinas's ethics never engages in a more or less coherent systematization of the entirety of regulations concerning the behavior of a human group. Neither does he found the possibility of a rational justification of moral norms through or under a unifying principle. It is therefore truly required that we understand and interpret his ethics in its extra-moral sense.

What does this thinking aim at, what is its endeavor? Levinas is attempting to express the "sense" of "what is human in man" – an expression pointing to the "non-synthesizable," as he puts it, i.e. that aspect of and in man which never allows himself to be totalized without remainder or to be resumed in a totality of "meaning." Levinas's body of ideas constitutes an Ethics of Ethics, according to Derrida,[1] or an ethics without law, without concept, without morality, and which precedes its determination in laws, in concepts, and in morals. We are dealing less with outlining the foundations of subjectivity than of returning to its arche-origin along the uncertain axis of the relationships of man to man. Levinasian ethics proposes to think of this interhuman relationship as an encounter, something unexpected, the event of a break-in, and, even more radically, as a consequence, a relation to the infinite, of which the face – as the site of the break-in – in its absolute nakedness, would be the trace, i.e. the non-site. As such, the face resists all definition. To define the face would be to forget about the infinite it upholds in the finitization of its definition. In other words, if the other is what he is, i.e. if he is defined in any way whatsoever, if he is enclosed in any sort of essence, he is no longer the other, he is what he is, he is his own being. As such, in his alterity as the singular subject, we never encounter his characteristics of being, characteristics which are and which make up the other, but rather his face as nakedness "without qualities," without being identifiable.

Consequently, the other is nothing but his face.

One might immediately point out that using the verb *to be* as a "predicate" for the other's "essence" as a face obviously involves a considerable difficulty, since the face is employed as its definition. All Levinasian philosophizing is conducted with a sharp attention to "*the sealed destiny to which the human being from the outset confines the other's language of being*"[2] while incessantly trying to retract the fatal said in which our language definitively fossilizes. This form of prudence makes up his philosophical style and gives his writing its inimitable respiration, breath and breathlessness, anger and disillusion. Rather than encouraging, like many of his contemporaries, the "end" of a philosophy which is always too metaphysical, Levinas overloads philosophy. To philosophy, he adds a historial effort, exasperating it as he tries to retract philosophy with the exaggeration that animates it by means of what he calls "his emphasis" or his "exasperation" through an "excess of expression."

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[1] *L'écriture et la différence,* Seuil, 1967, p. 164.
[2] *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Livre de Poche, p. 16.

For Levinas, this retracting accompaniment of philosophy consists of "*passing from an idea to its superlative.*"[3].

In this way, he carries the contents of philosophy beyond themselves. That is to say, basically, that he investigates and expresses the "truth" of the ontological language which makes up these contents. But he transposes the "truth" of this inquiry and of this expression into the "always" of a promise, of a future, of a love.[4] One could describe this as a shift from essence to the time of essence; from truth in philosophy to the temporality of a promise; from the *anankê stenai*, where concepts stand, to a continuous diachrony. Levinas thus in no way intends to do away with philosophy. Rather, he invents for philosophy an unprecedented character by interrupting it, that is, by desynchronizing it. Philosophy, indeed, guarantees its prestige as a synchrony of being and as a line of thought where Levinas finds nothing but a "dialectical" silence wherein all signification returns and turns back upon itself. But if this is the case, it is equally necessary that from the depths of this silence, from what makes this silence be, something rise up which already disturbs it, which converts it, something like a pre-synchronic change of lines, like a gravity, as Levinas also puts it. A Saying preceding everything Said, a doing-being rather than a being that has to impose itself and bring into existence its "*destructure.*"[5] This can only happen in a movement of composition, decomposition and recomposition – the Saying is "turn and turn about affirmation and retraction" of the Said.[6] We must have philosophy – it is indeed the same "must" which Justice requires – in order to discharge philosophy. If philosophy is allowed to have the "final word," could this final word, which is never spoken in the said and the written logos of philosophy, ever exhaust the Saying? Could it totalize an ultimate meaning in a Said and succeed in saying the end of the word? If there is an ethics preceding ethics (an abyss of responsibility preceding our beginning, freedom and presence of mind), there equally is a result following the result, an ultimate following the ultimate – and this is again the abyss of endless and incessant responsibility, without ever obtaining unjust satisfaction. This infinite of ethics presents itself to philosophical inquiry and to the mode of this inquiry as a challenge, a task, a duty of invention.

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[3] *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Vrin, 1992; pp. 141-142.

[4] *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Livre de poche, p. 53 (*AE*) : "The truth promises itself. Always promised, always future, always loved, the truth is to be found in the promise and the love of wisdom…" (Cited in French in the original.)

[5] *Autrement qu'être*, éd. cit., p. 76.

[6] *Autrement qu'être*, éd. cit., p. 75 (emphasis added).

The act at the same time conforms to tradition– or at least to a tradition inside the tradition (Aristotle, Pascal) – and radically heterogeneous to tradition. Moving from truth to truth, Levinas's desynchronizing transposition equally moves from philosophy to philosophy. It creates – both within and beyond philosophy – the adventure of a disproportion, a transcendence, a dis-interest. Levinas manifests a disinterest in philosophy in order to venture into the exploration of the ethical structure of all subjectivity.

To say that the other is the face of the other thus overtaxes the superlativization of every definition, its exasperation in an indefinable, an infinite. This means precisely that the face is not a plastic form, a sensible appearance, a phenomenon; it does not consist of what I see of it, of what I can touch of it. The face is that which remains out of reach of these figures of meaning (of immediate sensibility and intentional signification[7]). Being the face of the other – necessarily of the other, as we shall see – it decides the entire appearance of the world, it deforms its own form, it invisibilizes its own visibility, it "*takes us beyond.*"[8] The other thus announces itself as a face among the phenomena of the world; and even, more precisely, as that which undoes all phenomenality: a "*hole in the world*" as Sartre put it in a text dating from before the First World War, entitled *Visages*. Somehow, the face is not in the world. The relationship between form and deformation, between a phenomenon and its absence, between visibility and elusiveness, this "relation" between unrelatable terms which the face presents, is the trace of the infinite – but of an infinite which is properly in the finite while yet never being present in it. It is exactly this register of full presence and representation that the face invalidates. One could say that the face runs through the trace of that which never appears – the Infinite – while at the same time appearing somehow in-the-finite, in-finite. Maybe literature is more able to capture the face than philosophy. While watching Albertine sleep, Proust's narrator engages in a meditation on this "in-finite":

> *... beneath that blushing face I felt that there yawned like a gulf the inexhaustible expanse of the evenings when I had not known Albertine. I might, if I chose, take Albertine upon my knee, take her head in my hands; I might caress her, pass my hands slowly over her, but, just as if I had been handling a stone which encloses the salt of immemorial oceans or the light*

[7] The original French text ties up "meaning," "sensibility," and "signification" with a play on words relying on the homonymy of the French *sens*.
[8] *Ethique et infini*, Livre de Poche, p. 81.

of a star, I felt that I was touching no more than the sealed envelope of a person who inwardly reached to infinity.[9]

We could thus say that the face as the face of the other is, properly speaking, the only expression of alterity. There is no other. There is no alterity, in the strong sense of the word, of an object, or of a subject objectively grasped and understood, or of an other which would be another me, because such an alterity is always reduced to the sameness of the consciousness measuring or considering it. Consequently, there is no way for me to experience the face. In the "science of the experience of consciousness" of the phenomenology of spirit, the subject alien to itself – alienated in and through the other – asserts itself in the other's recognition of its free subjectivity. If it loses itself in this assertion, if it loses itself as subjectivity, as freedom, in the pure eternity of its objective being, it nevertheless recovers from this loss which is the condition of its self-reconstruction. None of this, however, is present in the submission in which the face immerses me; nothing of the order of a Hegelian *Erfahrung*. The face comes before all possible arrival; it precedes all experience I might have of it when appropriating it, all "enrichment" of my experience of the world and others. We are speaking of an ordeal. "Infinition" is an ordeal; it is the ordeal of the other man, the Other as the absolute other, every other and any other (Derrida), the first to arrive[10] (Levinas). That is, insofar as the infinite can be understood, as we have pointed out, as in-finite, in the finite. An other in the same, such is the "structure of subjectivity" according to Levinas, the most intimate mark of the subject's subjectivity, the inscription of the finitude of a trace which will come to disturb it, do violence to it, desubjectivize it. In this descriptive category of subjectivity, in this structure of the Other-in-the-Same, we can discern a few structural traits as far as the subject is concerned. Thus, we can portray what a subject is, as well as the nature of its relation to the other who faces it. I will discuss at least one of these structural traits: a decisive one since it encompasses all of the others and

[9] In the C.K. Scott Moncrieff/Terence Kilmartin translation. The French original: "Alors sous ce visage rosissant je sentais se réserver comme un gouffre l'inexhaustible espace des soirs où je n'avais pas connu Albertine. Je pouvais bien prendre Albertine sur mes genoux, tenir sa tête dans mes mains, je pouvais la caresser, passer longuement mes mains sur elle, mais, comme si j'eusse manié une pierre qui enferme la salure des océans immémoriaux ou le rayon d'une étoile, je sentais que je touchais seulement l'enveloppe close d'un être qui par l'intérieur accédait à l'infini". (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, Pléiade, III, p. 386)

[10] French original: *le premier venu*.

infinitely over-determines them. More precisely, I wish to point out the trait of the asymmetrical nature of the subject's relation (a formulation which now clearly appears as far too imprecise to be honest) to the other. An ethical I/Other relation is only possible in asymmetry. The reason for this is very simple: in the relation of a face-to-face ethics, I am not the Other, never, and under no circumstances could I possibly be that. I and You, me and you, these do not occupy interchangeable positions and are not alternatively experienceable: neither of them is able successively to take up the role of the other. The latter situation, which is ideal-type of the symmetrization of relations, is present in political citizenship. However, in the rigorous terms of Levinas, this citizenship characterizes something completely different from an ethics; we should thus clearly set apart each of these orders and effectivities. Indeed, in the position I am in, being someone who is to respond to the other, I cannot be replaced by anybody or anything, as is the case with my death. This is so because I myself could never have a face thanks to a thematizing reversibility. If this were possible, I would be implicated in a relation which is not ethical, but rather political or judicial, in which people are juxtaposed to one another as *Nebenmenschen* (Hermann Cohen) whose places can be exchanged and whose relations can be symmetrized.

The properly ethical relation is structurally entangled in asymmetry. Else we would be changing registers, passing from one domain to the next. When symmetrizing and equalizing, we jump or overturn into politics in the strictest sense of the term, that is, into the sphere of Justice, as Levinas calls it. When inverting the asymmetry in an asymmetrical way, I find myself confronted with an anti-ethical reversal of the relation, that is to say, in an utterly concrete situation where I, as an individual or a community, would say: the Other is Me myself. The ethical asymmetry thus is the indication of what it is not; being a just politics, it wrests an unjust differentialism from the extreme danger it involves. It pronounces itself in a very articulate manner since the irreducibly dissymmetric positions which it delineates imply practical requirements to which the subject finds itself assigned. The Other differs in his difference; I myself am bound to non-indifference. The Other calls; Me, I reply; in no way could I not hear the call. The Other has/is a face; Me, I am subordinate to this extreme fragility of the face of the Other. The Other shows himself in the transcendence of this face exceeding all sensible materiality, he is "closer to God than I am"; Me, on the other hand, I respond to this transcendence through the immanence of immediate material aid: by dressing, feeding, housing him. Else, if I respond to the other's

transcendence by my transcendence of subject, I fall into the "*hypocrisy of the sermon*" by seriously undervaluing "*the sincerity of hunger and thirst.*"[11]

Levinas thus touches upon something unprecedented: if the other, and even the absolutely other, is the other man, this expression, the other man, denotes with powerful precision an asymmetrical inappropriateness. The other and me, we are in no way units of the same kind, two somehow equal individuals who are to be situated indifferently in a relation. The other is not a human being in the way that I am one, in the way that he or she or they are human beings. It thus becomes obvious that Levinasian thought is philosophically speaking not a humanism. It is, in fact, on this warped line of humanism and ethics that morality objects to this ethical duo: how am I to do justice to humans, to all other humans, to all these "thirds" to whom I necessarily do violence by subordinating [them?] to the singular face of the other? The moral requirement which is opposed to the ethical one is neither illegitimate nor unanswerable, but it can only hold in the aftermath of the immemorial. The other is indeed incomparable, non-interchangeable, he only shows up out of the irreducible and unique singularity of the I, the self which I am and which I am only insofar as this place is non-transferable. It is indeed this relation, which is strictly speaking not a relation that Levinas characterizes as ethical.

When undoing all reciprocity, all reversibility and all isonomy, asymmetry in particular entails that from an ethical point of view the "relation to the other" does not allow for mediatization. It cannot pass through mediations which would render it intelligible and relative, that is, which would turn it into a relation between terms. This is not possible because the other holds in an absolute, in an absolution, of which I am not a part. Levinas speaks of a relation/non-relation between me and the other. In the strongest and most extreme sense, indeed, there cannot be a relation in the way that each would be relative to the other, a relation in which I would be the other for the other, and the other would be another me. We are rather dealing with an exposure, a denuding, the absolute impossibility of escaping the call of a face, my response to it or my renouncing response. We are dealing with a subject's structural dis-inter-est for the defection of his being; that is, of his interest, since interest (as Hegel pointed out) means inter-being,[12] being in or among. A subject is a being which acquits itself of its condition of being. To be human, to be a human subject, is not to be a being among beings, a being in being, another being,

[11] *De l'existence à l'existant*, Vrin, 1990, p. 69.

[12] The French original *inter-être* refers to the previously mentioned *désintéressement* and *interêt*.

a class in a general ontology or a region of being. To be a subject, for the desituated self (dismissed and deposed) thus implies not having a place in being, not having a place there where being-with-oneself[13] means to nomadize being in its entirety.

Before even constituting a philosophy of alterity, Levinasian ethics thus brings about a theory of subjectivity and its respondsive structure. This is the most important. I am being put into question by this face that haunts me, the I is traversed by the other and this transverberation makes up its structure. We can thus come to understand that there truly is a violence of the ethical in Levinas. What appears in the ethical connection as relation/non-relation always and violently constitutes an event; it radically alters the structures of all that appears (i.e. the established order of things) and evidently disturbs, in the strongest sense of the word, my subjectivity of subject, since this appearance which destabilizes all appearance, obligates me to respond or not to respond. In any case, I am obligated through an obligation which does not commence in me. On the contrary, it is I who commence after this response or non-response. Subjectivity, penetrated by the other who pierces itelf, is structured as a having-to-respond. This structuration preceding every I, makes the very use of terms such as "subjectivity" or "response" a delicate matter, and their usage may sometimes appear borrowed. The "subject" can both "respond" or not "respond," as we have already pointed out, but we are not speaking here of a choice, since I am not free to hear or not hear the call. Indeed, the response precedes the question, as Levinas formulates it. It is a doing which is not the product of an autonomous decision that sets the interrogation in motion. The having-to-respond is immemorial; it goes far back and precedes all questions I can ever ask myself concerning the reasons why I have responded or not. And often, when I have arrived at weighing the pros and cons, it is already too late, the time to respond has passed, the time of thinking and weighing has abolished it.

Evidently, the ethical produces a radical disruption in the subject, which is destabilized in its principles and its origin, disturbed in its assumptions and its initiative – to formulate things in a very euphemistic way, that is. On the other hand, charity, altruism, or, a fortiori, moralizing recrimination always consolidate the subject in itself, in its substantial contentment and its own identity. Another warning is necessary here if we wish to avoid a contradiction in reading Levinas, one less widespread than the contradiction concerning a morality in which we take part, but nevertheless highly prejudicial to the understanding of his oeuvre. To say,

[13] French original: *être-chez-soi*.

as I have just done, that ethics destabilizes, disrupts, desituates and deposes the subject is to comply to a "logological" constraint, that is, a constraint related to the language speaking being. In other words, the discourse justifying the structures and contents of Levinas's ethics cannot but formulate these in a vocabulary which is that of ontology. It is destined to fix in a said, i.e. in the said of the concept, an ethical saying which actually refers to something which is infinitely more fluid and mobile as well as "subject to" an a-chronological and a-logical temporality. It is therefore important to be wary of the chrono-logy inscribed by the order of discourse as the necessary price of its rigor. Indeed, the subject is always already disrupted, structured as disrupted, if I can spout it thus. Otherwise no subject would ever exist as an "other-in-the-same." If things happened otherwise, i.e. chronologically (first a subject; second its destabilization), the effective, empirical disruption would be neither possible nor thinkable. I am referring here to an objection which has often been made to Levinas (for example, by Ricoeur): in order for me to respond for the other or to the other, would I not necessarily first have to come to grips with myself, assume myself in the authentic manner of Heideggerian Dasein, before I could turn to others? Levinas meets this objection by disregarding such a model of reciprocation and chronological inter-conditioning. Indeed, in his view nothing is less certain than what is presupposed in this objection and the model it carries. Am I really able to respond in the sense of an ethical responsibility (which is very different from the responsibility of imputation or penal responsibility), in the sense of a subjectivity structured as always-already having to respond, if I begin (or assume myself in order) to respond from my own being, from my ontological substance and subsistence? Does the objection, on the contrary, not boil down to "somewhat justifying" one's ethical non-response?[14] This being the case, we can understand why Levinas sought to distance himself from the moral philosophies and the different varieties of moralism. All of these consist of

[14] French original: *"s'argumenter un peu" pour répondre, en raison, de sa non-réponse éthique"*. In a footnote, the author adds that the argument and its formulation are borrowed from Rousseau who strongly senses how obviously *the call* preceds the *reason* (justification). This remark is followed by a quotation from Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (from *Oeuvres completes*, Paris, Seuil, II, p. 224) which an old translaton renders as follows: "Nothing but such general evils as threaten the whole community can disturb the tranquil sleep of the philosopher, or tear him from his bed. A murder may with impunity be committed under his window; he has only to put his hands to his ears and argue a little with himself, to prevent nature, which is shocked within him, from identifying itself with the unfortunate sufferer."

reflecting on duties and thinking of them as a more or less superficial or more or less dense crust which agglomerates around an indivisible core of being, the subject. Levinas proposes a completely different figuration and a completely other possibility of thinking the moral link itself. The subject is not, therefore it has no core, neither moral nor pre-moral. The subjectivity of the subject, on the contrary, is a splitting of the self, a loss, an infinite opening. The subject does not direct its approach to the other, it does not take the initiative for it, it does not have the good-will to do it – it is not voluntarily good. It is directed by its drift towards the other. And even if it refuses to partake in it, like Rousseau's "philosopher," this refusal itself is again an indication of this pre-self which is the having-to-respond. Even if I make myself a murderer, this murder perpetrated in extreme banality and in confusing ontological ease is still the sign of a furious impotence before the face. There is no compromise if we are to believe Levinas and read him in the right way. Confronted by the face, "*we speak or we kill*," in Blanchot's lapidary expression. What a subject says, states, thinks, does, thus appears to flow from a Saying anterior to all signs, gestures and significations, of which the subject can believe itself to be the authorized author in an illusory way, and in which it believes it contemplates its own origin. It is this register that Levinas has thematized as pre-original or an-archic:

> *The responsibility for the other cannot arise from my engagement, my decision. The boundless responsibility in which I find myself is produced by that which precedes my freedom, by an "anterior-to-all-memory," an "ulterior-to-all-accomplishment," by the non-present, par excellence by the non-original, the an-archic, by that which precedes essence or lies beyond it. The responsibility for the other is the site where the non-place of subjectivity locates itself*.[15]

It is because of this anarchic aspect that the transcendental model of freedom is radically put into question. For, indeed, as Levinas asks himself insistently, is the choice for one's freedom really a free choice and can we be truly certain of this? If my uniqueness as a subject resides in my extreme responsibility for the other man who calls and if in this irreplaceable uniqueness I cannot possibly flee from it or rid myself of it, my freedom is paradoxically located at the ultimate end of "my" heteronomy. It is obvious that the ethical response is by no means of the order of an obedience. We obey a law, an institution, a hierarchical superior, a function, but never a person to whom, precisely, obedience

[15] *Autrement qu'être*…, op. cit., p. 24.

should not be given over any other insofar as it is regulated by the preliminary consent to a substantial code of conduct. Ethical responsibility, on the contrary, concerns the type of situation where the limits of regulation and the frame of prescription need to be exceeded by the responding subject without him even wanting to do so: on the spot he cannot but invent the rules of his acts or, more precisely, he has to act on the spot, ahead of all rules. If my self is unique, this is only through the impossibility of all substitution and all delegation, through my assignment tying me to the ethical moment of response. "*To be free means to do only that which nobody can do in my place.*"[16] This freedom of uniqueness establishes ethical discourse. Moreover, it allows us to clearly understand that it is only possible and tenable for the self of the first person. Its extension and universalization would boil down to a reversal through attenuation or anonimization. If Kantian reason presents itself as truly practical by means of autonomy, it is only because the moral subject subordinates itself to a commandment which is that of reason itself as it imposes itself through the moral law, and independently of others. For Levinas, on the other hand, it is a matter of connecting to exteriority rather than of autonomy of the will. The unconditional moral duty does not come to us through the reasonable will, but through the resistance that the face opposes to me. It is not thanks to the submission of the will to the law of reason as faculty of the universal that ethics is possible, but thanks to the inaugural and heteronomous fact of the face's word. The law thus appears to result from a facticity: I encounter the other.

Otherwise ethics would quite simply be reversed and savagely converted into a disaster for subjectivity – the disaster of universalisms (me, like all the others!), the disaster of differentialisms (the other that is me!). This heteronomous freedom where all is irremediably played in the single instant when a response does or does not come, equally allows us to grasp why receiving the other can constitute, and most often indeed does constitute, a trauma. The trauma of an untransferable freedom – a freedom so radical and so prevalent that I am in no way free of not being freed of that very freedom – definitively does away with the "firstness" of freedom in the sense of autonomy, its foundational function as the archè of the subject. It is a tragic freedom, surely, since it is exerted entirely in the fine point of an ungraspable instant: a man drowns, a man is beaten, a man is "being strangled under my window" and I fail to respond, unalterably, only thinking about it afterwards. But the wording is pleonastic: there is no

[16] « La Révélation dans la tradition juive » in *La Révélation*, collectif, Bruxelles, 1977, p. 68 (texte repris in *Au-delà du verset*, Minuit, 1982).

other thinking than the thinking-afterwards, subjected to the argumentative burden, running the risk of reregistering this non-response in an extra-ethical domain of my responsibility – that is, the domain of the political institution and the juridical administration. Thus freedom is not a structure of the subject consolidating it in its moral or transcendental autonomy; it is nothing but worry and anxiety, always "younger" than my having-to-respond, since it strikes me before all engagement: "*I have done nothing and yet I have always been at issue.*"[17] One could think of this "persecution" of the I by the other as scandalous. The immense force of Levinas's thinking resides therein – insofar as he has showed us that what is "most natural," living and letting die, is most problematic, the most vivid source of our questioning and torment. In its very mineness, in its illustrious "every time," being – this being which constitutes the existent that I am – can never be its own reason of being.

Translated from French by Sofie Verraest

[17] *AE*, p. 180.

IN RESPONSE TO JERARD BENSUSSAN: DO WE HAVE TO LET OURSELVES BE DOOMED TO MORALITY?

MARIA DIMITROVA

Dear Professor Bensussan,

Some people, including well-educated philosophers, start to grimace when they hear the name of Levinas, just because it is associated - and should be associated, and deserves to be associated - with morality. In our times of moral relativism, ethics is pushed aside, into a corner, overshadowed by ontology. Ontology seems closer to science in its claim of neutrality. And ethics is seen either as unnecessary ballast or as falseness and hypocrisy, or even worse - as a system of repressive rules, required by the rulers to keep the masses in submission.

Ethics, as we know from Marx and Marxism for example, has always been engaged in maintaining superiority, legitimating the morality of the dominant and/or comforting the oppressed. For Marx, morality is an epiphenomenon, constructed on the basis of economic relations and dependent on their changes – this is how Marxism as a whole joins the long tradition of moral relativism. Conversely, defenders of moral absolutism are bound to the idea that morality is a need of the highest spirit, the satisfaction of which enriches us spiritually (as a spiritual food). To bring this nonsense (usually supported by utilitarians, hedonists, pragmatists, etc.) to its extreme, we must accept that we need morality for the good of our digestion. From the point of view of Levinasian philosophy, all of this seems ridiculous. Realizing the stupidity of such (at times even cynical) interpretations and "seeing every day and every hour the impotence of moral standards," today many people are asking why we need morality at all and why do we have to speak of it. This is the subject of the first pages of *"Totality and Infinity*" - do we have to let ourselves be doomed to morality?

There is a persuasive urge to think of morality as a moral code, different for different groups and epochs. However, Levinas' lesson is that

morality should not be considered a form of legislation, encompassing the unwritten rules of one community or another, but, instead, must be understood "*au sense extra-moral*." Morality means recognizing the otherness of the Other, something which is not respected enough by laws, standards and codes. The face of the Other, bared before me, stripped of definitions, notions, standards and models, does not allow me to hide behind unifying and homogenizing rules and thus to transfer responsibility to institutions, to the collective, to destiny, to God or to some other authority, where the Other is subjected to common principle. The Other as a face transcends the system with its principles and rules. Morality is inevitable - even when I ignore it and try to avoid the appeal of the Other, the very attempt to escape it is a kind of answer – and what an answer at that! There is no escape from personal responsibility. So, according to the Levinasian philosophy, the relationship between the Other and me, which has always a moral aspect, begins even when I try to play deaf and blind to the Other or treat him instrumentally, reducing him to an object or a means, subjected to my interests, identifying him with a function in a social system. The moral relationship is the "alpha and omega" of all other relationships, even those that seem most neutral. Similar to Descartes, who argues that thinking cannot be revoked, because even when we doubt or deny it, it's still a form of thought (doubt and denial are also mental operations), Levinas states that morality cannot be ignored or eliminated, because the very ignoring or elimination comes with a certain moral significance. Morality or sociality is not determined by our belonging to some group, community, entity, territory, but is derived from our responsibility for others. It stems from the moral sensitivity of the individual.

Levinas' philosophy is radical and its radicalism goes "all the way." Using our common, habitual concepts, it is hard to determine where its genius lies. Still, if we have to underline the overwhelming reversal of thinking it evokes, then probably first in order comes the new understanding of sociality. Levinas refuses to reduce the sociality of the individual to his belonging to the Whole – not only to the whole of the Greek cosmos, sustained by its laws, but also to the flexible, always open and indefinite historical totality of the monotheistic cultures. Defining humans through their belonging to some totality, region, territory with its divisions – the way we classify objects through their belonging to the class and genus – is inadequate; it presupposes the point of view of a distant observer and omits the most important – the closeness between the Other and me, wherein sociality originates.

The relationship, in which "One is for the Other" is not territorial, but moral. Moreover, it does not constitute itself as a symmetrical and reciprocal intersubjectivity, but begins from the highstanding of the Other. The starting point is set by the appeal of the Face, which calls for an answer. The Other is neither below me, nor equal to me. Egalitarianism does not respect him enough. The Other is not sharing a territory with me, which we both inhabit and try to parcel out. The freedom of the Other is privileged as high-ranking in comparison with my freedom and coincides with his dimension of Transcendence. Our modern culture does not allow for the superiority of the Other in relation to me, because instinctively, automatically it interprets this as a relationship of dominance and obedience. Yet Levinas states that in the relationship between the Other and me, serving the Other is not slavery, but care for him. This care is a necessity, because the Other is a being, directed-towards-death. Only in the presence of a Third, and therefore of "anyone else," and everyone is "another for the other," can the basic social relationship be generalized, totalized, and politicized.

Levinas' philosophy sets a very, very high standard. It is as if Levinas has set a record in sport, astonishing not only for the public, but also for the remaining competitors in the field. He sets such a high mark that all other philosophical attempts must be viewed from its perspective. But while sport involves only one part of human abilities, Levinas marks the end of a thousand-year-old way of thinking, and at the same time – hopefully – the beginning of another. After Kant, no philosopher could be taken seriously if he didn't take into account in his work the thesis of the categorical imperative; in the same way, after Levinas, "*The Face, concerning me not in the indicative, but in the imperative*" is a thesis which cannot be overlooked.

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In Levinas' philosophy we find the duplication of a number of categories we use in order to explain human existence. As in the case of morality (as obedience to rules) and extra-morality (as caring for the Other), we can likewise talk of:

- transcendence (of the outer world) and extra-transcendence (of the Other);
- passiveness (in sensitivity) and extra-passiveness (in the closeness of the Other)

- desire (directed at the objects of the world) and metaphysical extra-desire (towards the Other and infinity, revealed by the encounter with him);
- sociality (as belonging to the whole of society) and extra-sociality (as responsibility for others)
- justice (according to legislation) and extra-justice (according to moral saintleness)
- rationality (as providing the foundation of "I can") and extra-rationality (as questioning myself and seeking a better justice)
- and so on.

The list could go on. Exactly because of this duplication, which Levinas uses to revise the centuries-old understanding of philosophical categories, the reception of his works is extremely difficult. All categories, describing human relationships, receive not only a literal meaning, understood through their place in the totality, i.e. in the system of worldly interests, but also another – metaphorical – meaning, related to the Face of the Other. It seems as if ethics is built upon ontology, just as metaphorical meanings are built upon literal ones, but, to speak the truth, the situation is quite the opposite – metaphorical or ethical meanings give birth to the ontological. We will even risk a few steps further in this direction: even though it looks like ethical relationships are conceived through the hyperbolizing of ontological ones, this is really an optical illusion, because for human beings authentic, fundamental ontology is morality itself. Levinas does not offer us a new morality, but a new interpretation of morality: *a sense that is not measured by being and not being; but being on the contrary is determined on the basis of sense*.[1]

For Levinas the true understanding of morality coincides with my presence in the world, and not with the way I declare what is moral for me or us – not only "I think," "I act," but even the simple "I am" is an answer to the appeal of others. This is the reason Levinas has to justify himself philosophizing about morality. He must speak, using the language of philosophy, whose roots are Greek and stem from dialectics. In dialectical debate each party in an argument answers its opponent with a counter-speech. But for Levinas, the understanding of morality is not limited to forming or articulating some moral maxims; true understanding coincides with everyday language, where deeds are the most important, not rhetoric. Besides, for Levinas, the Other is not an adversary, a competitor; neither is

[1] Emmanuel Levinas. *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Duquesne University Press, Pennsylvania, 2000, p. 129.

he simply a partner in some cooperative enterprise, or someone with whom we try to reach a common perspective through conversation. *Autrui n'est donc que son visage*.

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But the Other's face is ambiguity itself. On the one hand, it fits its outlines, its shape, it is this nose, this mouth, this forehead, and on the other hand, it is *"the invisible in the visible."* These two meanings are not opposed – the otherness of the face is not logical, but meta-logical and meta-physical. The difference between the literal, objectified meaning and the metaphorical, ethical meaning suggests a transition from one level to another. Metaphysics suggests meaning "in excess." Or, to put it otherwise, the ethical suggests a dive into depth, because the depth of my world coincides with the height to which the Other is elevated.

Heidegger had already announced the inauthenticity of average everydayness and indifference. He reconstructed a motive, which is not Greek, but stands at the foundation of monotheistic cultures: man is "a being, who heard God's word." In Biblical culture not only what one does, but even what one thinks, is a reply to God's appeal. In Heidegger's philosophy, the place of the appealing agency is taken by Being, while, in Levinas', it is occupied by the Other. Of course, this replacement suggests a different type of world-view and a reordering of layers, as after a powerful earthquake. Levinas does not reject the ontology based on the difference between beings and Being, but instead asks if it is fundamental. He strips ontology of its supremacy and hands it over to ethics. For him, ethics, not ontology, is first philosophy.

In ontology, both the Self and the Other receive their meaning within the horizon of being, comparable through the measure of the Third, that is, a mediating part – it could be the principle, the whole, the horizon, the institution, the Third person, etc. Ontological meanings are contextual and depend on their links in the system. But the Other has a meaning in itself and it is an absolute one. Of course, the Other is being. He is being-facing-death. Precisely this is why I should not leave him alone: I can reply to the appeal and transform distance into proximity and knowledge into morality. But this does not mean that in proximity I have the ability to situate him within the horizons of (my) world – the Other constantly withdraws himself. That is why the Other also has the meaning of exteriority, of Transcendence. Levinas follows in the footsteps of his mentor Husserl, who expresses the idea that the Other is the condition of correctness of my world and that each transcendence, including the transcendence of the

outer world, exists for me and is comprehensible to me only by virtue of the transcendence of the Other. But, for Husserl, both the Other and Transcendence are constituted in my immanence, whereas Levinas refuses to consider the Other as my Alter Ego. The Other is beyond, exteriority, the expression of his face reveals a dimension of transcendence which is not constituted by me. The Other is radically other. Meeting him I become aware of Infinity and in this way I am made to realize my own finitude. The difference, the most radical difference – the one which brings to life all other differences – is the difference between the infinite and finite. When facing the Other, who always exceeds the limits of my ideas and expectations, the world shrinks for me from its universal dimensions, common to everybody, to the dimensions of *my own* world.Thereupon I can no longer avoid responsibility, which has fallen exclusively upon me and not upon somebody else.

Already Kant had warned us that when infinity enters the picture, we are faced with antinomies. It seems that Levinas agrees, but thinks that infinity is presented to us not through the effort to extend our conditional truth to the unconditional, but by virtue of our encounter with the Face of the Other. Let us stress once again, however: the Face itself is basic ambiguity:

> *The first word of the face is "Thou shalt not kill". It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all.*[2]

The face of the Other is the source of all the controversies of experience. The contradiction, stemming from the Face, is created and described – if it can be spatialized at all – as the difference between the levels on which I and the Other stand.

> *The look with which the other faces the world, in its rectitude, means both its frankness and an authority not present in a simply logical alterity, which as a counterpart of the identity of facts and concepts, distinguishes one from another, or reciprocally opposes the notions of them, by contradiction or contrariety. The alterity of the other is the extreme point of the "thou shalt not kill" and, in me, the fear of all the violence and usurpation that my existing, despite the innocence of its intentions, risks*

[2] Emmanuel Levinas. *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo.* Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, 2000, p. 89.

committing. ... It is a responsibility that, without doubt, contains the secret of sociality.[3]

My moral sensitivity coincides with the depth of my subjectivity – this is where the range of my actions is determined, the spectrum of my possibilities, the choice between them, the freedom to choose and act, the true scale of my projects and everything said and done by me in the life-world. In the face-to-face encounter, the Other questions my identity, the seizure of a certain territory by me, makes me doubt the right to occupy this place under the sun, shakes my confidence as an owner of property, be it some characteristics used for self-typology and integration into some kind or genus. Being for the Other, I am deprived of such an identity. But with the Saying (which is impossible without the said as well as without a speaker and a listener), I reaffirm myself as "me" and then can rediscover again my Self. From now on, the return to self, to self-consciousness and self- reflection, to objectification and identification, to seizure and claims of ownership and property, is inevitable. It is important to stress, however, that this rediscovering of one's self in the process of identification is not an end in itself, but rather a by-product of the reply to others. The approach to other remains, but on the way towards him/her the Self loses itself and finds itself again - already changed, already older. Despite itself. Having exhausted itself, serving others.

Levinas suggests a reestablishment of the rights of heteronomy. Heterenomy had fallen out of use when Kant privileged autonomy. Someone might object that Kant insisted that the maxim of my behavior must be coordinated with others in order to be laid down as a universal law. The difference between Kant and Levinas consists, first of all, in the fact that while Kant sets out from the Self, Levinas begins from the Other. If the maxim I follow as an expression of my will can claim to be the expression of the rationality of human nature, as it is according to Kant's philosophy, this means that it has to be imposed on others as valid to the same extent for them too. Such a claim to establish a universal moral legislation, imposed by me on the others, is rather dangerous. This is how, usually through laws, others are subordinated and deprived of their independence. Law has been given the status of the ultimate and absolute value and goal. But, according to Levinas, it is not the law, but the defense of the right of the Other that empowers me to act, to question authority and supremacy, that encourages me to seek justice, calling for responsibility –

[3] Emmanuel Levinas. Diachrony and Representation. *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 169.

for the Other. My behavior acquires meaning and direction not according to the law, which I have imposed on myself (and therefore on everybody else), but as an answer to the presence of the Other. Without consideration of and attention to the otherness of the Other, my freedom would be a foolish spontaneity or would be characterized by the instrumentalization of others. Kant's imperative is not a remedy for these dangers, which threaten to develop into malignant mutations. Of course, we cannot reject autonomy - the choice of one's acts on the level of the life-world, consciousness, knowledge, determination. While autonomy is intrinsic to the Self, heteronomy stems from the Other. I do not have freedom to not hear the appeal, but I have freedom to say "yes" or "no," and to answer with "as far as I'm concerned…" Thus, autonomy itself has to be the answer to heteronomy and, as such, is nothing but taking into consideration the appeal of the Other – even before it is understood. The Other questions the spontaneity of my will, the caprices and changes of my mind, the egocentricity of my desires, the struggle for satisfaction, and all my ideas and truths. Precisely in this way the face invests reason, freedom and sociality in me.

> *La présence d'Autrui – hétéronomie priviligiée – ne heurte pas la liberté, mais l'investit*.[4]

Morality is not a response to violence, but to an appeal. In the presence of the Other there is an unarticulated and, we could say, an anonymous call in his encounter with me – apparently some inexplicable trust in me, that I will not leave him without reply, that I will not treat him like the objects lying around, that I will take into account his human presence – as if at this moment his destiny to be human or not depends on me. Subjectivity as moral sensitivity, being traumatic, is the suffering for the suffering of the Other and exactly this provokes my reply. But true understanding, as we have already mentioned, is not only in words, but in deeds– namely, because of this readiness to act, the Self cannot stay without rest in an accusative "me," but receives the opportunity to be Self in the nominative, that is, to say "I." Autonomy does not imply that one should act as a sovereign, but rather that one should act in response to the heteronomy which motivates him to decide more adequately and to choose his behavior in the urgency of the present, where the other is calling me. Quickly, help – clothing, food, shelter, etc. – must be found in order to respond to "*la sincerité de la faim et de la soif*."

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[4] Emmanuel Levinas. *Totalite et infini*. Kluwer Academic, 1992, p. 88.

Levinas does not confine himself to abstract humanism, where we state respect for the Other according to universal law (Kant's imperative); the human community is not formed by multiplication of transcendental subjects, whose common feature is self-consciousness, constituted as "the 'I think,' which accompanies all my ideas." For Levinas this type of humanism is not human enough. True humanism presupposes care for the Other in all his particularity and even singularity. In the concreteness of the encounter with him as an empirical and historically present being, care goes along with respect for his otherness. This is a service to the Other, not subordination or slavery to him. It presupposes, however, the transformation of "Thou" into "He," "She," "It," "They" – the grammatical third persons, made topical by a certain categorization pattern. Thereupon the Other is reduced to a being among other beings, to a being just like me:

> *But the order of justice of individuals responsible for one another does not arise in order to restore that reciprocity between the I and its other; it arises from the fact of the third who, next to the one who is an other to me, is "another other" to me*.[5]

Reciprocity is a relation between individuals, when they are compared by some common measure. The operation of comparison always suggests a Third party, playing the role of a bystanding observer of the moral relationship between the One and the Other. The unique and unequal, even incomparable, individuals, are leveled and equalized thanks to the Third. From the position of the Third they are judged, brought under certain rules, observed, controlled. Individuals become mutually exchangeable and replaceable only from the point of view of the one who objectifies them. And only when they interiorize his perspective toward themselves and in this way adhere to it, estranging themselves from one another, their relationships can be called reciprocal – even to themselves. Thus, we all become an audience to the spectacle that is our life together. In the multitude, humans are deprived of their faces – they are present as anonymous, faceless, without the possibility of saying, objectivized, exchangeable. In the totality of society power is always an asymmetrical and nonreciprocal relationship. It is brutal, despotic, when it deprives the "subordinates" of their independence, of their right to speak and consequently of any rights, reducing them to objects. Power is just, on the contrary, when it creates and maintains the political framework, facilitating moral relationships. But in this second case we use another

[5] Emmanuel Levinas. The Other, Utopia, and Justice.*Entre-Nous: Thinking of the Other*. Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 229.

word, that is, “government.” The political and the ethical order are not independent and this is exactly why we speak of good or bad politics. The criterion is the proximity or remoteness of social justice to morality.

It looks like I have to stop here. It seems to me that the issue of justice is the hardest nut to crack. Many have broken their teeth on it – not only politicians and revolutionaries, but also philosophers.

CHAPTER TWO

MEMORY AND THE IMMEMORIAL IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

JEFFREY ANDREW BARASH

In choosing to analyze Levinas' reflection on the theme of "memory and the immemorial," my purpose in the following pages will be less to engage in an exegesis of his thought than to examine, in its perspective, the theme of memory itself. Levinas elaborated his interpretation of memory in its relation to the immemorial above all in his work *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (*Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*), first published in 1978 and translated into English twenty years later. It is on this work that my analysis will focus. Levinas proposes in this work to distinguish his interpretation of memory from the predominant conceptions of memory that had been elaborated in different ways by earlier philosophical traditions and my primary task will be to reflect on the sense and scope of memory - its place in the "domain of being," according to Levinas' formulation - by indicating in light of these traditions what appears to me to be the problematic implications of the idea of memory that Levinas develops.

What is remarkable in Levinas' idea of memory in the work *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* is the radicalism of the dichotomy he establishes between memory, on one hand, and the "immemorial" on the other. And, far from an isolated aspect of his thinking, this dichotomy is founded on a presupposition which reaches to the heart of his philosophy: the irreducible distinction he draws between immanence and transcendence, between "essence" and what is beyond essence. Given that for Levinas essence signifies "being, which is different from entities" (*l'être différent de l'étant*),[1] the same radicalism which distinguishes

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Kluwer/Livre de poche: Dordrecht/Paris, 1978), p. 9. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are

essence and what is beyond essence separates being and what is "otherwise than being."

This dichotomy between being and otherwise than being, corresponding to that between memory and the immemorial, is reaffirmed throughout the work *Autrement qu'être*, and its radicalism is continually reinforced. This dichotomy concerns, on one hand, the order of being, the domain of the ego with its mundane desires and needs, its "interests" through which, as multifarious expressions of effort, *conatus*, modern philosophers in the wake of Hobbes and of Spinoza have interpreted the human essence. From Levinas' perspective, as we will illustrate more losely, the ego's interest, plunged into the past by way of memory, orients the quest to retrieve elapsed time in the form of history and of historiography. The immemorial, on the other hand, extends its reach beyond essence and beyond the interests of this world: it is "otherwise than being", rigorously distinguished from the worldly effort or *conatus* which, by all available means, seeks to persevere in its being. Incapable of being inscribed in memory and in history, the "immemorial" evokes for Levinas "*a responsibility which comes from before and reaches beyond what is held in the suspense of an epoch*".[2] And, it is in terms of this responsibility, emanating from an immemorial commandment, from an injunction beyond essence and "*sundered from being and its history,*"[3] that Levinas invokes "the Good" or "goodness."

This *radicalism* in Levinas' distinction between the immemorial, on one hand, interpreted as a source of goodness beyond being or essence and, on the other hand, memory, like history, understood in terms of effort directed toward worldly interests, will orient my investigation of the theme of memory in the perspective of Levinas. I will first examine the relation between memory and of the immemorial in his thought and then turn to that between the immemorial and the historical. An analysis of the radicalism of the dichotomy which distinguishes memory and history from the immemorial will set up the framework for my concluding reflection on the theme of memory that Levinas' philosophy inspires.

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my own.

[2] "…qui vient d'en deçà et va au-delà de ce qui tient dans le suspens d'une époque"; *Ibid*., p.154.

[3] "…en rupture avec l'être et avec son histoire"; *Ibid*., p.36.

I. Memory and the Immemorial

At the beginning of his book, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Levinas introduces the dichotomy between essence and what is beyond essence, corresponding to that between memory and the immemorial, in relation to a passage in the sixth book of Plato's *Republic*. As Levinas writes, Plato was the philosopher who posited that the Good is beyond essence. And, in his analysis of Plato, Levinas takes up the task of rethinking this distinction between the Good and being or essence, in order to radicalize it. The significance of this radicalization comes to light, I believe, where Levinas doubts the possibility of grasping the Good - the "immemorial" Good - by way of memory, even if, in the Platonic tradition, the idea of the Good was retrievable through *reminiscence*. Let us examine the precise implications of Levinas' radicalization of the Platonic position, in which his profound ambivalence toward the ancient Greek author comes to expression. We recall the passage in the sixth book of Plato's *Republic* which Levinas here interprets. In this passage, Socrates says to Glaucon:

> *Admit also that intelligible things do not only depend upon the Good for their intelligibility but also depend upon it for their being and their essence, although the Good is not at all essence, but is high above it (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσιας) in dignity and in power.*[4]

In the context of this Platonic dialogue, we recall Glaucon's response to Socrates upon hearing this unusual claim that the Good is "*beyond essence in dignity and in power.*" According to Plato, Glaucon replied to Socrates in a "ridiculous" manner: "*May the heavens save us, the hyperbole ('υπερβολή) could never go farther!*" And Socrates, as Plato records, in introducing this suggestion of a hyperbole or exaggeration, *attenuates* the radicalism of this distinction when he responds: "*The fault is yours […] for compelling me to utter my thoughts about it.*"[5] Yet Levinas, far from moderating this radicalism, reinforces it. How are we to interpret this radicalization?

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[4] Plato, *The Republic*, vol. II, 509b (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard, 1980), p. 106-107. Levinas had already interpreted this notion of the Good beyond essence in his earlier work, *Totalité et infini* (Kluwer: Dordrecht, 1988), p. 76. On the variety of 20th century Jewish philosophical commentaries on this passage in Plato's *Republic*, see my article "Après Davos. L'éthique à l'épreuve du politique chez Ernst Cassirer et Emmanuel Levinas", *Philosophie et Judaïsme*, *Critique*, 728-729, January/February, 2008, p. 145-157.

[5] Plato, *The Republic*, vol. II, 509b, p. 107. In a footnote to this translation of the

Plato, while situating the Good beyond being in dignity and power, made of it, as Levinas comments in critical perspective, an "idea."[6] Moreover, if in the context of *The Republic*, Plato posited the supremacy of this idea in relation to the True and the Beautiful, like these latter ideas it participates in "essence," as the determining principle of essence. And, as Plato's readers will readily recognize, this mediation between the idea of the Good and essence is accomplished, notably in the *Phaedo* and the *Meno*, through *memory* conceived as *reminiscence*. In this perspective, our ability to recognize the Good, the True and the Beautiful, even in their weak reflection in ordinary sense experience, depends upon a recollection of these ideas, embedded in the soul before all experience. Hence Levinas' radicalization of the Platonic distinction between the Good and essence, by interpreting the Good as "otherwise than being", calls for a dissociation of the Good from the objects of any possible reminiscence. The Good is identified, in other words, with the immemorial which no reminiscence is able to recall. "*The Good which reigns in its goodness,*" as Levinas writes, "*cannot enter into the present of consciousness, even were it to be remembered.*"[7] In these terms, Levinas relates subjectivity to goodness, conceiving it to be a necessary source of meaningfulness of the subject, and he situates the subject, "*in an immemorial time which no reminiscence might retrieve as an a priori.*"[8] Then, in a different context, Levinas distinguishes the Platonic dialogue from the drama in which philosophers are engaged and from the intersubjective movement that they elicit since, according to him, the "*Platonic dialogue is reminiscence of a drama rather than the drama itself.*"[9]

English edition of this dialogue, Paul Shorey aptly comments that, in the face of this hyperbole, "the dramatic humour of Glaucon's surprise is Plato's way of smiling at himself"; Plato, *The Republic*, p. 107n.

[6] Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 36. In *Totalité et infini*, p. 43, Levinas had already raised the decisive question in regard to Plato: "The filiation between the Soul and the Ideas upon which the *Phaedo* insists is it but an idealist metaphor expressing the permeability of being to thought?"; "La parenté entre l'Âme et les Idées sur laquelle insiste le *Phédon*, n'est-elle qu'une métaphore idéaliste exprimant la perméabilité de l'être à la pensée?" Even more radically than *Totalité et infini*, *Autrement qu'être* leaves little doubt that the answer must be in the affirmative.

[7] "Le Bien qui règne dans sa bonté ne peut entrer dans le présent de la conscience, fût-il remémoré"; *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, p. 36.

[8] "… dans un temps immémorial qu'une réminiscence ne saurait récupérer comme a priori"; *Ibid*., p. 47.

[9] [le] dialogue platonicien est réminiscence d'un drame plutôt que ce drame même"; *Ibid*., p. 39.

These different references illustrate how radically Levinas places in question the traditional Platonic role of reminiscence in its recall of the idea of the Good, and participating in essence as the principle that determines it. We are faced, on one side, with immemorial goodness and, on the other, with essence which is an object of remembrance. Between memory and the immemorial, between being and what is beyond being, the unique point of contact which reveals itself is the drama of encounter with the other, eliciting the pure responsibility of the one for the other. What is significant here for us is less the fundamental role of this responsibility for Levinas' notion of ethics than its implications for the interpretation of memory. And, in the context of the work *Autrement qu'être*, these implications seem to me to be quite clear: once Levinas deflates the Platonic tradition of reminiscence to radicalize the Platonic doctrine of a Good beyond essence, memory must forfeit any fundamental status - above all in the sphere of ethics. In the very first pages of this work, memory is attributed to the domain of essence, in the service of effort, *conatus*, and of its interest in persevering in its being by all possible means. Memory is thus rooted in a *conatus* that finds its typical expression, as Levinas writes in another context, in the philosophy of Spinoza.[10]

What are the consequences of this dependence of memory on being for the theory of memory that Levinas proposes? We recall the theory of memory proposed by Spinoza, which reinterpreted a long tradition in the framework of the *Ethics* that, in its broad lines, may be traced back to Aristotle: far from drawing on the doctrine of reminiscence of eternal ideas, memory for this tradition records only the traces of images perceived by the senses. Like imagination, memory is capable of producing an image independently of the perceived object, but one which, unlike the caprices of fantasy, presupposes a faithful reproduction of the image. In view of this interpretation of memory derived from the perceptual image, it is perhaps not surprising to encounter, in one of the rare passages of the work *Autrement qu'être* dealing with this seminal

[10] In the work *Noms propres* Levinas refers to a "still natural tension of pure being itself that we have termed above egoism, which is not a vile flaw in the subject, but its ontology, and which we find expressed in the sixth proposition of the third part of the *Ethics* of Spinoza: 'each being expends all its efforts, as far as possible, toward persevering in its being' […]" ("tension encore naturelle de l'être pur lui-même que nous avons appelé plus haut égoïsme, lequel n'est pas un vilain défaut du sujet, mais son ontologie et que nous trouvons dans la sixième proposition de la 3ème partie de l'*Ethique* de Spinoza: 'Chaque être fait tous ses efforts autant qu'il est en lui, pour persévérer dans son être'[...]"); Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1976), p. 82.

interpretation of the reproduction of images in the framework of what Levinas terms animation or "psyche" (*psychisme*), and which for him, significantly, must be distinguished from concern for the other, from ethical responsibility. In this context, analysis focuses on a retrieval of the image of being as "presence" or "absence", where memory, like imagination, derives from sense objects once present to perception.[11] If we interpret "being" here, as Levinas does at other points in this work, in terms of the effort to persevere in being - of Spinoza's *conatus* - this notion of memory is entirely consistent with Levinas' overall interpretation: memory which, like perception and imagination, is oriented through the fundamental human effort to persevere in being, is characterized by its "interestedness" (*intéressement*). It is in this precise sense that the representations of memory can never attain the trace of the immemorial from which they are radically distinguished. In Levinas' telling words, the immemorial is "*inconvertible into memory.*"[12]

II. History and the Immemorial

Levinas' depreciation of memory in favor of the immemorial calls at the same time for a parallel devaluation of history. Like memory, history corresponds to a time which is representable or "recoverable" (*récupérable*). A passage from *Autrement qu'être* eloquently states what he takes to be this correspondence between memory and history:

> *The one nearby strikes me before striking me, as if I had heard him before he spoke. Anachronism which attests a temporality different from that in which consciousness is articulated. It undoes the recoverable time of history and of memory where representation is continuous. If, indeed, in all experience the account of fact precedes the present of experience, memory or history or the extra-temporality of the a priori recovers the gap and creates a correlation between this past and this present. In the proximity, a commandment is heard coming from an immemorial past: one which never was present, and which began aside from any liberty. This way of the one nearby is the face (visage).*[13]

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[11] *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, p. 115.
[12] *Ibid*., p. 165.
[13] "Le prochain me frappe avant de me frapper comme si je l'avais entendu avant qu'il ne parle. Anachronisme qui atteste une temporalité différente de celle qui scande la conscience. Elle démonte le *temps récupérable* de l'histoire et de la mémoire où la représentation se continue. Si, en effet, dans toute expérience, la facture du fait précède le présent de l'expérience, la mémoire ou l'histoire ou l'extra-temporalité de l'a priori, récupère l'écart et crée une corrélation entre ce

In this key passage taken from the book *Autrement qu'être*, we find, in regard to history, the same radical distinction from the immemorial that separated the immemorial from memory. And the "history" to which Levinas refers here corresponds in his vocabulary to the two senses that the term history conveys: history as *res gestae*, comprising the experience of peoples – even where this history is only implicit or partially preserved - and as *historia rerum gestarum*, or the retrieval and narration of this historical experience.[14] For Levinas, history, much like memory, operates in the sphere of essence or of the interest of being, which seeks by all possible means to persevere in its being. Like memory, history for Levinas can only prove resourceless before the immemorial.

It is this resourcelessness which leads me to my principal question: why does Levinas insist with such intransigence on this radical distinction between the immemorial and the time of memory, both personal and historical?

In order to comprehend this depreciation of memory, it might be tempting to invoke the terrible fact witnessed by a memory at once personal and historical, and recalled by Levinas in his dedication at the beginning of *Autrement qu'être:*

> *To the memory of the closest among those of the six million who were murdered by the National-Socialists, beside the millions upon millions of human beings of all persuasions and of all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other human, of the same anti-Semitism*.[15]

Faced with the enormity of this crime and of the ethical perplexity it raises, it is evident that the representations of memory or of history can only manifest their helplessness.

And yet, to locate the principle source of Levinas' radicalism, we should not insist too exclusively on the role of memory or of history. The claim of Levinas' work, after all, concerns the *immemorial*, and it raises the challenge of *transcendence* in regard to memory and history, with their

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passé et ce présent. Dans la proximité s'entend un commandement venu comme d'un passé immémorial: qui ne fut jamais présent, qui n'a commencé dans aucune liberté. Cette *façon* du prochain est visage"; *Ibid*., p. 141.

[14] Hence Levinas associates memory at times with history and at others with historiography, cf. *Ibid*., p. 140-41.

[15] A la mémoire des êtres les plus proches parmi les six millions d'assassinés par les nationaux-socialistes, à côté des millions et des millions d'humains de toutes confessions et de toutes nations, victimes de la même haine de l'autre homme, du même antisémitisme"; *Ibid*., p. 5.

source in the effort of being which seeks to persevere in its being. If Levinas draws such a radical distinction between the immemorial and memory and history, it is to maintain the infinite uniqueness of the immemorial before the frailty of mnemonic or historical representations. Capable only of focusing on the concatenation of images or of facts, these representations for him necessarily pass by the non-phenomenal proximity of the Good before being, lying entirely outside their purview. This transcendence, expressed through the face of the other, underlies the most intimate identity of the self. And the presentiment of this transcendence underlying the self, evokes for Levinas the "enigma of the infinite" which distinguishes it, in calling on the name of God, from the phenomenality of essence.[16]

Levinas aims here to clear a way toward Divine transcendence, which at the same time involves the injunction of the ethical. This accounts for his opposition to Kierkegaard's paradox which underlines, in the face of the divine commandment, the *limit* of all ethical commands. Indeed, according to Kierkegaard's interpretation, the divine command requiring Abraham to sacrifice his son clearly illustrated that an absolute injunction may require what ethics forbids. [17] At the same time, Levinas' hostility is still more sharply directed against Kierkegaard's main adversary, whose ethical reflection proves even more formidable for Levinas than the paradoxical formulations of the Danish philosopher. This adversary is indeed Spinoza, for whom the possibility of an ethical interpretation of God may be elaborated only on the basis of a *negation* of any form of transcendence as such. We recognize here Spinoza's critique of the supernatural and the miraculous, as of all belief in occult powers. In the name of transcendence, such occult powers had often been invoked to fuel the credibility of the superstitious multitude, proving the best of means, as Spinoza had demonstrated in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, of dominating the multitude for political purposes. This is why, in Spinoza's view, true ethics requires a radical critique of all supernatural or transcendent claims of religion.

Levinas was always prudent in his references to God and very much aware of the danger of instrumentalizing faith in function of the interests of this world. For him, Divine transcendence can in no way be separated from ethical proximity. But it is this emphasis on transcendence - on its

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[16] *Ibid*., p. 243.

[17] Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres*, p. 86-87; Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death, trans. Walter Lowrie* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 64-77.

exceptional, extravagant, and enigmatic otherness - which most directly accounts for his attitude toward history: in referring everything to the immanent representations of being, history, like memory, eliminates the enigma of a transcendence which can in no way be accounted for in terms of such representations. Hence the critique directed by Spinozist ethics against the miraculous and, above all, against its instrumentalization in the form of superstition, could only be made at the cost of relegating all human concern to the domain of immanence. Spinoza's thought, as Levinas recognizes, inspired a broad current of historical-critical study of the Bible, which played a prominent role in the development of the modern human sciences. As Levinas writes in commenting on the spirituality of Judaism in the book *Difficile liberté*:

> *The exceptional essence of Judaism, inscribed in square-shaped letters and illuminating living faces, at once an ancient doctrine and contemporary history, does it not risk favoring a mythical vision of a spirituality which is nevertheless accessible to analysis? Objective science - sociology, history, philology - aims to reduce the exception to a rule. Western Jews were the promoters of this research. The Theologico-Political Treatise of Spinoza, already at the end of the 17th century, introduced the critical reading of scripture. At the beginning of the 19th century, in Germany, the founders of the famous Wissenschaft des Judentums transformed holy scripture into pure documents.*[18]

If Levinas aims in his writings toward a transcendence beyond the immanence of being which seeks to persevere in its being, it is above all in an effort to find an alternative to Spinozist immanence and to what Levinas names the interestedness of *conatus* (*intéressement du conatus*). And this transcendence which for him is the necessary precondition of the ethical injunction, radically opposes the idea of memory and of history inherited from a tradition which, in its refusal of all that cannot be

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[18] "L'essence exceptionnelle du Judaïsme - déposée en des lettres carrées et éclairant des visages vivants, à la fois doctrine ancienne et histoire contemporaine, ne risque-t-elle pas de favoriser une vision mythique d'une spiritualité pourtant accessible à l'analyse? La science objective - sociologie, histoire, philologie - s'efforce à réduire l'exception à la règle. Les Juifs occidentaux furent les promoteurs de cette recherche. Le *Traité théologico-politique* de Spinoza, dès la fin du 17ème siècle, instaure la lecture critique des Ecritures. Au début du 19ème siècle, en Allemagne, les fondateurs de la fameuse *Wissenschaft des Judentums* transformèrent les Ecritures saintes en purs documents."; Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963), p. 43.

included in the sphere of immanence, found its fundamental expression in Spinoza's philosophy.[19]

Must we limit our scope, however, to a choice between Spinozist immanence and a philosophy of transcendence as Levinas conceives of it? To my mind, the gap Levinas establishes between immanence and transcendence hardly permits us to place in perspective the essential character of memory - whether interpreted as personal memory or the historical memory of peoples. In relegating memory to the domain of being which seeks to persevere in its being, in making it a function of interests in the world, Levinas leaves little space for memory beyond a functionalized view of its operation in the elaboration of images derived from perception, once the perceptual object is absent. But then, how might historical experience corresponding to this theory of memory recall, at the level of collective existence, more than the mere concatenation of representations that memory provides? The insistence on transcendence, not as a source of faith - a theme which lies beyond what concerns me here - but as fundamentally constitutive of the self, does it not run the risk of forgetting the time of memory and of history in which the identity of the self finds a living source? Does Levinas' radicalism not risk obscuring the fact that the ethical sources upon which this identity draws flow from an age-old *ethos*, from a memory and a history which in their often implicit significance and their symbolic force are by no means equivalent to simple images or representations? My purpose here is certainly not to overturn Levinas' interpretation by attempting to derive the ethical norm from an historical source - an impossible task, as I conceive of it - but to retain an intermediary space between memory and history, on one side, and ethical goodness, on the other.[20]

It would reach beyond the confines of my present argument to propose a full elaboration of this idea of memory and history, which is currently a topic of a work in progress on the symbolic dimension of collective

[19] In the words of the first sentences of Leo Strauss' study of this theme, first published in German in 1930: "In our time scholars generally study the Bible in the manner in which they study any other book. As is generally admitted, Spinoza more than any other man laid the foundation for this kind of Biblical study." Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 35.

[20] What seems particularly paradoxical to me in this respect is Levinas' insistence on a radical distinction between memory or history and ethics in *Autrement qu'être* which is particularly difficult to reconcile with the accent he himself places on the role of the Talmudic tradition in his volumes of *Leçons talmudiques*.

memory.[21] I readily acknowledge the importance, for me, of Levinas' renewal of ethical philosophy, in spite of this point of disagreement.

I will conclude my remarks with an example which will permit me to illustrate this broad interpretation of memorial time, also comprising that of history. It is taken from the narrative of the Jewish *Haggadah*, which Levinas knew so well. Repeated orally on the occasion of Passover, this narrative has become significant for Jews, Christians and Moslems alike:

> *This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the Land of Egypt. Let anyone who is hungry come and eat. Let anyone who is in want come and celebrate the Passover.*

Constitutive of memory and of history, of multiple memories and multiple histories, such an injunction to remember and to relive an original historical event has nothing to fear from critical-historical analysis. And I also dare to believe that this injunction, beyond any question of the "authenticity" of its transcendent source, might provide firm support for ethical identity in its profoundest universal sense.

[21] See in this regard my preliminary efforts in this direction in the essay "Analyzing Collective Memory", in Doron Mendels, ed., *On Memory: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 101-116.

IN RESPONSE TO JEFFREY ANDREW BARASH: THE IMMEMORIAL TIME

MARIA DIMITROVA

Dear Jeffrey,

The dichotomy between what has been assimilated into the whole of Being - either by individual or collective memory - on one hand, and the immemorial, on the other, which is not just what is forgotten, but what has never been memorialized, what is not memorialized, and what could not be memorialized, is correlative to all of the principal dichotomies that Levinas introduces. A huge gap separates:

1)		2)
Immanence	-	Transcendence
Essence	-	Beyond essence
Being	-	Otherwise than being
I	-	Other
Archē	-	An-archical
Ontology	-	Ethics
Cognition	-	Good
etc.[1]		

In the Levinasian construction, the terms in column 2 acquire a double status. When inside the Totality they are opposed to their logical/dialectical opposites (in column 1); they receive a meaning through their place in the System of worldly interests. However, in addition to these meanings gained through reference to the illuminating totality, they take on meanings in dialogue. Thereupon, all these contents are "*animated with metaphors, receiving an overloading through which they are born beyond the given*."[2]

[1] This list of dichotomies is, of course, not comprehensive.
[2] Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense" in *Levinas: Collected Philosophical*

When "beyond" is involved in metaphor, it leads to other contents simply absent from the limited field of the Ego-centered discourse which totalizes from the perspective of the Self. Authentic dialogue is maintained not as a conversation of the soul with itself,[3] that is, as a monologue, but with that which signifies of itself - the Other. The different meanings that were united thanks to the *conatus essendi* of (my) being are situated and orientated in another direction - toward the Other. Levinas asks:

> *Does not sense as orientation indicate a leap, an outside-of-oneself toward the other than oneself?*[4]

The radicalism of the dichotomy between memory and the immemorial is dictated by one's desire or perhaps by the effort to leap beyond oneself. In this leap, the sense of one's entire being is at stake. What does it mean to leap beyond ourselves? Briefly, this means expiring my time for the time of the Other. However, how is this possible, since the time of the Other is always its own and thereby the immemorial for me?

The outside-of-oneself is the exteriority of the beyond. Its wonder is due to the elsewhere out of which the Other comes and into which he withdraws. This withdrawal does not coincide with a going toward the elsewhere, as to a term, but to absolutely absence - the immemorial. The beyond is not "*another world behind the world*"; it is not "*a simple background from which a face solicits us*"; "*the beyond from which a face comes signifies as a trace*."[5]

Levinas understands dialogue in a different way from Plato. In Athens, dialogue is a conversation among equal partners, free citizens of the *polis*, who dispute and exercise their arguments on a given topic: the truth of reason is at stake in their competition. For Levinas, a conversation of Plato's type is only apparently a dialogue because Socrates only "accouches" the truth. Socrates hears in his interlocutor only what it seems he has known for ever and what is contained in the question raised he has raised. What reaches the interrogator from the outside, in reality comes from the inside and is rather reminiscence. The otherness of the other cannot be of any importance, cannot be heard and accepted there, where "*know thyself*!" is the prime order and every cognition is the knowing

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Papers, translated by Alphonso Linges, (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), p. 75.

[3] For example, the conversation between memory and imagination, the Ego and the Self, the transcendental subject and the empirical one, etc.

[4] Ibid., p. 90.

[5] Ibid., p. 103.

reason in me (Socrates' *daimon*). For Plato, the reasonable is *eidos*, i.e. idea, which is common, sharable, and rediscovered or imposed (due to its truth) on the interlocutors. Plato's dialogue is not a conversation with the Other, who is part of the crowd, but is a conversation about eternal ideas, reaching as far as God (the Good), and is finally a conversation of the soul with itself. According to Levinas, my relation to the Good (God) is never a direct one, but always passes through my relation to the Other; however, this path is not dialectical as it cannot assimilate otherness and leave it behind for the sake of the teleology of the One. In Levinas' philosophy, a person cannot speak to the Supreme One otherwise than speaking to the lowest one, that is, the face of the other human being naked in front of death. God (the Good) is not the mediator between the Other and myself; rather, the face of the Other is the mediator on my way to God. The Face marks the border of my passage to God. As fas the border is concerned, I am always on this side; I am always in this world. The Face as a frontier has a double status: it is both local, like me, and a stranger coming from the outside. The Face is a twofold entity: on the one hand, it is this form, this nose, forehead, lips, etc., but on the other hand, it is the "*invisible in the visible*."[6] On the road to God, the Self follows the trace read in the face of the other man. Like Kant, Levinas leaves God aside and does not allow reference to him in discussing and settling human issues.

The pioneer in considering human history and culture as dialogical is probably not Plato but Martin Buber. The tradition of monological philosophy assumes the I-It link, that is, a subject-object relationship, as a comprehensive model, while in the dialogical philosophy the I-Thou relationship is privileged. Classical German philosophy, the most developed form of monological philosophy, assumes that any thinking and movement of spirit revolves around the Subject, being reflection and self-reflection. In Buber, however, the I-Thou relationship, which is the event of meeting, is incommensurable with knowledge in the form of the I-It link. The I-It link is experience, i.e. the world of the Self - it is inside the Self because:

> *the world has no part in the experience. It permits itself to be experienced, but has no concern in the matter. For it does nothing to the experience, and the experience does nothing to it*.[7]

[6] The shortest definition of face given by Maurice Blanchot.

[7] Martin Buber, *I and Thou.* Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, Edinburg : T.& T. Clark, p. 5.

In Buber's philosophy the I-Thou relationship both precedes and exceeds the subject-object sphere. Levinas expresses this difference between I-Thou and I-It words stressing that:

> *man is the only being which I cannot meet without expressing the meeting itself. A meeting differs from cognition exactly in this.*[8]

While monological philosophy deals with cognition and activity, dialogical philosophy pays attention to communication and its various forms. Where, earlier, the very process of communication was considered a kind of cognition and practice, now practice itself, cognition (and even pure thinking) are themselves considered a form of communication. In earlier times, speaking was interpreted as one of the functions of the Self-subject; today, we witness how speaking follows different roads leading, us "outside." When thinking about thinking, that is, the "I think," involving evidence and certainty, is replaced with "I speak," the Self's attention is no longer concentrated only on the object because the Self is no longer alone on the stage; another character appears in the drama - the Other. For a dialogue at least two persons are needed: the one who issues signs and the one who receives them; an addressor of the word, on the one hand, and an addressee, on the other. In terms of its fundamental structure, an activity (cognitive or practical) is not comparable to communication. Communication is primary in relation to the purposefulness and instrumentality of actions and interactions. In a conversation, motives, meanings, and the directions of behavior are determined. *"I speak"* is implied in every *"I make"* and even in *"I think"* and *"I am."* Before one objectifies and transcends oneself in deeds, one learns about transcendence, including the transcendence of the world of objects, thanks to the meeting with the otherness of the other, which is the source of all understanding.

Levinas differs from Buber in that he believes that there is an original inequality between I and You and that the phrase "I and You" is quite likely misleading. Levinas proposes a more adequate phrase, "the Other and me," in which difference and asymmetry are stressed: the Other, being a face, is the addressor of the appeal which I hear as the one chosen to respond. We are not speaking about narrative forms of speech, including historical narrative, where the Self occupies the position of storyteller and determines where the story begins and ends, what the facts, causes, and their interpretation are, as well as how events follow each other; we are speaking about a prescription in which the Self plays the role of addressee.

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[8] Emmanuel Levinas, "L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale? " *Entre nous. Essais sur le pensee-à-l'autre* (Paris: Editions Grasset), p. 19.

Responding to the appeal, the Self is not in the nominative but in the accusative case. The question is not only about the end of synchrony and its dialectically implied interdependent terms, but also of a surplus of diachrony. Levinas understands diachronic temporalization as a struggle against experience as the source of supreme meaning - that is, dethroning the Same and depriving it of its priority. It is about making this sovereign Self, who identifies himself with the universality of Reason, hesitate. This Self can doubt everything but not itself and its right to exist. This imperialistic Self tries to assimilate the Other into its own world (even if the world is not understood as always the same cosmos but as a mobile history). However, this attempt to close the Other within the totality of the world always fails - the Other escapes and leaves behind only a trace. The Other goes where no thought can follow him, he abandons the world's horizons.

In Levinas' philosophy the Other has the status of the Absolute, of an agency according to which all other meanings are organized. However, unlike traditional interpretations in which the Absolute is eternity (eternal duration, eternal being, etc.), for Levinas the Other is an Absolute because of its mortality, vulnerability, uniqueness, perishability and the temporality of existence. The appeal of the Other as a "being toward death" is a supreme command. According to it, the contents of memory, knowledge, experience, and history are organized again and again. This is a Commandment above all commandments, a Covenant above all covenants, a Prescription above all prescriptions, an Order above all orders. It is not a principle, archê, but an-archy. It is precisely to this anarchy that the Self has to comply and not to certain moral norms. Not, as Sartre might say, because in the concreteness, uniqueness, irreversibility of any human situation, "there is no sign either here on earth, or above in the sky" to indicate my response, but because the face of the Other is an expression of an inescapable and endless heteronomy. Here the Self is attached to the responsibility for what happens in the world in the very moment that it happens. The Self cannot avoid responsibility - it comes upon him. He takes it not because he expects a reciprocity or reversal of relations, but because he cannot hide or flee, even the refusal to respond is a kind of response. Communication does not imply the gathering of in-different, although similar, elements in a certain totality, but non-in-difference of the one to the other exactly because in the event of the meeting they are not equal partners. Levinas says that they are not even contemporaries. The Said lags behind the Saying.

This change in philosophy (a shift in priority from activity to communication) can be summarized in Levinas' words: "We" is not a

plural of "I." The Other is not a second I; we both are not particular cases of universal Reason - in communication we are not transcendental subjects each reduced to "the 'I think' that accompanies all my representations." The Self is "an individualized society" who here and now is responding to the presence of the Other, being in a position to use all the resources of experience. In Modernity, the thought that the Other is privileged is not allowed because automatically, almost instinctively, it is identified with the postulate of domination and submission. Whereas, according to Levinas, the freedom of the Other is a superior position which my existence serves, even in cases when I do not want it and sometimes even when I do not realize this. In the impossibility of escape from responsibility we see the interference of the Good, and here the phrase "the Good is, in spite of us" acquires meaning. This kind of relation is caring for the Other and not enslavement by the Other; it is not my choice to respond to the Other; rather, I am the one chosen, and hostage, because of the Other's freedom.

In order to accord with Levinasian philosophy, Kant's definition of freedom has to be rethought so as to restore the rights of heteronomy. My behavior and relationship to things in the world achieves its meaning, that is, its direction, not according to the law which the Self assigns to itself but in the response to the Other, in complying with its presence/absence. But the Self has nothing to rely upon and use as a resource except what is gathered in the totality of existence and what coincides with the memorable. On this point, there is no discord between my position and yours, Jeffrey. The ethical cannot be derived from a historical source, but we need to retain an intermediate space between the Other and me. This intermediate space is where the Third, all third persons - he, she, they - abides.

In Levinas, the question is not one of responsibility, which, thanks to reflection and various verdicts, including the verdict of history, is determined after deeds are done, but, rather, about my sensibility as a moral subject and about giving a preliminary consideration to what my actions would mean for the others. Where Kant poses the Self as the beginning, in Levinas the beginning lies in the Other. In Levinas' philosophy, the human being is no longer defined as a "rational animal," as in ancient Greece and in German Idealism, but as a "being that has heard the Word," that is as man in Biblical culture. However, the basic principle of universalism (e.g., as we see it in Greek and Christian philosophy) is refuted because, according to Levinas, there is no original equality between the Other and me; I always have one more responsibility than the Other - I am always responsible for him while his responsibility to

me is his private business, as if I have taken one more step towards him than he has toward me; as if man can walk passing over himself. Kant's imperative, laying the foundations of Modernity, launches the necessity of universalizing the maxim that I myself follow. According to Kant, this is possible when it is the expression of the rationality of human nature as such. It then follows that the Self coincides with its will (he is the lawgiver and the executor) and, at the same time, he judges this will. Moreover, when it is universalized, the maxim of my own behavior claims to spread over others as valid in the same degree for them. However, such a claim of imposing universal moral legislation on behalf of the Self on others could harbor danger: ignoring the otherness of the other and exercising violence over him. Pascal pointed out that concern for the common likely implies hatred of the other and not love and respect for him. I love the Other because he is similar to me. If I love the Other because he is similar to me, I love not the otherness of the Other, but myself in the face of my own likeness. If the Other is reduced to a meaning ascribed by me according to a given categorization by its belonging to genera and classes, then he is defined in the same way as we territorially define objects through their place in the whole. However, whereas the pure thing is, in Heidegger's words, "non-orientation-toward-nothingness," the Other is always a "being-toward-death." The true intrigue between the Other and myself is not place but time.

The appeal that can be read in the face of the Other, who is a mortal, finite, and vulnerable being, authorizes me, in my capacity as a rational being, to act and respond. The Other invests reason and freedom in me. This means that the Self decides autonomously how to act, but his autonomy will be a reply to the heteronomy springing from the otherness of the Other. Freedom is not a foolish spontaneity, caprice, arbitrariness, but is protection of the freedom of the Other and of his right to be a Self; that is, of his right to be himself. In the position of responding, the Self will not make a decision as an autocrat or tyrant, but interrogate his own domination and justice. The face puts into question the righteousness of the world with which we naively identify in our natural attitude, taking it, as Alfred Schutz, says for the field and object of our actions. Seeing the Other as a part of the given, obvious, undoubted, and self-comprehending world, as well as typifying it, I objectify and degrade him to the status of an object and allow instrumentalization, exploitation, and domination over him. If man is located in a social category which he cannot accept as relevant for the definition of his private situation, he will feel that he is no longer being treated as a human being with his intrinsic freedom. He will be degraded to an interchangeable exemplar of a typified class. He turns

out to be alienated from himself - a mere representative of his typical features and characteristics.

In order for the Other not to be faceless/depersonalized, I have to respond to his appeal not only in words but also in deeds. Only the divine word is instantaneous creation; human beings need time in order to transform words into deeds. Time, however, does not flow like a river in flood, as Hegel believed, but always, as Heidegger stressed about the particular Self, time is wanting. Time flows not in spite of human resistance but as human resistance against nothingness and death. However, when speaking about death, the immediate question is about the death of others because nobody can be a spectator of or witness to his own death; where my own death is concerned, I can judge only indirectly relating to others. Exactly because the Other is a being-toward-death he touches me not in indicative but in the imperative: "*In the direct vulnerability of the face, in the bottom of this weakness, a voice can be heard, which orders a commandment directed to me not to stay indifferent to that death*." A commandment is truly understood when it is fulfilled. Through the activity of the Self the word is carried out, the meaning of things is embodied, time acquires spatial dimensions, upheaval comes, the bonds of the historical world are tied, untied, and re-tied again and again.

It might be a good idea to take a look at Hegel on activity and history as he is hailed as being the greatest connoisseur in this field: "

> *Activity presupposes a material already present on which it acts, and which it does not merely augment by the addition of new matter, but completely fashions and transforms. Thus that which each generation has produced …is a heirloom to which all the past generations have added their savings …To receive this inheritance is to enter upon its use. It constitutes the soul of each successive generation, the intellectual substance of the time; its principles, prejudices, and possessions; and this legacy is degraded to a material which becomes metamorphosed by Mind. In this manner that which is received is changed, and the material worked upon is both enriched and preserved at the same time. This is the function of our own and every age: to grasp the knowledge which is already existing, to make it our own, and so doing to develop it still further and to raise it to a higher level. In this appropriating it to ourselves we make it into something different from what it was before.*[9]

In Hegel's philosophy of history instrumentalization is one's main attitude toward the historical Other. Levinas sarcastically notes that,

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[9] G. W. F. Hegel. *Lectures on History of Philosophy,* "Introduction," translated by E. S. Haldane (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 3.

according to Hegel's pattern, everyone is represented by the heritage he has left behind even before he dies.

But the burden of this heritage, which constantly increases, threatens to overwhelm us with no chance of proceeding further on. In Nietzsche's *On the Use and Abuse of History* attention is paid to this danger. In Nietzsche's opinion every kind of history, whether monumental, antiquarian, or critical, can be used against life in such a way as to prevent the new from germinating: the dead bury the living.

Levinas is actually impelled by a motive similar to Nietzsche's: not to allow the Same, the already assimilated, that is, experience, the memorialized, to suffocate what is Other, to destroy alterity, transforming it into mine-ness, ascribing some sense to it in my system of coordinates, prejudices, intentions, goals, benefits, etc. When the Other is approached with baggage (our stock of knowledge and all our possibilities) without being in a position (as Gadamer's hermeneutics suggests) to put stand before us, otherness would be neglected and the Other mortified. In order to gain anything from inheritance, the first condition is not to smother the heir in the constricting embrace of history, personal or collective.

Entities exist in the human world according to their meanings. Meanings, however, emerge in the signification which is needed because of the Other. The Other by herself/himself is the first meaning, the supreme relevance, and all other meanings are necessary in order to be transferred to her/him. Even when, as in a written text, the writer is the first reader, the discourse would be meaningless without the roles of the addressee and the addressor. In a monologue, these two roles exist, maintaining their difference, but they are played by the same actor. Monologue is derived from dialogue and not vice versa. Furthermore, a monologue is in fact an internalized dialogue. Dialogical meanings are primordial and command the assemblage of my experience. The contents of what has been experienced are deposited as something said-after-being-said. These deposited meanings start to arise when the Self hears the call of the face of the Other even before he has understood the call. The abstractness of the face disturbs immanence without settling into the horizons of the world. Unlike things, which by themselves are self-contained and, causing effects, move without orientation toward nothingness, the face leaves a trace behind, withdrawing from the world and heading to what lies beyond. The trace is not an intentionally produced sign, which borrows its meaning from the world's order; the trace calls for the opening, reconstruction, and reconstitution of meanings - by turning upside down the significance of causes and effects, of happenings and events. These operations of overturning, however, are the

"trademark" of memory and history. The trouble is that in memory and history, the Other is turned into a Third: she, he, it, they.

In practice, I have hospitably met the face of the Other if I have allowed a past which is not mine to put into question the righteousness of my world and its firm, self-evident meanings. If I assume the Other only as my past, then I am modeling it according to the interests of my day, modernizing it and identifying with it. In my ignorance and forgetfulness, I have forgotten about others and presume my Self to be the beginning of its own actions, the center of every past, present, and future. My imperialistic Self strives to eternalize itself, to persist "for ever and ever," to turn its world into an empire and as autocratic Lord to dominate over this past, in which others dwell. However, the awareness of my transience, which I can see in the eyes of the Other, dispells the illusion that I am an infinite and imperishable being or an eternal origin; and the insight that I am a created being, looking for my origin outside of myslef, the premonition of the end, the acute experience of limits, being situated here and now and not there and then, etc.- these do not allow me to identify retention with the past, protention with the future, and the now with the present, even less with eternity. There is a future which does not belong to me, in which other people will be living without me; there is past which is not my past and belongs to people who lived once; there are bygone epochs which cannot be grasped in their meaning if they are interpreted as steps on the ladder of history leading upwards as far as the last step on which I stand or on which "we ourselves," our values, our ideals, stand. What surrounds my finite world of created and mortal being, no matter how and to what degree I try to extend its horizons, is the infinity of the beyond.

That which has never been, cannot be, and will not be memorialized is the very withdrawal of the other into the beyond, his transcendence transcending all meanings and ideals, spaces, and boundaries. No matter what images I retain, what memories I recollect of him, the attempts to resurrect him are always palliative and I cannot save him from his death as such. But walking in the trace, reading it, and relying on it as if overhearing an appeal from the Beyond, I am led and guided and this changes the meanings of the things in the world. Does not the very life of memory and history consist of this change of meanings? Are they not the only reservoir where the meanings of things and events are preserved, interpreted, and turned upside down? But as a resource at my disposal, this reservoir is incommensurable with the size of the Beyond into which others have disappeared from my view. My view can follow them only as far as the horizon of the world, but not beyond the resources of the world.

In view of the limited resources of the world, I am not in the position to invite "everyone" to dinner even for a single day so that they all should have enough food. "Everyone" is an impersonal collective noun which does not imply anyone personally. Universal justice is actually injustice. There is no chance for conversation when the otherness of others is refused admittance, if their difference is denied, and when a uniform tolerance, in the sense of indifference, is practiced towards them. If we are all equal and in a state of in-difference to each other, what reason would there be to converse? Could we be together at all?

The Other is not free in the same way I am free. As Levinas emphasizes, his freedom is his superiority. Before him and for him I respond with a responsibility from which it is impossible to escape. In my care for his otherness, the more I fulfill my duty the more I get into debt; the more responsible I am, the guiltier I feel; the more I give, the more I am surprised: look at how rich I was and how much more I can lay on the table! The depth of my world coincides with the height to which the Other has been elevated.

For Levinas, this is the reason why passivity of the Self is more passive than any passivity that is opposed to activity; good is better than that good which I perform in response to evil; anarchy is a more original order than every other order opposed to disorder; the Other does not slip away into another world behind this world but into what is beyond, which is no longer being but otherwise-than-being; the Transcendence of the Other is more transcendent than the transcendence of the world of objects and is never transformed into immanence; the immemorial is not what hasn't been memorialized or what has been forgotten, but what has never been, what is not, and could never be in memory or history. There are meanings which are not determined by the logic of things inside the totality, but by their significance in time - in eschatological time, which does not coincide anew with the constructed and reconstructed times of memory and history. It is immemorial time or, maybe, a *liberation from my time*.[10]

[10] Emmanuel Levinas, "Meaning and Sense" in *Levinas: Collected Philosophical Papers,* translated by Alphonso Linges, (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999), p. 92.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM THE CARESS TO THE WOUND: LEVINAS'S *OUTRAGEOUSNESS*

JACOB ROGOZINSKI

How are we not to commit an act of violence? How are we no to do violence to the Other, to the revelation of the Other, to his kindness, his "rightness" – to the "sincerity" of a face "which could not lie" – but also to his weakness, his destitution, to the nakedness of this face which exposes itself at all times to the possibility of injustice, of outrage, of murder? How are we not to do violence to the face of the Other who summons me? How are we, for example (but this is obviously more than a mere example), not to do violence to this eminent face of the Other, this enigma of listening to the name of Emmanuel Levinas, and to his legacy?

If we refuse to take up the role of the disciple, of transforming his body of thought into "an oracle in which 'the said'[1] is immobilized," if true fidelity to a thinker necessarily involves some injustice and infidelity, *how are we not to do violence* to Levinas' work as soon as we attempt to read it? This question, however, is an ambiguous one which can be understood in two ways. At first glance, it asks *how to avoid* committing violence; it takes us down a road leading away from the rages of history, from the struggle to the death and the allergy to the Other, toward peace and a serene understanding of the text we want to decipher. In this case, we would be dealing with an ethical question, with *the* major question of ethics. But the question can also be understood differently, as the bearer of a certain indignation, a revolt: *how do I keep myself from* committing violence? Why would I not, here and now, give in to a justified anger toward this body of ideas which, while pretending to prohibit all violence, is itself nevertheless committing extreme violence? Why would I not do so

[1] In the French original, Levinas uses the term *le dit*, here translated as "the said," as opposed to *le dire*, translated as "the saying."

in spite of this prohibition which Levinas' own line of thought cannot help but violate, as if it were constantly flouting the very Law it enacts? Or would I maybe do so precisely *because* of this prohibition, that is, because an ethics of non-violence would be bound to be an illusion, because all condemnation of injustice and war would unavoidably bring about *another act of violence* which would be, if this expression makes any sense, the violence of the Good? If we understand this question as a theme, a meditation on the impossibility of ethical non-violence, on the necessity of passing on to merely "economizing violence," it would lead us back to a domain which has already been explored, notably by Derrida. It is not in this direction that I wish to proceed. Rather, I will attempt to inquire into the violence of "the saying," which is anterior to all conceptualization and thematization; a *hyperbole* characterizing Levinas' approach, which seems to be his peculiar way of practicing the *épochè*. He himself describes it as "*passing on to the superlative*," as "*sublimation*," "*overstatement*,"[2] or "*emphasis*": "*exasperation as a philosophical method*."[3] I would rather give it a name which, errors excepted, he never uses: *outrageousness.*[4] This term, deriving from the word *outrage*,[5] designates the act of *moving out of*[6] of passing beyond (*ultra*) a limit, of ex-ceeding[7] it. Only such hyperbolic violence could support all the excess, all the immoderacy of a line of thought that claims to lead us beyond being. A previous testimony to this in Plato's *Republic* was the ironic astonishment with which Glaucon received the idea of the *épikeina tès ousias*: "In the name of Zeus, Socrates, there we have a *daimonikê huperbolê*!", a demon hyperbole, a quasi-divine transcendence.

It is this surprise, this strickenness - which has always inspired me to read Levinas, and notably his last work *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, where the exaggeration increases - that takes an ever more radical path. How do we receive a saying of such an excessive nature without necessarily being outraged[8] by it? How are we not to resist, with a

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[2] The original, and perhaps more appropriate, French term employed by Levinas is *surenchère*.

[3] French original: *l'exaspération comme méthode de philosophie*. Cf. "Questions et réponses," *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Vrin, 1982, p. 141-143.

[4] French original: *outrance*.

[5] The same term is employed in the French original: *outrage*.

[6] French original: *passer outre*.

[7] French original: *outrepasser*.

[8] The French original, *excédé*, equally plays on the linguistic affiliation with previously mentioned terms such as *outrance, outrage, outrepasser, ex-cès* which all refer to Levinas's philosophical approach of hyperbolization.

violence itself *exasperated*, a line of thought which is so violent, so outrageous that it holds me "guilty of surviving" the other, even already "guilty of existing"; that accuses me "of a mistake that I have not made freely"; burdens me with a debt which "increases to the extent that it is paid off"; and even ventures an untenable praise of persecution: "Without persecution the ego raises its head"?[9] We should clarify that by the term "hyperbole" is not only understood that range of expressions so frequently used in this book where we find the exaggeration of the *more* ("a passivity more passive than any passivity", "the more just I am, the more guilty I am", "more guilty than any other," etc.) or the exaggeration of the *never enough* (a proximity which is "never close enough"). In addition to these senses, our use of the word "hyperbole" equally designates a certain way of concatenating motifs through repetition and radicalization, one which "*makes an idea pass on to its superlative, and, ultimately, to its emphasis*"[10]; for example, from the uniqueness of the I to its *chosenness*, from the proximity of the other to his *haunting* me, from my exposure to the Other to his *persecuting* me … Or a generic notion is presented as a borderline case: from psychism to *psychosis*; from responsibility for the other to the necessity of taking his place, to sacrifice myself for him without reserve. Or, in yet another way, a simple virtuality (sensibility as "vulnerability") is transformed into an effective experience (vulnerability as "hemorrhage," as being "wounded to death"). Those are some of the many hyperboles, passing beyond the limit, at the same time sublime and terrifying, and which should be taken seriously, *literally*. Derrida already vividly emphasized this fact concerning the major motif of *Totality and Infinity*: "*The face is not a metaphor, it is not a figure. The discourse on the face is neither an allegory, nor, as one might be tempted to believe, prosopopoeia*."[11]

We should come to the same conclusion regarding the hyperbole and the collection of motifs developed in *Otherwise Than Being*. Levinas insists on it concerning the expression "mal dans sa peau"[12]: this "is not a

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[9] French original: *sans la persécution, le moi relève la tête*. Cited from the original French of *Otherwise Than Being*, i.e. *Autrement qu'être,* second edition, Livre de Poche-Biblio, 1990, p. 177. All references to this book are hereafter incorporated into the text itself.

[10] French original: *qui fait "passer d'une idée à son superlatif, jusqu'à son emphase"*.

[11] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London and New York, Routledge, 1978, p. 125.

[12] A French expression closely related to the English "uncomfortable in my skin"

metaphor *in itself*", but "the *in itself* of the contraction of ipse-ity." The entire lexicon of stricture, of denuding, of skinning which accompanies it should thus be considered as "more than metaphors," "the exact trope of an alteration of the essence." In other words, a trope foreign to all rhetoric, where the linguistic use would coincide exactly with the thing itself, with the archi-phenomenon of a torsion of the Self, "in itself already out of itself."[13] We are speaking of the marvel of a trope which would also be a *too much*,[14] the paradox of a saying which is fully adequate to a phenomenon only because of its inadequacy, its surplus, its infinite excess. As such, Levinasian "sublimation" seems to go back to the extreme violence of the Kantian sublime. Through boundlessness, the disfiguration of sensible figures, the sentiment of the sublime presents the unrepresentable of the supra-sensible Ideas and of the ethical Law. Through its outrageousness, Levinasian hyperbole echoes the saying of an ethics without Law.

We might ask ourselves what the status of this hyperbolic saying is, and how it relates to the categories of ontology, to the phenomena which phenomenology attempts to describe. This saying is often presented as an act of rupture, of "interruption," and Levinas sometimes tends to give credence to this interpretation. Yet he seems to admit that there is a correspondence, a certain continuity, between the approach of phenomenology (and/or ontology) and his own in stating that it is "*the over-determination of the ontological categories ... which transforms them into ethical terms*"; that the phenomenological description of the appearance of the other "*turns into ethical language*"; or that "*the tropes of ethical language are found to be adequate for certain structures of the description*." To put it otherwise, ethics should *rely* on phenomenological descriptions; Levinas is actually less concerned with breaking with the latter than he is with "over-determining" them by giving them an ethical significance. Several noteworthy consequences follow. First of all, we need to acknowledge that this type of exaggeration does not correspond to a *break* with phenomenology (as Derrida, for example, claims that it does in his *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*); a fidelity – however infidel – to the analyses of Husserl remains there all along. But we should equally concede that the "tropes" of ethics are not to be reduced to pure *prescriptions*, precisely because they still contain a *descriptive* part, or at

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and used when one feels uneasy with or about oneself.

[13] French original: *en soi déjà hors de soi*.

[14] The original French *trop* plays on the formal resemblance with the previously mentioned *trope*.

least a certain "adequacy" to the description. It would thus be a mistake to regard Levinas' thought as a logic of the "prescriptive phrase," as Lyotard did, or then to conclude that the motifs of obsession, of being held hostage, of persecution, of sacrifice, etc., would have no ontological or existential consistency – that is, would in no way affect our concrete existence. It would be incorrect to think that these motifs merely open up the ultimate horizons of ethical conditions to us, in their extreme and as yet non-actual possibilities; that borderline situations forever remain foreign to our experience, merely capable of orienting it, in the same way that the inaccessible "ideal of practical reason" orients moral action in Kant.[15] Quite the opposite. What is really at stake in Levinasian exaggeration is the description of experience as if it were already confronted with these extreme situations – or as if we would continuously have to confront them. This exaggeration is *at the same time* prescriptive and descriptive, it precedes the distinction between *Sein* and *Sollen*, or is situated beyond it. On this level of radicalism, all traditional demarcations fail; it then boils down to the same thing to say either that I *have to* sacrifice myself without reserve for my persecutor, or that I *am only me* if I accept thus sacrificing myself.

What is the purpose of this hyperbolic outrageousness? Is it only aimed at the categories of the same and being? Everything seems to suggest that, when radicalizing, Levinas' ethics equally turns back *against itself*, against that which, in its own discourse, tends to *betray* – in every sense of the word – its own violence and confess to a hidden mistake by revealing that it remains under the yoke of the same, that it is still a captive of the discourse and the concepts of ontology. In this way, the approach of *Otherwise Than Being* can be defined as a *hyperbole of a hyperbole*, since this book also attacks – in a discreet manner – certain major affirmations made in the preceding works; Levinas somehow *redoubles the violence* by going back over the *already* hyperbolic statement of these works, in order both to intensify and to rectify them. The ethical saying is – as we all know – inseparable from an incessant *unsaying*[16] of what was said in the past, and Levinas himself acknowledges that, in *Totality and Infinity*, he had contented himself with "*simply inverting the terms*" of the ontological difference "*privileging beings*"[17] (i.e. the other) "*over being*."[18] But this

[15] The author adds that, in his opinion, this is the interpretation currently proposed by J.M. Salanskis.

[16] The French original contains a wordplay opposing the ethical saying (*dire*) to the act of retracting (*dédire*). [Perhaps this could be removed – now that the translation matches the original?]

[17] French original: *l'étant*.

reversal is nothing but the "*first step in a movement*" of taking ethics "*beyond the ontological difference*".[19] Attempting to think the self, the Other and their relation-without-relation by freeing them from their secular submission to being, such will hereafter be the vocation of ethics, such will be the stake of this hyperbole which appears to be "*more ontological than ontology; an emphasis of ontology*."[20] All motifs of ethical discourse, as well as its style, the atmosphere of this line of thought are profoundly affected by this. Such being the case, the I, which was formerly defined by its selfish *conatus*, by its power of identification and its sensuous possession of the world, now gives way to an I without power and without qualities, one that receives its uniqueness and identity entirely from its pre-assignation to the Other. The hyperbole of the I then amounts to its destitution, its "de-position." As for the face, of which *Totality and Infinity* still praised the "sincerity," its "absolute authenticity," comparable to the veracity of the Cartesian God,[21] this face is from now on typified by its "ambiguity," that of a "mask" where the trace of the Other "appears and then is erased.". Another step, another turn in the hyperbolic trope, and this face which used to be that of my victim (or the eminence of the schoolmaster who taught me) would become that of my persecutor. The intrigue of the self and the Other would no longer be thought of in terms of a relation of pupil to schoolmaster, of a son to his father, but rather in terms of persecution, of haunting, of traumatism. And the scene where this intrigue is played, the site of the encounter is no longer be the same: instead of an unbridgeable separation and exteriority, we are dealing with an intimate entanglement in which the Other manifests itself as *Other-in-the-Same*. These shifts, these turnarounds, these mutations are of such great scope that it seems to me that we can distinguish a "first ethics" of Levinas (the one of *Totality and Infinity*) and a "second ethics."

It thus seems appropriate to inquire into the evolution of Levinasian thought, to ask ourselves if this radicalization of ethics does not lead to an impasse; if these hyperbolic motifs do not in the end appear to be inconsistent; if, as was already the case for the I, Levinas's ideas concerning the Other as elaborated in *Otherwise Than Being* do not bring about a *de-position* of the other, his neutralization, his revocation to the benefit of an anonymous alterity. We would then be speaking of a reasoning which is not accidental, but rather the inevitable consequence of

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[18] French original: *l'être*.
[19] Cf. his preface to the second edition of *De l'existence à l'existant,* Vrin, 1978, or his preface to the American edition of *Autrement qu'être*.
[20] Originally cited in French from *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée,* p. 143.
[21] Op. cit., Nijhoff, 1984, p. 172-176, etc.

Levinasian exaggerations. As a discerning reader might note, this emphatic *épochè* entails that we are no longer concerned with enabling that which is shown to show itself – i.e. we are no longer concerned with phenomena – but rather with "showing something else" at the limits of the visible: "*the superlative, far from rendering more clear, more visible that which it submits to exaggeration, profoundly alters it*."[22]. It is this *alteration of the Other* – but also of the I and of the relation between the two – which should be analyzed. Is the radicalization from one book to the other still a simple extension of the same project, the same purpose? Or does the inflection imposed by *Otherwise Than Being* on the contrary bring about a complete reversal of perspective, comparable to that "revolution" Levinas found in the transition from the second to the third of Descartes' *Metaphysical Meditations*? On the one hand, his outrageousness could only consist in taking things *to the limit*, of developing all implications latent in his thinking, without there being a real rupture. But, on the other, this outrageousness could also perpetuate itself *beyond* its limit. Let us give an example: in *Totality and Infinity*, it is the nakedness of the face, its destitution, its absolute vulnerability which summons my infinite responsibility toward it; and this summons is so imperious that this pleading face can, *à la limite*, come to haunt me as an obsession. That which pursues me relentlessly, which literally *per-secutes* me, thus is the violence of the Good; a certain continuity holds when we pass from the epiphany of the face to persecution. And yet, the direction of this relationship can be reversed, and the same term can come to designate the "maliciousness" of the Other, "*the face of the fellow man in its persecuting hatred*." The ethical summons, then, is so immoderate – so excessive is the violence of the Good – that it can only properly be expressed in terms evoking the most extreme evil (persecution, hatred, being held hostage…).[23] Consequently, the two adverse [opposite] poles of the ethical experience become indistinguishable. If they are actually the same terms, are we then still speaking of the same violence, the same persecution? How are we to avoid confusing the face of the humiliated victim with that of his torturer? The outrageousness of Levinas's thought makes it pass over a divide, covering an abyss which separated two distinct versions of

[22] Originally cited in French from R. Calin, *Lévinas et l'exception du soi,* PUF, 2005, p. 242.

[23] The author adds that Ricœur managed to acknowledge "the enormity of the paradox comprised in expressing by means of maliciousness the degree of extreme passivity of the ethical condition" – cf. *Autrement, lecture d'"Autrement qu'être" de Lévinas,* PUF, 1997, p. 24; and already *Soi-même comme un autre,* Seuil, 1990, pp. 390-392.

the Other. The implications of such hyperbole are frightening: having to "respond to the persecutor" (to the point of being myself accused *in his place*, sacrificing myself for him …) does not have the same scope if this face persecuting me is that of the weak, the poor, the victim, or, on the contrary, that of the SS. If ethics refuses to distinguish between these two faces of the face, and celebrates the "integral passivity" of the persecuted *in all cases*, it would end by repudiating the revolt of the ghettos.

The same difficulty arises when we consider the relation of the I to the Other. Whereas the first ethics would regard them as infinitely distant, the second, on the contrary, seems to situate the Other in an overwhelming proximity. But this divergence may be illusory, as the reference in *Totality and Infinity* to Descartes suggests – a reference to the "idea of the infinite in me" which makes the relation between I and Other conceivable as an *intimate exteriority* (an "extimacy," Lacan would have said), that is, as a "surplus," an "overflowing" of the Same by the Other, a separation in immediate proximity. We could thus speak of "transcendence in immanence," some sort of an inherence, a residing of the in-finite *in* the finite.[24] The Other thus announces himself *as the Same*, as a trace left "in" the I, in the depths of my flesh, while at the same time infinitely exceeding me. In reality, the analyses found in *Otherwise Than Being* merely make explicit what was already stated in *Totality and Infinity* by taking into account all of the consequences implied – presumably in response to Derrida's objection, which emphasized that the wholly Other[25] can only be expressed in the language of the Same while *presenting itself* as a mode of the Same or of the I.[26] From the "first" to the "second" Levinas, continuity still seems to have the upper hand. Or the meaning of this *in* of "Other-in-the-Same" – this transcendence in immanence – would have to change completely in the second ethics … If, earlier, we could speak of an inflation of the I, of its outpouring *toward the Other*, we are now faced with exactly the opposite movement, some sort of a penetration of the Other *into the Same*: a pre-original *injection* which has always pierced the

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[24] Cf. *Totalité et infini,* p. XIII et 170, and *En découvrant l'existence,* Vrin, p. 172. On this interpretation of the in-finite, where the *in-* signifies simultaneously "non" and "in," cf. *De dieu qui vient à l'idée,* pp. 105-106.

[25] French original: *le tout-Autre*.

[26] Cf. "Violence and Metaphysics," pp. 140-141, etc. The author adds that paradoxically, at the same time that Levinas seems to accept the Derridean objection by coming to regard the Other as "Other-in-the-Same," Derrida appears to adopt Levinas' position when conceding the possibility of a wholly Other. In *Faire part* (Lignes, 2005), Rogozinski has given an account of this back-and-forth movement and its consequences for Derrida's thinking.

I, even before I was myself. Once again, the apparent homonymy of the terms masks a decisive rupture. It is undoubtedly at this point that the difference with the first ethics is most visible. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas insisted upon the necessity for the I to "conserve its secret," to preserve its intimacy against the indiscreet reach of the Other, following a demand which is at the same time ethical and political since "*[o]nly on the basis of this secrecy is the pluralism of society possible*."[27] In *Otherwise Than Being*, conversely, he emphasizes our "*imprudent exposure*" to the Other, "*leaving the subject no possibility to withdraw into his secret*."

As such, the injection of the Other-in-me has seen through me, has "brusquely exposed me without any possible evasion"; since it traverses me from one side to the other, since it penetrates me all the way into my interior *conscience*, we can conceive of it as a *perforation* of the I by the Other. What are its consequences? What happens to the Other when his alterity introduces itself into the very heart of the I? While *Otherwise Than Being* devotes long analyses to the effects of this perforation *on the I* – the traumatism, the fission, the torsion of the self it provokes – Levinas nevertheless fails to evoke its consequences *for the Other*. This is because he straightaway defines this perforation as an "intrigue of the other in the same, *which does not amount to an openness of the other to the same*" (emphasis added), as though, unlike the I, the Other could pass this test while remaining *unaltered*, absolutely intact, shut away from all contact with, all contamination by this I which it haunts. The I's agonizing opening up to the Other, its being skinned alive by him, would thus be answered by this enigmatic closure of the Other, who would resist, closing himself up to the suffering, to the distress of the I, while at the same time penetrating the I and eroding it into the depths of its flesh. "The darkening of the world never attains the light of Being";[28] it is in these terms that Heidegger pointed out (in 1947…) the sacred character of Being (*heilig*, i.e. always *hale*, unharmed), however great the scale of the disaster befalling man may be. Strangely, it seems that this assertion (should we call it a postulate? a wager? an article of faith?) that *there is something unalterable* persists if we move, with Levinas, "*from the sacred to the holy*"[29] – as if, beyond a certain limit, the "separation" implied in the biblical *kadosh* and the salutary guard of the *Heile* would close in on each other and *nearly* merge. This could put into question the all-too-easily assumed self-evidence of certain demarcations: the one between Being and

[27] Op. cit., p. 29, cf. also p. 93.
[28] "L'expérience de la pensée," *Questions* t. III, Gallimard, 1966, p. 21.
[29] French original: *du sacré au saint*.

the Other, between ontology and ethics, or between Athens and Jerusalem, the "two sources" of our Western religiosity. To put it in James Joyce's terms: "*Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet*."

In the case of Levinas, this position could certainly be justified ethically as an attempt to safeguard the Other, to protect him "in a maternal way" against all offense, against all outrage from the side of the I. It would be grounded in the absolute dissymmetry of the ethical relation which, while letting the Other infiltrate me, forbids me introducing myself into him, to violate him while seeking to "unveil" him, to "understand" him, to lock him up in a concept. "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? … Hast thou commanded the morning since thy days … ?" … Who am I, then, to dare ask the wholly Other that he "open up" to me, reveal to me his secret? But, on the other hand, does this prohibition to question the Other not imply renouncing the exercise of thought itself, notably the questioning of the consequences of the act which injects him into the I? Is it possible for the Other to engage himself in this way in the Same without being altered by it, without becoming the Other *of* the Same, an Other already disfigured by the Same? How far can this intrusion of the Other into the I go? Does it not run the risk of annihilating the I, of dispossessing it completely of self – of my body, my duration, my ipseity – when it does not even leave the I the option of receiving the Other, either to respond or not to his call with a *here I am*? When it comes to this motif of "the Other-in-the-Same," the problem is not merely to be found in the *in*, i.e. the modalities and effects of the Other's injection into me – but equally in *the Other*, the status of this enigmatic alterity which has always been perforating me. Is the *same* name of "other" adequate to name both the wholly-Other – infinitely separated from the I – and an alterity with which I merge as one, to the point that it cracks me open? This Other-in-me – is he still *another*? Does he still have a face? We might assume that this is not the case, that we should rigorously distinguish between the epiphany of the face of another, who always approaches me *frontally*, in the directness of the face-to-face, and this pre-injection of an anonymous alterity which haunts me from the depths of myself. But then we would be forgetting that the face is not a visible face; it does not have an a priori assignable place: it gives itself in the ever singular event of its revelation and, in this sense, the whole body can *compose the face*, just as a voice or an outstretched hand. If the event of the face is measured by the "disturbance" it provokes – by the interruption of my narcissistic auto-affection – then the traumatic penetration of the Other into the I is eminently, excessively a "face," at least insofar as we are speaking of the encounter with an other as analyzed

in *Totality and Infinity*. If approaching the face in a face-to-face contact tends to disappear in the second ethics, it does so to the benefit of a *more-than-face*, a revelation without epiphany of a "face" without a visible face, an archi-face which is no longer that of another.

But Levinas would never consent to this. A case of modest self-restraint or rather one of blindness? Preventing him from asking such questions is the outrageousness of his thinking, which takes him beyond the limits of the delimited area of every phenomenon when he tries to "show something else," to approach the enigma of an *other Other* – but without explicitly recognizing this possibility of the Other's division.[30] Carried away by an exaggeration which gets lost in itself, the second ethics indeed tends to identify the Other-in-me with the other, as if these two terms were necessarily synonymous – for example, in this passage where the "[r]esponsibility for the *other*" is defined as "a claim laid on the same by the *other* in the core of myself, the extreme tension of the command exercised by the *other* in me on me, a traumatic hold of the *other* on the same …" (emphasis added). It happens to be the case that this identification is not self-evident. If it is true that this Other who haunts me and persecutes me affects me in a pre-original manner, even before appearing to my consciousness, then how would I be able to recognize, identify him *as* an other without doing violence to his indetermination?[31] If we wish to respect his mode of donation, we can do nothing more than to designate him as an Other=X, an anonymous alterity. We are then faced with an imperative which is simultaneously *ethical* (respecting the neutrality of the Other while refraining from violating his secret) and *phenomenological* (describing the phenomenon as it appears, without imposing foreign determinations on it). Taken literally, however, this imperative forces us to break with a major thesis of phenomenology, one that affirms that "*the intrinsically first stranger* (the first *non-ego*) is *the other Ego*";[32] we no longer have the right to determine it in this way. Levinas himself, however, remains absolutely faithful to this assertion of

[30] The author adds that, on this subject, Lacan's thinking seems to be more open to the different ways in which the "other" gives himself; he could be called more "phenomenological."

[31] The author recognizes here the interrogation of the "unfathomable anteriority" of the Levinasian Other as explained, "in a rather exasperated manner," by M. Haar in "L'obsession de l'Autre," *Emmanuel Lévinas,* Cahier de l'Herne, 1991, rééd. Livre de Poche, p. 526.

[32] "*Das an sich erste Fremde (das erste "Nicht-Ich") is das andere Ich"* - Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* §49, trans. Donald Cairns, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1960, p. 107 (trans. modified).

the *Cartesian Meditations*, even when as he distances himself from Husserl by refusing to assimilate the other to "another *me*," in order to respect, more than Husserl did, the radical alterity of the First Stranger. In this way, the entirety of Levinas's *oeuvre* testifies to his obstinate fidelity to this thesis of his master. But considering the "first non-me" as an other is not necessarily the only possibility authorized by Husserl's approach. To this decisive question – *who* is the First Stranger? – the founder of phenomenology has also given another answer: in certain manuscripts of the thirties, he indeed came to designate the *Ur-hylè* – the "material" of the primary sensations by which the I is originally affected – as the *Ichfremdkern*, the "core" *in me* of "the stranger in me." The discovery of an Other-in-me thus appears to be neither Levinas' nor Derrida's – except that, in the case of Husserl, we cannot speak of an other, but must consider an alterity *that I myself am*, since the I "is indivisibly one with [*in eins mit und ungetrennt*] its most profound hyletic foundation."[33] These primary sensations of movement – of displacement and obstruction, of tension and relaxation – and these *Empfindnisse* – these perceptive "sentiments" of heat or cold, of ruggedness, of whiteness, etc. – which affect me before I am intentionally directed toward an object, all of this belongs to my immanent life, is one with me – while at the same time *equally* manifesting itself as other than me, as the announcement in me of a stranger-to-me. Faced with the enigma of the First Stranger, all the traditional demarcations between the Same and the Other, the I and an other, immanence and transcendence, start to break down. Previously unobserved questions then crop up. If this Other=X is at the same time mine and foreign, how does this double character manifest itself? Does his foreignness – which is not *absolutely* foreign to me – inevitably bring about a division, a fission of the I? Is it impossible for me to come to recognize this Stranger as *mine*, as an opaque part of my self? To reconcile with him without merging with him? What relation could there be between this immanent alterity and the transcendence of an other? When I encounter an other, will I not *project* the alterity of the other-in-me onto this other outside of me; will I not confer certain of its traits to him, identify him with this alterity? An other would then be nothing else than my *double*, the replica or the mask of the stranger-in-me. What would be the consequences in the domain of ethics? If we are to distinguish at least two modes of the Other, two kinds of alterity, that of the face of an other and that of the Other-in-me, has the time then not come to put an end to

[33] Cf. texts cited by N. Depraz, "Temporalité et affection dans les manuscrits tardifs de Husserl," *Alter* n°2, 1994, pp. 72-73.

the equivocal uniqueness of the name of "Other," to abandon the *monotheism of the Other*?

Levinas could not ask himself these questions because he remained faithful to the first thesis of Husserl, which defines the original foreignness as an other. This fidelity is maintained through all successive exaggerations – first when he identifies an other as the wholly Other, and next when he reintroduces the latter into me as an Other-in-the-Same. What Levinas in all cases refuses to take into account is the possibility of an *other alterity*, more radical than that of the other. At one point, he nevertheless evoked an "other than the other [*autre qu'autrui*], other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical bond with another." He specifies that this *other otherwise* is "different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the *there is,*"[34] i.e. with the impersonal "insignificance" of the being.[35] But is this archi-alterity not that of the First Stranger in me, of Husserl's *Ur-hylè*; it is to this alterity that the name "God" refers. Could it be identical to what he calls the Other-in-the Same? If this is the case, it would lead us back to the classical thesis of a God "nearer tome than I am myself" … This theological interpretation, however, appears to me as erroneous, precisely because Levinas identifies the Other-in-the-Same *with the other*, with an ethical alterity which is distinct from divine alterity. In spite of everything, the outrageousness of his thinking made him move them ever closer to one another, to the point of identifying the ethical illeity of the face and the "glory" of the Sinai, "the language of what is beyond being" and the name of God. Under the single term of "Other," three different determinations are confused; the difference between them is covered up and denied as soon as it appears.

It is this confusion of different dimensions of the Other – whether it is deliberate or not is not the question – which characterizes the second ethics; in this one term Levinas juxtaposes certain traits of the Other=X (its obsessive proximity, its pre-injection into me) and those of the other as wholly Other (his infinite exteriority, his radical separation from the I). This *double condition* of the Other, these two incompatible natures, are simultaneously affirmed in such a way that the alterity of the wholly Other enters *as such* into the core of the I and makes it burst open. In order to

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[34] Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alfonso Lingis, Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff, 1987, pp. 165-166.

[35] *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée,* p. 115. The author adds that it is impossible for him in this context to inquire further into this "possible confusion" between the non-sense of the Other and that of Being, which disconcerts and destabilizes the entire Levinasian foundation.

describe this paradoxical situation where self-being is defined as a fission of the self, as being torn away from the self, he speaks of a "body stripped of its skin," of the "hemorrhage of the hemophiliac". Again, these are not mere metaphors, but rather a bodily inscription of ethical hyperboles. The body does not represent, but is in reality "the contraction of ipseity"; the subject is "of flesh and blood," "entrails in a skin, and thus capable of … giving his skin."[36] Once again, we notice a conception of the ego as an "incarnated I" testifying to Levinas' fidelity to Husserl, to the latter's notion of a self which is originally *Ichleib*, "flesh of the ego."

All motifs of the second ethics could be similarly reregistered into the bodily domain, where the motif of the *skin* plays a major role. As for the I, "*bound up with the self*," tied to its ipseity, Levinas claims that it is "*too tight in its skin*,"[37] tucked in the "*Nessus tunic my skin would be*." He describes the Other-in-the-I as a "*thorn in the flesh*", an "*other-in-the-skin*"; and the vulnerability of the I, his sacrificial exposure to the Other as a "*denuding itself of its skin*." In this way, Levinas – maybe without knowing it – approaches Freud's thesis defining the I as a "projection of the bodily surface," "an I-body," that is, an *I-skin*. But its function is not the same in the two thinkers. In the eyes of the founder of psychoanalysis, the "skin" is a *protective surface* (bodily or psychic), a *Reizschutz* which helps the subject resist the stimuli from the outside world or from the id.[38] In the case of Levinas, it is rather a *zone of exposure* which makes the perforation of the I by the Other possible. Instead of enveloping me, protecting me, my skin makes me suffer some sort of an *invagination* where my flesh turns inside out, exhibiting my most secret intimacy. The "denuding" of which he speaks is one of being skinned alive, a tearing apart which rips me away from myself, and it is actually my "own" skin tearing itself apart: it is almost as if there were "*no longer an opposition between having a skin and being flayed or skinned*."[39] All of these motifs reappear in Levinas' new way of looking upon the *caress*. The second ethics defines it as "*the non-coincidence of contact*," a "*dehiscence*" where the "*discrepancy between the approach and the approached*" is revealed; that is, where the irreducible distance between the I and the Other within me is maintained. Describing the caress in such a way, the second ethics

[36] Original French expression: *donner sa peau pour*: sacrifying oneself for the sake of, dying for the sake of.
[37] Original French expression: *être mal dans sa peau*.
[38] For further reading concerning this thesis of Freud, as explained in his essay on *Le moi et le ça*, and its theoretical and clinical implications, see D. Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau,* Bordas, 1985.
[39] J.L. Chrétien, "La dette et l'élection", *Lévinas,* Cahier de l'Herne, p. 271.

appears to extend the earlier analyses outlined in *Time and the Other*, and subsequently in *Totality and Infinity*. However, if the caress was already defined there as a "beyond contact" – a "hunger" forever unappeased, an experience of the "ungraspable"[40] – these analyses took into account the non-coincidence, the ceaseless "evasion" of the caressed flesh by invoking the vulnerability *of the Other*, the "extreme fragility" of the feminine which brings the Other to shy away from, to avoid all bodily contact as a "profanation" of his reserve. In the view of *Otherwise Than Being*, the caress always proves to be a vulnerability, but it is no longer that of the Other, of the Beloved: it is that *of the I* in its devotion, its "immolation" of the Other. While caressing the body of the Other, I hurt myself, I cut myself in contact with him; I let myself be lacerated by this body that I caress, be torn apart by it to the point that I "sacrifice my skin." In reality, being skinned precedes all caressing, all external contact with the Other, since *I have him in my skin*, he has always perforated me, torn me away from myself. We are faced here with a "tangential exaggeration," where the motifs slip from hyperbole to hyperbole – from pre-injection to perforation, and thence to being skinned and to hemorrhage –to the point of wounding, "wounding to death," as the truth of the caress and of all relations to the Other. Paraphrasing an author from which Levinas sought to distance himself, but who appears to be closer to him than he thought: *hell is the Other-in-me*.[41]

How would it be possible to escape this hell into which the outrageousness of the second ethics precipitates us? How are we to think bodily contact without over-determining it in a series of hyperboles? By describing it as it is given, neither as a caress, nor as a wound, but simply as contact, as skin being touched by skin. In which singular experience is this phenomenon originally given? If we are to believe Husserl, it is given in the act where the flesh touching flesh recognizes the touched flesh as its own flesh – what Merleau-Ponty calls the tactile "intertwining," the "chiasm." As described in *Ideen II* or in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the most original phenomenon of bodily contact is this self-experience in which my flesh *touches itself* while touching. Levinas very deliberately refuses to take this classical analysis into account, because it presupposes the priority of auto-affection over hetero-affection, whereas he posits on the contrary the principle that incarnation plays "into an intrigue larger

[40] Cf. *Le temps et l'autre* (1946), reed. PUF, 1983, p. 82-83, and *Totalité et infini* pp. 233-238. These analyses are without a doubt directed against Sartre, who, on the contrary, conceived of the caress as taking possession of the other, an attempt (doomed to failure) to capture his freedom through incarnation.

[41] French original: *l'Autre-en-moi, c'est l'enfer*.

than the apperception of self … I am tied to others before being tied to my body." If one is to accept this postulate, one has to conclude that contact is necessarily altered, disconnected from the self by the alterity of the foreign flesh: "In contact itself the touching and touched separate, as though the touch moved off, was always already other, did not have anything in common with me." This is why "caresses are dormant in all contact" and, in all contact, the wound. In defining touch as an agonizing exposure of the flesh *to the Other*, in refusing to envisage the event of a tactile *auto*-affection, Levinas once again proves his fidelity – even to its ultimate implications – to Husserl's thesis identifying the First Stranger as the other. Today, it is precisely this thesis which should be questioned. Through the experience of the chiasm, indeed, I discover an irreducible gap opening between my flesh and itself: I experience a stranger *in me*, an anonymous archi-alterity which does not amount to the alterity of the Other, whether that of an *alter ego* or of the face of an other, or to that which "God" names. In me too, the touching and touched separate, *as if* my flesh were "always already other" – and yet I discover that this other flesh that I feel is another pole *of my flesh*; that the First Stranger I encounter is a part of my own flesh, which hides from itself and misunderstands itself as a transcendent Thing. Before tying myself to others, I have first tied myself to my flesh, that is to say, to myself.

That being the case, it is time to return to Descartes, but to another Descartes than the one praised by Levinas: to the Descartes of the second *Metaphysical Meditation*, the one who discovered in the original truth of the ego an element of *resistance* to the hold the Other has on the ego – the Other as a great Deceiver which should finally be exposed as an illusion in which the ego loses itself. Let us avoid misunderstanding: while we are indeed refocusing on the ego, affirming the priority of his auto-donation over all transcendent donation, this certainly does not mean that the vulnerability, the obsession, the traumatism, the entire martyrdom of the Self so admirably described by Levinas disappear as if by magic. Rather, their significance becomes profoundly different: if the Stranger haunting me is none other than me myself, we can now envisage, beyond wretchedness and hardship, the possibility of an I-flesh reconciled with itself, having to some extent overcome its anxieties. From this point of view, the entire dimension of ethics should be reconsidered, since it is my primordial relation to myself, to my own flesh, which founds the possibility of my relation to the Other; and the alterity of another from now on appears as a projection transcending this archi-alterity which I first encounter in myself. This leaves open the question of how – through this screen representation, this specter that I project onto the Other – I am

nevertheless to make my way toward him, how I am to approach others *in truth*, beyond the obsession and the phantasm.[42] Levinas' ethics can at the outset be considered some sort of antithesis, a version *in negativo* (in the way that we speak of a photographic "negative") of this phenomenology of the I-flesh. It can equally be regarded as one of its privileged *developers*. In other words our proximity to Levinas is more intimate than it may at first glance seem; may our debt to him "increase to the extent that it is paid off."

Translated from French by Sofie Verraest

[42] See Rogozinski's book *Le moi et la chair, introduction à l'ego-analyse,* Cerf, 2006.

IN RESPONSE TO JACOB ROGOZINSKI: LEVINAS' *OUTRAGEOUSNESS* AS A GROTESQUE

MARIA DIMITROVA

Dear Prof. Rogozinski,

Emmanuel Levinas – his philosophy, his world, his ethics – permits, and almost encourages, his depiction via the grotesque.

It is very rare to encounter the genre of the "grotesque" in the field of philosophy. The "lovers of wisdom" seem to prefer stuck-up, pompous and bloated maxims, combined in heavy, monolithic, solemn tractates. This is not the case in literature and the visual arts. There, masterpieces can be found in the grotesque style. I'll mention just a few: in painting, Hieronymus Bosch, Jericho, Dalí, etc.; in literature, François Rabelais, Ionesco, Beckett and, of course, the unrivalled Kafka. Everything, which in apodictic discourse is elevated, spiritualized, deified, conversely becomes "the other of itself" in the grotesque style – the sacred is reduced to its incarnations, but they are somehow disgusting; ideology is naturalized, but we perceive this type of natural form as more or less misshapen. The grotesque is rather hard to contemplate and very often we try to escape the discomfort it causes.

The first feature of every grotesque picture is its ambivalence. It is created by a clash of opposites, typical of the author's attitude to the object depicted – in your text this object became Levinas' legacy. The creator of grotesques, however, projects his own ambiguous attitude to the topic, one that results from mutually exclusive values and evaluations, as the appropriate expression of the problematic objective state itself. The confusion of heterogeneous moods and the failure to resolve conflict are distinguishing characteristics of the grotesque.

In our case, it is true that we can transform Levinas' body of thought into an oracle in which "the said" is immobilized, thus showing our strict fidelity, our submission to the Master; but, on the other hand and simultaneously, we must concede that true fidelity to a thinker necessarily involves some injustice and infidelity. Only when the ambivalence of this

attitude to Levinas is transferred to Levinas' philosophy itself do we reach the excessive controversiality of the grotesque: "*Levinas' body of ideas, while pretending to prohibit all violence, is itself nevertheless committing extreme violence*". When the caress is literally identified with wounding, we can easily adopt a grotesque style when speaking about Levinas' outrageousness.

Emmanuel Levinas himself emphasizes on many occasions that the method he has used in his works is hyperbolization. His term "beyond" does not refer to a world beyond our world but, to a passage beyond the borders of any world. "Beyond" is not simply "above" or "over." "Beyond" is the dimension of height in which every "above" or "over" is situated and becomes relevant. "Beyond" is extraterritorial, whereas in the grotesque it seems territorial. When the extraterritorial meaning of "beyond" is reduced to the territorial "above" and "over" and claims to take their place, they all come together in "down here" and form a combined whole – the entirety of corporeal, worldly, territorial existence. Thus, for common perception the result is a totality, but this totality is a composite form, as when instead of wings, hands are attached to a bird's body. If wings are attached to a human body, this is a sort of uplift, a hyperbolization, which turns the human into an angel or an angelic being. Levinas' ethics wants to show us that my Self, becoming "me," can be elevated, inspired, to fly beyond the attachment to the totality of worldly interests. For Levinas, this happens only when the Self is not merely for-itself, but for-the-Other. Levinas uses hyperbolization for heightening, something which should make us understand that everything in connection with morality exceeds our "normal," "average," "reciprocal" relationships. His hyperboles insist on what is "more in less." The contradiction between ethics and ontology spans the whole of his philosophy and greatly exceeds our traditional understandings of humanity. In Levinas' humanism, ontology is subordinated to ethics and every return to the old "ethics within the boundaries of ontology" looks as though turned upside down [like an inversion]. Indeed, let us ask ourselves, is it possible to assume without absolutization, without augmentation or enhancement, that *"[n]othing is more grave, more august, than responsibility for the other, and saying, in which there is no play, has gravity more grave than its own being or not being*"?[1] Levinas' high-flying ethics also draws ontology in its wake to such an extent that the ontological merges with morality - the Self becomes itself when is for the Other. Whereas in the grotesque

[1] Emmanuel Levinas. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, 2000, p. 46.

portrait of Levinasian metaphysics, ethics is reduced to the level of ontology and to an event within the horizons of (my) world. In view of the logic of being, my Ego has a leading role, because it functions as a beginning. Conversely, according to Levinas' conception, the first is the Other. Levinas warns his readers on many occasions against this reduction of his philosophy. He insists again and again that the vertical relationship, i.e. the relationship in depth or height between the Other and me, should not be projected onto the flatness of being's parameters, but, instead, terrestrial existence must be elevated to its metaphysical meanings.

Perhaps it is not possible to argue, as Levinas does, without extravagance or amplification that ethics is not reducible to the code of rules of any given community or to any principles, even strictly personal ones. When the Other is presented in his dimension of transcendence, we must say (though it might seem an exaggeration) that the moral subject is without respite at the service of the heterogeneous appeal of the Other. It is impossible to state without some kind of sublimation, which looks like overstatement, that through the face of the Other and his eyes a Good is looking at me: *"A Good in relation to which being itself appears. A Good, from which being draws the illumination of its manifestation and its ontological force. A Good in view of which 'every soul does all that it does'."*[2] As if this humanism, for which no other humanism up to now has been human enough, this excessive Levinasian humanism, provokes our desire to ground it and take a sober look at what all this means in terms of the categories of being. Exactly this urge to sobriety drives us to turn against Levinas and makes us slide downhill, leading us to the grotesque.

But once we arrive at the grotesque bottom, the dimensions "up" and "down" disappear. Thereupon, the existence of such a thing as morality, as well as the philosophizing about it, also disappears. The bird with hands instead of wings not only cannot fly, but is even deprived of its symbolic or metaphorical value to represent the very possibility of flight beyond. The journey to the grotesque begins precisely with the grounding of absolutes. But, in contrast to irony and satire, which also walk this path and which bring down *the Most High* and turn it into an object of mockery, the grotesque is not concerned only with exchanging the places of high and low, but also turns its efforts to reducing the distance between them, achieving even a sort of platitude or even their full identification.

Whereas the ironist and satirist retain their position of absolute freedom and supremacy over the mocked character, the creator of the

[2] Emmanuel Levinas. Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other.Translated by Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav. Columbia University Press, New York,1998, p. 200.

grotesque tries to speak as a detached and dispassionate observer, keeping calm even though he himself feels confused and uncertain about the controversy and absurdity of the situation in which he has placed his character. This situation looks grim and fearsome because of the unbalanced proportions of things and the implication that, until this moment, only habit prevented us from seeing these disproportions and their strangling horror. The grotesque claims to reveal the demons that haunt us, to point out the deformations which we had previously ignored, and, conversely, to demonize the rosy dreams which we created for ourselves; ultimately, it claims to show us that the remedy we habitually take is, in fact, a poison. The aim is to provoke our disgust, to make us turn away and refuse the opiates, i.e. the hyperbolizations, which we believed were our salvation. So, the question then is whether Levinas' ethics is too elevated and thus intoxicating?

Well, what's so bad about bringing metaphysics down to earth? What happens if we try to defend the unbounded autonomy of the Self? Is it not true that, whether we like it or not, we enclose the Other within the schemes of our own narrow-mindedness? Is it not true that my Ego, and not the Other, is in closest proximity to me? Isn't egocentrism the most reliable coordinate system? In response to these questions, we would like first to note that if this is the case, then hierarchy crumbles: "*Il ne peut y avoir de sens dans l'être que celui qui ne se mesure pas à l'être*,"[3]

The operation of hyperbolizing most commonly uses ontological terms in an ethical sense. But such a vast gap exists between the strictly ethical and common ontological meanings that it cannot be compared even to the separation between heaven and earth. For example, passivity, opposed within a totality of being to activity, is one thing; passivity (more passive than any passivity), which coincides with the vulnerability and subjectivity of the Self, hearing the appeal of the Other, is quite another thing. Similarly, there is an incommensurability between juridical guilt, sought in the courts after the deed has been perpetrated, and moral guilt, which precedes any deed and makes me more guilty than any other even before I have done anything. In the same way, there is an enormous distance between our everyday understanding of responsibility and the responsibility, which connects me with transcendence, with infinity, and can never be depleted by the answers I give as a limited, finite being. Moreover, it is out of the question to compare intimacy, which is moral in its essence and therefore never close enough, and the intimacy that is carnal and spatial.

[3] Emmanuel Levinas. Humanisme et an-archie. Humanisme de l'autre homme, Fata Morgana, 1972, p.81.

According to Levinas' philosophy, I could never take the place of the Other, no matter how much of an effort I make. The Other eludes the range of my capabilities and I cannot catch up with him, no matter how faithfully and diligently I pursue the trace left by him. As if the magnification that Levinas uses is so magnificent that it provokes an opposite reaction, the fear of some immoderate, unreasonable intoxication, something like an ethical delirium. And as a kind of resistance, the creators of grotesques, seeking to avoid the placeless sublimity and exaltation of one extreme, compared to another so typical in hyperbolization, completely ignore the distance between extremes and present them as continually blending with one another even to the point of their fusion into a strange, frightening, and incompatible combination. However, this combination does not "fly in the sky"; although it looks fictional, it is perceived as bodily existence itself, inseparable from earthly conditions. For this reason, the impact of the grotesque is horrifying and at the same time ridiculous.

In this regard something very important must be pointed out about Levinas' philosophy, something which saves it from mockery. Tirelessly Levinas reminds us not only that there are different levels of descent into the depths, but also that we need the mediation of a Third. Once we have left the field of the ethical relation (if such a departure is at all feasible since responsibility cannot be escaped), we enter into a reflexive attitude toward others and reflexivity presupposes the presence of a third person. Even though Levinas focuses on the face-to-face relation, which is par excellence the direct relation, he never forgets that the Third is already looking at me with the eyes of the Other (and along with the Third also, in principle, everybody else). The Third must not be ignored, if we do not want to alter or ridicule Levinas' position:

> *The third person who, in the face, has already withdrawn from all revelation and dissimulation – who has passed – this illeity is not "less than being" with regard to the world where the face penetrates; it is all enormity, all the immensity, all the Infinity of the absolutely Other, escaping ontology.*[4]

Levinas needs the series of hyperboles precisely to show us that "bodily contact" is not just given and that we could not describe it without over-determining:

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[4] Emmanuel Levinas, "Signification and Sense," in *Humanism of the Other*, translated by Nidra Poller, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2003, p. 41.

> *The body is not only image or figure here, "the expression "in one's skin" is not a metaphor for the in-itself; it refers to a recurrence in the dead time or the meanwhile which separates inspiration and expiration ... This recurrence is incarnation ... In it the body which makes giving possible makes one other without alienating.*[5]

According to Levinas, the subject is not in time, but is diachrony itself. In the identification of the Ego there is his aging and it is the diachrony of an election without identification. Uniqueness is without identity. Not being an identity, it is beyond consciousness, which is in itself and for itself. The diachrony that one will never "catch up with again" prevents the one from joining up with itself and identifying itself as a substance. It is diachrony due to an election that denudes and impoverishes. Without the demand from the Other the ethical (i.e. human and not naturalistic) meaning of the aging is lost.[6] The theses that "*[b]efore tying myself to others, I have tied myself to my flesh, that is to say, to myself*" and that "*it is my primordial relation to myself, to my own flesh, which founds the possibility of my relation to the Other*" do not stand in antithesis to Levinas' ethics. Concerning this Levinas writes:

> *One may in particular wonder whether such a "relation" (the ethical relation) does not impose itself through a radical separation of the two hands, which in point of fact do not belong to the same body. It is that radical separation and the entire ethical order of sociality that appears ... even in the hand one shakes.*[7]

The thesis privileging a departure from the Self, which is not a reply to the appeal, heard from the opposite shore, but a reconstruction of the circling around myself cannot be acknowledged as a version *in positive*, which uses Levinas' philosophy as its photographic negative; it is rather a transfer of meanings from one field to the other and vice versa, from the non-locus to the locus, without a mediator, in which the meanings become the other of themselves and ultimately induce a feeling of the absurd: an incapacity of the subject to break free from the centripetal wandering around himself as a center. The thesis and antithesis, united into one by the grotesque, even if thought of as the front and back side, can be considered

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[5] Emmanuel Levinas. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, 2000, p. 109.
[6] Ibid., pp. 56-57.
[7] Emmanuel Levinas. On Intersublectivity. Notes on Merleau-Ponty. *Outside the Subject*. Translated by Michael B. Smith, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994, pp. 101-102.

equal only if one allows an illegitimate reduction of meta-language to language, devoid of the dimension of height and blind to metaphorical sense. Only in this way can the caress and the wound be immediately (without preserving any distance between them and without an understanding that the suffering within me receives meaning as suffering only because of the suffering of the other) be perceived as phenomena which are mutually exchangeable and of the same order, and can Levinas' language can be deemed "outrageous."

As regards the perspective in which I see things, I agree with Jacques Ellul, who says in his book *The Humiliated Word*, with respect to the extreme violence attributed to language, that nothing is more senseless than the argument, heard thousands of times in today's world, that speech and words are terroristic. It seems that Ellul is convinced by personal experience that the people who say this so easily have not experienced themselves the difference between the violence of words and the violence of the lash, between the roaring human mouth and the silent barrel of a gun. In the grotesque these two extremes are merged and make us shiver, for wherever this merging occurs, it is monstrous. One of the lessons of Levinas' books – from the first to the last, including *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* –is that where the Word is spoken and the Other can be heard, the firing of guns and revolvers has either been deferred or silenced.

Perhaps this will sound unoriginal, as many have done the same already, but I would also like to join the respect shown to Levinas by Maurice Blanchot:

> *In Emmanuel Levinas' book – where, it seems to me, philosophy in our time has never spoken in a more sober manner, putting back into question, as we must, our ways of thinking and even our facile reverence for ontology – we are called upon to become responsible for what philosophy essentially is, by welcoming, in all the radiance and infinite exigency proper to it, the idea of the Other, that is to say, the relation with* autrui. *It is as though there were here a new departure of philosophy and a leap that it, and we ourselves, were urged to accomplish.*[8]

But at the same time I know very well that the appearance of the grotesque signals the end of some monolithically serious myth. Labeling a belief as myth already presupposes distance, suspicion, reflection, and the end of faith. The grotesque exactly describes the myth's picturesque

[8] Maurice Blanchot. He Infinite Conversation. Translated by Susan Hanson. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1993, p. 51.

agony. And the grotesque has as its function not only to demythologize and represent the death of the myth, but represents our liberation from it as well. In this way, it could be the beginning of another style of thinking and a quite new culture.

Translated from Bulgarian by George Christov

CHAPTER FOUR

THE QUEST FOR JUSTICE VERSUS THE RIGHTS OF THE OTHER?

ERNST WOLFF

1. Ethics, politics and human rights

In his initial reception, Levinas become known above all as a philosopher of an extremely demanding ethics, an ethics of an infinite responsibility to the other, issued from a heteronomical, asymmetrical "link" with the other. But, as mentioned, recent Levinas scholarship tends toward interest in the political aspects and implications of this philosophy. Abstracting from the divers interests and themes of authors on this subject, it seems that most of them are in one way or another concerned with the relation between ethics and politics; that means the transition from the ethical face-to-face with the other to the question of justice. In this regard, readers of Levinas most often argue for one of two scenarios. According to the first, the heteronomical relation to the other with its infinite appeal to my responsibility is limited in politics by the plurality of others and thus equality is established between me and the other. This is the role of the State: not the limitation of man being a wolf for man (Hobbes), but the limitation of my otherwise infinite responsibility for the other. Thus equality is based on fraternity. And this equality in turn would be the basis for a politics in which the rights of the other are expressed in human rights. These rights of the other are my obligations. The second reading insists that institutionalized justice (including the law and declarations of human rights) is never a sufficient expression of justice and therefore the State should perpetually be called to improved justice. In such an attitude, in such a politics of prophecy, I am obliged to testify to the other (even if its means going against the normal functioning of the State) and thus to call the State to greater justice.

In both of these readings, recognition is given to the fact that politics, left to its own devices, left to develop itself according to its own inherent logic, could not and should not be considered sufficient justification for the State. Rather, politics should be in perpetual exchange with the ethical imperative imposed by the originary ethical appeal (as in the case of the first scenario) or should more energetically be interrupted or interfered into in response to the originary, an-archical ethical appeal (as in the case of the second scenario). Both of these readings reflect on the way in which the system of institutionalized justice is exposed to the significance of ethics; both recognize the fact that for Levinas politics, the domain of justice, is secondary to that of ethics.

The aim of my paper is not to refute these readings – they correspond, each with its own accent, with the ideas of Levinas. Or to be more precise: they correspond with what Levinas considered to be the political implications of his ethics. What I shall do here is to ask: even if we remain within the framework of Levinas' ethics, have the number of possible implications thereof for politics been exhausted? Are there not perhaps some other ways to translate the heteronomical significance of the other for the subject in the domain of politics? And if there is such another way of being truly levinasian in the quest for justice, what would this entail for "the rights of the other"?[1]

2. Levinas' interpretation and reinterpretation of human rights

In order to set up my argument, I would like to unpack what Levinas says about rights, human rights, and the rights of the other.[2] He identifies in human rights discourse an attempt, parallel to his own, to reflect on ethics in politics or the "beyond politics within politics" (Derrida). The

[1] The current essay is a resumption and an extension to the domain of human rights of problems that I have developed in detail in my *De l'éthique à la justice. Langage et politique dans la philosophie de Lévinas*. (Phaenomenologica 183) Dortrecht: Springer, 2007. It takes the place of the essay announced on p. 157 of this book.

[2] The texts that I shall refer to primarily, but not exclusively – the three essays gathered ("Inderdit de la representation et 'droits de l'homme'", "Paix et proximité", and "Les droit de l'autre homme") under the title "Paix et droit" in *Altérité et transcendence* (pp.129-155), "Les droits de l'homme et les droits d'autrui" in *Hors sujet* (pp. 159-170) and "Droits de l'homme et bonne volonté" in *Entre nous* (pp. 215-219) – are all from the 1980s and attempt to exploit his ethics to contribute to the theory of human rights.

human rights discourse and Levinas agree that a State cannot be left to its own devices, and this holds not only for totalitarian States, but also for democratic ones. The judicial, legislative, and executive powers of the State should be submitted to ethical scrutiny. This is done by emphasising a certain importance or significance of the unique individual over against the interests of the State or the majority of its citizens. But Levinas is convinced that his philosophy of ethics is superior to the discourse of human rights as way of reflecting on the State and on rights, and he follows two strategies to argue this. First, he indicates the weakness of the human rights discourse, and then, secondly, he situates the justification and understanding of human rights within a particular locus of his own work, namely within the question of justice, in order to reinterpret it in terms of the rights of the other. I shall now look at these two strategies in turn.

2.a. Weakness of the human rights discourse

Human rights are all liberties or freedoms of will, according to Levinas.[3] Such freedoms or rights would off course have posed no problem if it were not for the fact that there are a multitude of bearers of these freedoms. If the autocracy of monarchs and emperors is replaced by a democracy of common citizens, what protects society of degrading into a war of everyone's freedoms against that of all the others?[4] What safeguards the law against contradicting claims of the urgency of specific rights?[5] How could the liberties of every individual be compatible with all liberties of all of the others, without these liberties loosing their essential character?[6] In order to answer this question, one would have to penetrate to the true origin of rights as inalienable and independent of contextual demands: where do they come from?[7]

The Kantian solution to this problem, that Levinas identifies in the human rights discourse, consists of a recourse to practical reason: the free

[3] Cf. *Entre nous* 216.

[4] *Hors sujet* 165: "Mais les droits de l'homme […] ne courent-ils pas aussi le risque d'être démentis ou offusqués par les droits de l'autre homme?"

[5] Cf. *Hors sujet* 164.

[6] *Entre nous* 217: "En quoi et sous quel mode, en effet, la volonté libre ou autonome que revendique le droit de l'homme pourrait-elle s'imposer à une autre volonté libre sans que cette imposition implique un *effet*, une violence par cette volonté subie?" Cf. also *Hors sujet* 166.

[7] *Entre nous* 216: "la question du *devoir être* même de ce droit reste ouverte."

will submits itself in free exercise of its reason to a universal law of which the will is itself the legislator.[8] Or as Levinas correctly states:

> *The will that obeys the order of a free will, would still be a free will, just as a reason that submits itself to reason [would still be reason – EW].*[9]

Thus, by practicing freely the practical reason, the good will is autonomous; its submission to the universal law is the very exercise of its freedom and by no means a way of compromising its freedom, even though it entails a self-limitation of its freedom in the instauration of justice.

But Levinas identifies some tensions in this justification of human rights: is the limitation of rights for the maintenance of justice not already a way of treating the other as means rather than as end alone, and thus in contradiction with a basic maxim of the universal law?[10] And besides, once institutionalized, the enforcement of the state of law and human rights necessitates the recourse to the means of the State, which are sometimes violent.[11] Hence also the anguish experienced in the face of the recourse to violent means even though the use of it could in certain contexts be legitimized.[12]

A second criticism of this approach to human rights is that its understanding of reason is too simple. The will has not been exhaustively analysed by its relation to the universals of the practical reason, suggests Levinas.[13] The will and the exercise of freedom, i.e. human freedom, is non-heroic, since it is corporeal[14] and thus subject not only to reason but to the forces of the body and of history that acts on it and coerces it in directions not prescribed by the practical reason. The practical reason is also at the mercy of forces that decentres the subject.

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[8] Cf. Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königlich Preußichen Akademie, [1786]1903), Bd. 4 (Paul Menzer, ed.), p. 405.

[9] "La volonté qui obéit à l'ordre d'une volonté libre serait encore une volonté libre comme une raison qui se rend à la raison." *Entre nous* 217 (all translations are my own).

[10] Cf. *Hors sujet* 166.

[11] Cf. *Hors sujet* 167.

[12] Cf. *Altérité et transcendence* 142.

[13] Cf. *Altérité et transcendence* 154; *Hors sujet* 166.

[14] Cf. *Liberté et commandement* 38.

2.b. A new understanding of human rights

When Levinas then sets out to reconsider human rights he does so by situating the question within the framework of his own work and in particular in the question of justice. Levinas is not against the institutionalisation of justice, in fact, he considers this as an inevitable outcome of any reflection on justice.[15] But he is convinced that if considered from the point of view of his ethics, justice will be institutionalized in the form of liberalism. And he hastens to define the liberal State as one where

> *by law, justice always seeks and endeavors to become better. The liberal State is not a purely empirical notion – it is a category of ethics according to which the people, placed under the generality of laws, retain the meaning of their responsibility; i.e. their uniqueness as elected to respond.*[16]

If we, then, want to understand Levinas' reinterpretation of human rights, we have to situate it within the question of the liberal State, that is characterized by an improving justice, and this in turn is possible only if we take serious the position of the subject as uniquely elected and responsible for the other. Only the elected, responsible subject could call the already institutionalized system of justice in a specific context to an improved justice; only such a subject could act as prophet.[17] In other words, we are referred once again to the crucial transition from ethics to justice.

The essence of this transition or translation could be summarized as follows. I find myself face to face with the other in an asymmetrical situation: the alterity of the other consists of an ethical appeal that has all

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[15] Cf. for example *Totalité et infini* 334-335: "dans la mesure où le visage d'Autrui nous met en relation avec le tiers, le rapport métaphysique de Moi à Autrui, se coule dans la forme du Nous, aspire à un Etat, aux institutions, aux lois qui sont la source de l'universalité.", *Autrement qu'être* 251: "L'Etat [est] issu de la proximité" and *Dieu, la mort et le temps* 214: "Les institutions et l'Etat lui-même peuvent être retrouvés à partir du tiers intervenant dans la relation de proximité."

[16] *Autrement que savoir* 62: "de droit, la justice se veut toujours et s'efforce d'être toujours meilleure. L'Etat libéral n'est pas une notion purement empirique – il est une catégorie de l'éthique où, placés sous la généralité des lois, les hommes conservent le sens de leur responsabilité, c'est-à-dire leur unicité d'élus à répondre." Levinas refers to the liberal State, but without defining it in these words in *Hors sujet* 167.

[17] To which Levinas refers explicitly in *Hors sujet* 167.

initiative "before" my ontological, hermeneutic existence. This alterity invests me with an ethical imperative to an infinite responsibility and thus my subjectivity is at its origin heteronomical. Henceforth, each and every aspect of my existence has the character of being a response to the originary appeal. My entire existence stands under the obligation to translate as good as possible the appeal of the other into reality; in other words, I have to testify about this imperative, I have to obey it. But there is not just one other, there are always more – the thirds. And the moment there are three others, the unproblematic but highly demanding meaning of the other for me, is troubled. Since I cannot answer to all the legitimate appeals made on me, I am now forced to ask questions about my own limited capabilities in answering the appeal of all of the others in order to respond to what is most urgent and to where I could be the most effective – *"Who comes before whom in my responsibility*?"[18] This question is the essence of the transition or translation of ethics to justice; it is the question of justice in terms of ethics. In order to answer this question, I now have to compare the others, establish principles, write laws, etc. I have to work for the realization of justice and even for the institutionalisation of justice. But without that institutionalization, the State, ever being an excuse for not prophesying, that means: appealing to that institution, in the name of the other, to improve its justice.

It is within this perspective that Levinas justifies and reinterprets human rights as the rights of the other: human rights are not founded on each citizen's autonomy, but are implied in the idea of heteronomy. All human rights are developments of the basic imperative: "Thou shalt not kill!", which is at the same time my obligation to let the other live. Nobody can be responsible for the other in my place. Moreover, I have to obey this obligation way beyond the demands of institutionalized laws, in fact, I have to do so to the point of sacrificing myself for the other, to the point of becoming saintly.

This would then be the orthodox way of understanding Levinas' contribution to the theory of human rights. It consists of three essential elements: /1/ the accent on the right of the other, /2/ the importance of constantly prophesying, that means to call justice to greater justice, and /3/ and the injunction to sacrifice yourself in saintliness for the improved justice, for the rights of the other.

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[18] "Lequel passe avant l'autre dans ma responsabilité?" *Altérité et transcendence* 148.

3. The contradiction of the thirds and the vulnerability of the rights of the other

But still, I am not convinced that everything has been said on this subject. Let us reconsider the question: "Who is the other, whose rights are to be defended?" The answer to this question is not "the other" – the bearer and originator of rights is not the other – but the third. Let it be stated clearly that I never encounter the singular other, I always only encounter the thirds.[19] And there are four things that the third doesn't do that are often overlooked, not only by Levinas' commentators but, at least to some extent, by Levinas himself. These points are crucial if we are to understand the nature of the agent of politics in Levinas' philosophy.

First, the third does not limit my responsibility. We know that Levinas thought that the State is the situation in which my infinite responsibility for the other is limited by the presence of the other others, the thirds. And this is correct in a certain sense: my responsibility to any particular other is de facto limited by my responsibility for any other other. But the sum of my responsibility for the thirds remains infinite; it is never accomplished or exhausted.

Second, whilst leaving intact my uniqueness as elected to respond to the other, the third doesn't leave untouched my heteronomical relation to the other. Since the significance of one other is contradicted[20] by the significance of another other for me, I have to pose the question of justice: "Which of the legitimate appeals made on me should be considered the most urgent?", that is, "Who comes before whom?" Or to put it differently: since the heteronomical link between one other and me is contradicted by the heternonomical link between another other and me, I have to arbitrate between them. But just as nobody could answer to the singular other's appeal to me in my place, just so, nobody could answer to the plurality of appeals in my place. Only I could answer the question

[19] "There are always at least three people. […] As soon as there are three people, the ethical relation to the other becomes political and enters into the totalizing discourse of ontology." // "Il y a toujours au moins trois personnes. [...] Dès qu'il y a trois personnes, la relation éthique à l'autre devient politique et entre dans le discours totalisant de l'ontologie." "De la phénoménologie à l'éthique", p. 129.

[20] "The third introduces a contradiction in the Saying of which the meaning in front of the other went up to that moment in one way. This is, in itself, the limit of responsibility, birth of the question: What do I have to do in justice?"// "Le tiers introduit une contradiction dans le Dire dont la signification devant l'autre allait, jusqu'alors, dans un sens unique. C'est, de soi, limite de la responsabilité naissance de la question: Qu'ai-je à faire avec justice?" *Autrement qu'être* 245.

posed by the plurality of others, the question of justice. I say what is to be done in justice, I give the law, and nobody can do this in my place. In this process, it is inevitable that I give privilege to some thirds before some others. What is more, nothing obliges me to submit myself to the dictates of reason or to the opinion of others concerning the most desirable form of justice. In other words, the plurality of heteronomical relations to the others, thus constitutes me as subject of politics to an extreme and individual autonomy.

Third, the third does not relieve me of the obligation to realize justice for the thirds. Translating the imperative of the other into reality is explicitly included in the obligation of translating ethics to justice.[21] In front of the thirds, I still have to work for the actualization of justice, in fact, of a very demanding justice, one whose obligation on me goes way beyond the demands of institutionalized laws. In fact, I have to work for justice – the justice that I myself define – to the point of sacrificing myself, that is, to the point of becoming saintly.

Fourth, the third does not allow direct interference of ethics in politics. Faced with the appeal of the other I never give myself immediately and unconditionally to the other. I always have to ask myself first the question of the urgency of the appeal of this other, compared to the appeal of that other. Thus, it is not true that ethics questions, undermines, challenges or interferes in politics. Nowhere is politics, the State or any institutionalised form of justice directly exposed to ethics. These institutions are only challenged, questioned, prophesied against by someone – me – who answers the question: "Who comes before whom?". The only form in which politics is exposed to prophetic criticism is in the form of an answer to the question of justice. The political subject mediates between the appeals of the others and the political institutions.

Where does Levinas' thought on ethics lead us in the face of the plurality of others? It leads us to politics as exposed to a political subject that is – the irreplaceable elected one by all the thirds, elected for a mission for which he is infinitely responsible, responsible beyond and independent of already institutionalized demands and obliged to actualize justice at whatever cost he deems fit, even to the point of sacrificing himself for the actualization of this mission of justice, but, who is at the same time autonomous, the first and singular authority on what form justice needs to take, and on what existing institutions of justice ought to be undermined in the name of the other and at the same time no question is asked about this subject's competence or suitability for this task.

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[21] See note 20.

This is the person responsible for interpreting and safeguarding the rights of the other. Since human rights are to be understood as the rights of the others, since human rights are derived from a far more profound imperative, namely "Thou shalt not kill!", the guardian of human rights is subjected to an extremely demanding task. Levinas is correct when he identifies this task as stretching beyond institutionalized obligations: the political subject as prophet has to constantly call for an improved justice and as saint should personally sacrifice himself for the realization of this justice. I am the ultimate institutor and guardian of the justice of the State, of its judicial, legislative and executive powers.

Levinas is off course completely impotent to give me any advice on how to go about in my demanding task, since the originary ethical appeal is an-archical, that means, there are no rules, principles or guidelines directly derivable from the original imperative. And if he were to give me any guidelines, these would only constitute another element in my complicated question of justice: "What comes before what?" Hence, in Levinas' philosophy, politics is constantly exposed to people who are ready to sacrifice themselves in order to actualize their specific notion of justice that they consider as being truer to the appeal of the other and superior to or more urgent than the form of justice institutionalized where they are. We could call such people "saints"; we could also call them fanatics or terrorists. Despite the spirit of his texts, but not against the letter of it, there opens up an abyss of possible interpretations of Levinas' ethics that, even though they strive to remain true to the originary appeal of the other, or in fact, because they strive to remain true to the infinite appeal of the other, lead to ethically undesirable consequences.

Nothing – not even institutionalized human rights – protects the other against my idea of how to safeguard and maintain the right of the other. The consequence of a Levinasian frame of thinking is that the other does not have the right to be protected against my efforts to realize what I consider the most just dispensation for humanity. The rights of the others are not protected against my ideas of when it would be desirable to suspend them in the name of an improving justice. Levinas' politics is one inspired by a demanding, self-sacrificing ethics, but for the same reason it carries in it the danger of being a politics of the war of every citizen's notion of justice against that of the others.

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IN RESPONSE TO ERNST WOLFF: THERE IS JUSTICE AND JUSTICE

MARIA DIMITROVA

Dear Ernst,

The significance of Levinas' philosophy, as well as that of other great philosophers, is understood and measured not only by the problems posed and the solutions offered but also, and maybe even more, by the conclusions that can be drawn from them – by the unsaid, drawn from the said. Everything connected to justice and human rights in Levinas' thought is drawn from his interpretation of morality. That the Other concerns me not in the indicative, but in the imperative – I don't see how this record in ethics can be exceeded. Levinas deduces the ideal of holiness from the possibility of giving the Other priority over myself:

> *The only absolute value is the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself. … I am not saying that the human being is a saint, I'm saying that he or she is the one who has understood that holiness is indisputable.*[1]

When it comes to morality Levinas is always radical and his position is unambiguous: morality starts when I can place the Other above myself. But did Levinas have any hesitations about political categories? Did he himself give way to ambivalent and contradictory interpretations in the field of social and political philosophy?

It is well known that the novelty of Levinas' position stems originally from his assignment of ethics as first philosophy. Placing practical (moral) philosophy before the theoretical/analytical, putting responsibility before freedom, restores to us the faith that there is an absolute. But this absolute coincides neither with the whole of the Cosmos, nor with the whole of History, nor of the State or Society in general; it is not the Self, nor the

[1] Emmanuel Levinas. Philosophy, Justice, and Love. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*. Columbia University Press (New York: 1998), p. 109

Common Good, but the Other. What a shock, what a scandal, what a blow to our egocentric culture – I am responsible not only for myself but, before everything else, for the Other. The implications of such a turn are fascinating. But after waking and sobering up, the words of Levinas are a breath of fresh air in the midst of the suffocating outbursts of doubt with respect to morality. His philosophy, whose task, as he himself states, is not to construe ethics, but only to find the meaning of morality, offers healing. In our tormenting suspicions that faith in Transcendence, and Transcendence itself, are forever destroyed, Levinasian philosophy shows us a way out of this state of disbelief. The Other as a face proves the existence of Transcendence and is constitutive for the sociality of the Self. With the Face of the Other, Transcendence is present to me. To deny responsibility for the Other, i.e. sociality, means to deny humanity. This also means that there is a need to rehabilitate something like an eternal orientation for human thoughts and actions, even though in a way different from that of mythologies, theologies, and theodicies. This orientation, or direction, or absolute, is no longer presupposed by the comfort of religions, does not follow from scientific proofs, political programs, or legislative measures, but makes them possible and allows them to be judged. Morality as a care for the Other is the ultimate criterion for justice and rights. This is why there is good or bad politics, good or bad laws, good or bad institutions and systems – because there is an absolute starting point in view of which they can be evaluated and judged, and thereby to be transcended and improved accordingly.

Levinas says that Transcendence is what turns the Other's face toward me. The face breaks the system. It comes from the beyond and is a rupture in being. How does the Other affect me? The face that looks at me affirms me. It speaks to me. It is thus that it renders possible and begins all discourse. Face and discourse are tied to each other. If I recognize the Other as an addressor calling me, I believe in him. The face-to-face structure is initially a structure of faith or trust. Men who credit each other form a society.[2]

However, is there not a danger of abusing this original trust? Is there not the possibility of committing an act of violence while feeling summoned to respond to the appeal of the face? Is the perspective that would finally intrude into the Other's life and try to coerce him completely excluded? What protects the Other from my interference in his fate? Has the Other any right to be protected in this case? Can he be protected?

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[2] See Emmanuel Levinas. The I and the Totality. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other, p. 34.*

Since everyone is going to follow his own views about responsibility and justice, can competition and struggle be avoided between those summoned to protect the right of the Other? Is this not the fault of a prophet – to extend his particular vision to universality, demanding the change of the political order of the state? Could not this philosophy serve as a justification for terrorist suicide acts if the self-sacrificing devotion to the struggle for the right of the Other demands giving the life of the protector?

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Levinas insists that the question of justice is brought forth in the relationship between the Other and me, but because, with the eyes of the Other, a Third is looking at me. In my encounter with the Other, we are immediately joined by a Third, but this Third doesn't have his own life, his own eyes and face, he cannot exist separately from the otherness of the Other – the Third is an abstraction, created by my constitutive abilities and is only the idea or conception of the Other. I always encounter the otherness of the Other, but my understanding clings to him like a cloth and thus hides his nakedness – he is viewed in the light of the categories through which I perceive him. Always in my encounter with the Other, with the face of the Other, the Third is also present for me. The third party isn't there by accident – the Other is not only listened to, but the manner in which he speaks is also observed. My "I think" grasps it thematically. And Levinas' lesson is that first justice – attention to the face of the other – is thus discovered to be the source of the objectivity of the visible.

My responsibility for the Other can never cease – it is a passivity more passive than any passivity opposed to activity; it is bottomless – infinity in me: the more I fulfill my duties, the more they grow. The relationship with the Other is not created outside of the world; it questions my world. This is the dimension not in width, but in depth. Depth is not visible from the perspective of the Third, and is not visible at all, as it is the clandestine intrigue between the Other and me. Only in the indirect perspective of the Third, in the panoramic presentation of the conversation from the point of view of Reason, which is by definition universal, the infinite height of the Other or, which is the same thing, the bottomless depth of the Self (its never-ending responsibility) is made finite. In the world of the third person infinity means replicating a finite being over and over again. This is an illusion of infinity or an inauthentic infinity, extrapolation of finitude by continuous multiplication. But ethical infinity (between the Other and me) is something different from the ontological extrapolation of the Same to

the dimensions of quasi-infinity. [*Authentic* – M.D.] *Infinity then manifests itself in the finite, but it does not manifest itself to the finite.*[3]

Levinas notes that infinity is wrong or negative if it is merely a negation of the finite: something becomes an other but this other likewise becomes an other and so on *ad infinitum.* He underlines that the Infinity that appeals to me from the face of the Other does not coincide with that wrong or negative infinity, as the Other does not become likewise an other and the end is not reborn, but moves off, at each new stage of the approach, with all alterity. In my encounter with the second, third, fourth, and so on – already positioned in sequence and hence measured by the unifying scale of the third –otherness is each time a new visitation in the passage from the One to the Other.

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In Levinasian philosophy, as with the notion of infinity, all categories regarding human relationships have different meanings, depending on whether they are understood ethically or ontologically. According to Levinas, justice can be understood ontologically as an already institutionalized social order, carried by the Third (i.e. all third persons, including the Self), but justice can also be understood in the ethical perspective as still non-institutionalized justice, called for by the prophet.

In the domain of institutionalized justice, judging means bringing a particular case under a general rule. Reason is precisely the ability to move from particular to general and vice versa. Judgments refer to objects, people, situations, as well as to everything in the world. Exactly in this summarizing and typifying judging – and isn't all judging typifying? – the immediacy of the relationship with the Other is lost. Judging by norms and standards always refers to the Third. Through formalism and codification similar cases can be treated in a similar way – formalism is possible because of the common form, to which the Other is reduced, being the other of any other. Thereupon justice is handed out according to this common form, common rule or common law and it has validity for everyone, even for the Self. In this way, justice is conformity to the law. In institutionalized justice the relationship between people is mediated by the law to such an extent that everyone is correlated merely to the law, and not to the other person – an act is deemed a crime, because it trespasses, violates or does not abide by a law, and not because it has caused harm to the Other. But crime can be defined also as trespassing the Other's rights,

[3] Emmanuel Levinas. A Man-God. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 54.

regardless of legislature – the reason would then not be the law, but the affront to the Other; the one concerned would not be the law, but the other person. Themis dispenses justice blindfolded while the eyes of the prophet watch vigilantly and constantly.

Sometimes the rights of the Other are violated but without people even suspecting; hence they do not realize this injustice. The exceptional sensitivity to the suffering of the Other is a prophet's distinguishing characteristic. True prophecy is inspiration. I respond without understanding to some order urging me to speak and go. True prophecy is an obedience preceding the hearing of the appeal; this is obedience prior to all representation, a responsibility prior to commitment, prior to thematization. Prophecy makes language irreducible to being one act among others. The order is found in obedience itself, the order has never been represented since it has never been presented. The command from exteriority sounds in the mouth of the one that obeys and becomes an "inner voice." I know not from whence I have received that of which I am the author. Because of the sincerity of saying all man's spirituality is prophetic. But insofar as the prophetic is projected onto the surface of the understandable (the said), saying, if it is not completely effaced, is experienced as a trace.

The very search for justice, without which justice is impossible, is inspired by charity. Justice as such is not a struggle for power and is not the result of the play of political forces, but presupposes the interference of charity. *Charity is impossible without justice and justice is warped without charity*.[4] The question is whether law takes precedence over charity. If justice is not concerned about its own injustice, then nothing can prevent moral decay and the escalation of violence within the State. Moral crisis is inevitable, if prophetic voices in defense of the unjustly ignored or injured other are stifled or neglected. Levinas explains that the prophet is the first to hear the appeal, the first to respond to it in a given situation. *There is something like heteronomy here, which one could call inspiration – and we will go so far as to speak of prophecy, which is not some kind of genius, but the very spirituality of the spirit. That is the meaning of the verse from Amos: "The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" – as if the prophecy were simply the fact of giving ear.* The mission of the prophet is to give concrete shape to the imperative of morality, translating it into the language of justice. He is the mediator of the reversal of heteronomy in autonomy. Thus the movement for the correction of the existing notion of justice and the establishment of a better justice begins

[4] Emmanuel Levinas. Philosophy, Justice, and Love, *Entre Nous*: *Thinking-of-the-Other,* p. 121.

"from his mouth." The prophet calls for the liberation of the Other from the classifications and divisions which confine him in some external description and reduce him to an element of the system. The prophet in me resists bringing the Other under principles and classifications, replacing him with an anonymous one. Injustice is already present in the depersonalization of the Other by his reduction to the Third. The prophet articulates the wound inflicted on the Other. In this way the prophetic voice demands change of existing policies, institutions, the established system, etc. – all this is questioned. Existing government legislation and existing ideas of rights face criticism and are shaken – they have to justify themselves and the existing order. In the horizon of the world, justice cannot do without restricting the Other and enclosing him within the system, even if this classification and typification are fully justified. However, as Levinas underlines, morality, on the contrary, demands not restrictions on the Other, but self-restrictions in order to make room for the Other. My Self is called upon to revise its own (often naïve) imperialism.

> *Messianism is that apogee in Being – a reversal of being "persevering in his being" – which begins in me*.[5]

The face of the Other sobers me in the self-referential logic of my existence, awakening the prophet in me. The I is the one who, before all decisions, is elected to bear all responsibility.

Justice begins with the question, which I pose to myself, but is an answer to the imperative presence of the Other before me: Am I not the usurper of this place under the sun? Is there a justification for what I am or what I want to be? This question undermines the identification of the Self with the order taken as given and awakens its sensitivity to otherness.

> *Subjectivity as responsibility is commanded at the outset; heteronomy is somehow stronger than autonomy here. …The word ordonne in French means both having received orders and having been consecrated*.[6]

It is the Other who is first and there the question of my sovereign consciousness is no longer the most important, whereas in the mortal struggle of freedoms, sovereignty is the stake.

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[5] Emmanuel Levinas. A Man-God, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 60.
[6] Emmanuel Levinas. Philosophy, Justice, and Love, *Entre Nous*: *Thinking-of-the-Other.*, p.111

According to Levinasian philosophy prophecy must always be ready to challenge and provoke the State and its citizens to better justice. But it does not follow from this that each initiative to articulate the rights of the Other and realize them in a juridical order are left to the particular individual. On the contrary, if we speak of justice, *it is necessary to allow judges, it is necessary to allow institutions and the state; to live in a world of citizens, and not only in the order of the Face to Face.*

The prophet "*always speaks before the king*."[7] He urges the king to see what the law actually means, thus reminding him of ethics. When legislation does not serve the rights of the Other, but is used merely for the criminalization of actions, people are treated and judged as if they are merely particular examples of clauses and paragraphs, as if they exist according to rubrics and articles – this kind of calculation happens in the totalitarian state:

> *A state in which the interpersonal relationship is impossible, in which it is directed in advance by the determinism proper to the state, is a totalitarian state. So there is a limit to the state. Whereas, in Hobbes's vision – in which the State emerges not from the limitation of charity but from the limitation of violence – one cannot set a limit on the state*.[8]

Every state, including the liberal one, when left to its own imperfect laws, organized as power distribution and as an instrument of legitimate repression, tends to become totalitarian. As truth turns into dogma, when not re-discovered, as beauty wears and fades, when not transformed, so does justice become injustice, deviating and even involving cruelty and perversions, if not watched over by generosity, that is, if we do not search for better justice. Institutionalized justice, which relates to the Third or to "everyone," "every other one," is never just enough. Similar to morality, when it falls asleep, relying on its past achievement, justice becomes a caricature of itself. To prevent this from happening, it needs never-ending self-critique and concern on the part of the liberal state with the view of guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of citizens. But as rights are perceived as "my rights" and their defense consists in expansionist claims by separate groups and individuals within the whole, the state is torn apart by contradictions and struggles. In the state of Hobbes these conflicts are limited or reconciled through the social contract, legitimating the violence of the sovereign. Thereupon, because of their struggle to survive and the

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[7] Emmanuel Levinas. Philosophy, Justice, and Love. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 106

[8] Ibid., p. 105.

fear of punishment, opposing sides in the conflict are temporarily pacified within the borders of the state. Peace achieved through legitimate violence is not authentic peace but merely a temporary calm before the new storm, for it does not rely on the search for social justice but on legislation, which is readily backed by sanctions and force. The limits of this state tend to expand with the expansion of the authority to exercise coercion through state institutions (by the king, the "state aristocracy," the state apparatus, or the nomenklatura). Levinas speaks of another kind of peace – messianic peace, where there are limits to the state set by charity. Messianic peace is achieved not by jurisdiction, which is an instrument in the hands of the rulers; messianic peace is achieved by just men and women:

> *The just state will come from just men and women*.[9]

Levinas criticizes German idealism because it did not understand that the pronoun "I" cannot have a plural form. Diverging from Kant's transcendentalism, Levinas writes:

> *Between the conception in which the* I *reaches the other in pure respect ... but is detached from the third party, and the one that transforms us into a singularization of the concept of man,... a third way emerges, in which we can understand the totality as a totality of me's, at once without conceptual unity and in a relationship with one another. [...] Respect attaches the just man to his associates in justice before attaching him to the man who demands justice. [...] [T]he commandment I receive must be also a commandment to command the one who commands me. It consists in commanding a being to command me. This reference of a commandment for a commandment is the fact of saying We, of constituting a party. ... We is not the plural of I.*[10]

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According to Levinas every true speech is a commandment. For our contemporary democratic culture, such a concept of speech is scandalous. In our time it is believed that true speech is dialogue, and dialogue is a form of mutual exchange – a form of contracting between partners, achieving shared understanding of what interests them. Not only the command, but even an admonishing tone is unacceptable. It is believed

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[9] Emmanuel Levinas. Philosophy, Justice, and Love. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, p. 120.

[10] See Emmanuel Levinas. The I and the Totality. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*.

that good manners and mutual advantage presuppose tolerance shown for the right of others to express their opinion. It is assumed that not only coercion, but even the simplest instruction would impair communication. In dialogue each side should have an equal chance of maintaining an independent point of view and thus be an equal and sovereign participant in the discussion. This means that everyone has the opportunity to contribute to achieving mutual consent, a shared result, or a final decision. Discussion would then be reduced to the exchange of information, perspectives and evaluations, which are played out as a form of gambling because they confront and exclude each other, but have a common stake and follow common rules. Any discussion would be reduced to the dialectic of questions and answers and the goal – the common – would unify the participants. The relations of the participants would be symmetrically positioned around some Third – the topic of discussion. The Third is the common place, which enables the finding of a common language and the overcoming of the particularity of each position. Conversation establishes a shared world or common horizon. Only then are the separate positions, united as parts in a whole, recognized as equal, but in their quality of relative truths. Relative – this means they are not completely denied and rejected. But let's not forget that if they are not completely denied, it is only on the condition that they give up their claim to sovereignty. Otherwise they will be silenced by force. Only if they allow themselves to be transformed into some third, which they are not, only if they submit to the supreme authority, speaking on their behalf, only then will they be preserved. Thereupon their supporters will link to each other only by media and will not be able to speak directly with each other. Mediation is done through the universal principle, the absolute spirit or Reason, hiding behind the backs of the participants in this story. This Reason, which is revealed, while hiding, because it rules over the separate freedoms through its trickeries, actually hinders human speech: not only does it warp the meanings of the conversation, it destroys the word itself, as it turns upside down everything it names, transforming it into something else. Dialectical Reason speaks in this way on behalf of this partial negation. It does not annihilate the person but only deprives him of his independence.

Of course, a shared world can be established not by means of tolerance, which allows the participants to exchange their views, so that they are dialectically taken off, but by means of open warfare where the goal is to silence your adversary. Thereupon the war of all against all starts with the attempt to impose one's own point of view as universally valid. We know these struggles, in which one speech is opposed by another

speech nd each claims to express "the true faith," "the common good," "ultimate justice," etc. History is the tale of these wars between religions and ideologies and in which the heads of the enemies have fallen and the blood of unbelievers has been shed; the *truth triumphant*, the truth of the winners in the battle, has suppressed the *truth persecuted*, the truth of the victims. Speech can also be a mode of violence, an act of depicting the other's existence as inferior. Speech, then, is a relationship between freedoms which limit or deny each other, striving to constrain the pretentions of the other participant. While in speech (as responsibility), the collocutors *are transcendent in relation to one another. Neither hostile, nor friendly.*[11]

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Levinas knows that in every speech the said betrays the saying, that when we use speech as the vessel of information, we forget the addressing of the Other. Language is logos, but also appeal and response. Conversation is a way of approaching the face before it is an articulation of things in the world and the Other "in his quality of …" Before it establishes symmetrical and reciprocal relationships between the parties, referencing their perspectives towards some third, speech is attention to the expression of the Other. As Levinas says:

> *Speech is an exchange of ideas about the world. Together with the hidden thoughts it carries, together with the vicissitudes of sincerity and the false picture it draws, language presupposes the uniqueness of the face, without which speech could not begin.*[12]

The thematic, interpretive and motivational relevance, united around the figure of the Third, is conditioned by the relevance of the Other. The face of the Other is independent of my initiative and my power. It questions my freedom to construe images and ideas, to understand and evaluate, to give meanings to things and others. It commands my ability to see, think and make judgments. It itself is judging me and makes me search for the truth in justice, i.e. to doubt the rights of my spontaneity. In brief, this means that I am endlessly instructed by the Other and that from the face of the Other I learn sense. The Other is the condition, as well as

[11] Emmanuel Levinas. The I and the Totality. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the Other*, p. 35.
[12] Emmanuel Levinas. Totalite et Infini. Kluwer Academic, 1971, p. 220.

the last sanction, for the rightness of the world, in which I am always a local one.

In a dispute, the only way to overcome the identification of any side with reason (the principle or the whole) is awakening to otherness and exteriority.

> *An exteriority without violence is the exteriority of discourse. The absolute of the interlocutor upholds the search for justice. Its mode of being and making its presence known consists in turning its face toward me, in being a face. This is why the absolute is a person*.[13]

Our private affair is made public with speech and then the I is in relationship with a human totality. For this reason conversation is called upon to play a privileged role in the work of social justice.

Insisting on one's own conception of justice and rights in opposition to the other within a totality presupposes withdrawal of the attention paid to the difference of the Other. Inside the totality, which it seems impossible to create without injustice, awakening to the different is disturbing. Reason, identified with universality, absorbed by its rightness and truthfulness, does not easily put itself into question.

> *Let us not forget the perennial false prophets who flatter kings. Only the true prophet addresses the king and the people without truckling, and reminds them of ethics*.[14]

The otherness of the Other, his incommensurability with me, with my separate existence, thoughts and belongings, is recognized by me precisely as a questioning of my spontaneity, i.e. as ethics. The moral subject is not defending its own correct and truthful conception; the moral subject is an endless farewell to the imperialistic Self that is hateful to myself; it is the very giving of myself for the other without rest or with any opportunity to lay down my head. It is the infinite passivity or passion or patience in me as if my exceptional uniqueness were reduced to that ceaseless event of substitution. "That is me" is the fact of emptying myself of being, but this permanent loss of Self is the very process of identification – not on the basis of Same but as uniqueness. Redemption, however, is not a form of self-sacrifice and is not suicide; on the contrary, it is the life of the Self

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[13] Emmanuel Levinas. The I and the Totality. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the Other*, p. 22.

[14] Emmanuel Levinas. Philosophy, Justice, and Love. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other,* p. 106

for-the-Other. Levinas criticizes Heidegger: "*'to die for ...' appears to him only as a 'simple sacrifice'."*[15] According to Levinas, when one is for the Other – in love and/or hate – his own life and death no longer concern him: the primary question is not "to be or not to be" but how being is justified. One's existential temporality is the process of unconscious aging where dying for the Other, dying his death, takes priority over "authentic" death.

> *This future of death in the present of love is probably one of the original secrets of temporality itself and beyond all methaphor.*[16]

Translated from Bulgarian by George Christov

[15] Emmanuel Levinas. "Dying for…", *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other,* p. 216.
[16] Ibid., p.217.