Subject Matters

A Journal of Communications and the Self

Editorial board

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Editorial statement

Subject Matters is a bi-annual publication which seeks to explore current thinking about subjectivity, to cross disciplinary boundaries and to challenge critical orthodoxy in the process. It is dedicated to debate on the nature of the subject and its various characterisations, especially in modernity.

The journal seeks to go beyond the restrictions of poststructuralist/postmodernist paradigms and to avoid the cliques and the clichés that poststructuralism has naturalized. As such, it seeks to invite papers from researchers in different disciplines, particularly where the relationships between 'communications' and 'subjectivity' are seen to exceed the boundaries that current critical predilections have set for them.

The editors are especially interested in contributions concerned with the ways in which the *concept of the subject* as it has been defined in recent years can be put into question and even decentred.

Contributions which engage with the legacy of high theory but bring theory into contact with everyday life will also be welcome.

Papers which impinge on communications and cultural theory but which are not necessarily describable as emanating from that tradition – from the sciences or elsewhere in the humanities – will be considered.

Papers dealing with historical formations of subjectivity will also be welcome if they contribute to contemporary debates.

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Tables should be numbered consecutively and titled, and must be referred to in the text by their name. Each table should be submitted on a separate sheet

References to scholarly work should appear in the body of the text. Avoid the use of footnotes. References within the manuscript should appear as follows:

> "The word 'language' is sometimes used in common parlance in an inappropriate way to designate a certain nonverbal communicative device" (Sebeok 2001: 14).
>
> or
>
> As Sebeok has argued (2001: 14) 'language' is a term which should only really be used with reference to humans.

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Multiple author books or monographs:

> Beasley, R. et al (2000) *Signs for Sale: An Outline of Semiotic Analysis for Advertisers and Marketers*, Toronto: Legas.

An edited book:

> Silverstone, R. and Hirsch, E. eds. (1994) *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, London: Routledge.

An article in an edited book:

> Larmore, C. (1981) 'The concept of a constitutive subject' in C. MacCabe ed., *The Talking Cure: Essays in Psychoanalysis and Language* London: Macmillan.

An article in a journal:

> Jost, F. (1998) 'The promise of genres' *Reseaux*, 6 (1): 99-121.

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Contents

Subject Matters Vol. 3, No. 1 © London Metropolitan University 2006
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Levinas, Paris (1990), during a meeting with Ponzio

Preface

Paul Cobley
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To mark the centenary of the birth of Emmanuel Levinas, this issue of *Subject Matters* is dedicated to a thinker who contributed so much to the theory of the subject and whose work in general has been so influential. Levinas' impact on so-called 'continental philosophy' and its Anglo-American constituencies is immeasurable. His thinking on subjectivity has informed other areas, too, such as psychoanalysis. Yet, the regions where Levinasian thought might be most appositely deployed, in politics and communications, have not yet embraced the possibilities that Levinas offers.

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Subject Matters is therefore publishing a major essay on Levinas, 'The I questioned', by Augusto Ponzio. Ponzio himself, of course, is a major figure on the international academic scene, being a renowned authority on Bakhtin (and the Bakhtin School), Schaff, Sebeok and semiotics. Full Professor of Philosophy of Language and General Linguistics and Head of the Department of Linguistic Practices and Text Analysis at Bari University, Italy, he has published over 70 books, 300 essays, and 50 translations and introductions (from Aristophanes to Vološinov). A fair number of these have been co-authored with his collaborator, the formidable scholar, Susan Petrilli; most recently, they have published a major (600+ pages) treatise entitled *Semiotics Unbounded* (2005). Yet, despite Ponzio's towering achievement in his many fields of interest, it is possible to argue that, at the very core of his thinking, there is a single concept: that of 'dialogue'. Furthermore, his conception of dialogue, while owing much to Bakhtin and Sebeok, is especially redolent of Levinas.

This should be evident in 'The I questioned'. Here, Ponzio investigates politics, war and global communication, each considered within the terms of a critique of a non-dialogic conception of dialogue. As Ponzio writes, "Levinas' philosophy is not a philosophy of dialogue but a critique of dialogue according to the dominant conception founded on the category of identity" (p. 10). While the critique of dialogue is at the centre of all of Ponzio's work, it is utilised in different, politically specific ways. To begin with, it is a conception of dialogue which, in going beyond the liberal notion of meeting others halfway, negotiating and compromising, actually *opposes* such agentive programmes, recognizing in dialogue a compulsion and demand rather than self-identified good will. Such a framing of dialogue is to be found, too, of course, in Bakhtin; as Petrilli and Ponzio succinctly state:

> For Bakhtin, dialogue is not the result of an initiative we decide to take, but rather it is imposed, something to which one is subjected. Dialogue is not the result of opening towards the other, but of the impossibility of closing (1998: 28).

Ponzio's work can be understood as an elaboration of the specificities of this insight, an extension of its principles to all the variegated formations of capitalism. In the instance of 'The I questioned', the formation under interrogation is "Identity", and the common misconstrual of 'I-other' relations which Levinas elucidates through dialogue. As Ponzio puts it, dialogue should not be seen in the service of mere self-affirmation:

> On the contrary, as formulated by Levinas, dialogue is passive witness to the impossibility of escape from the other; it is passive witness to the fact that the other cannot be eluded, to the condition of involvement with the other apart from initiative taken by the subject who is called to answer *to* the other and *for* the other. The 'I' is constitutionally, structurally dialogic in the sense that it testifies to the relation with otherness, whether the otherness of others or the otherness of self (p. 11).

For Ponzio, then, Levinas provides the crucial means for addressing the communication-ontology relationship, especially in the phase of global communication.

Ponzio's essay arrives at a time when the West is, on the one hand, still recovering from the muddled intellectual throes of 'multiculturalism' and, on the other hand, involving many of its key players, waging a 'war on terror' which is almost exclusively focused on the 'Islamic other'. Ponzio uses Levinasian thought to demonstrate that, far from being an aberration or a pragmatic phase in Western capitalism, such paradoxes may constitute the rule. Like his contemporaries, Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben, Ponzio seeks to demonstrate that the very rule of capital subsists on the naturalization of exceptions (see Agamben 1998, 2005 and Badiou 2003, 2005). As such, he explicates Levinas' *oeuvre* as forming the basis for a critique of Western reason, a critique which must proceed from the subject's entanglement in communication-production.

Levinas and Ponzio, Paris (1990)

Eight of the world's top Levinas scholars have been invited to respond to Ponzio's intervention, with each taking a different tack but nevertheless focusing on the relevance of Levinasian categories in the understanding of subjectivity and the dilemmas of the current global conjuncture. The short responses appear in no particular order but many of them do have valuable explications of Levinasian principles which may guide a reading of the whole. For example, Newton's contribution explicates the status (or statuses) of Levinas' "*oeuvre*"; Bernasconi outlines the understanding of "identity" informing Levinas' various works; Ward explains the Abraham/Ulysses distinction; Burggraeve gives a more general, but vital, account of features of "Jerusalem and Athens" in Levinas; and Ward's essay also questions the putative Jewishness of Levinas' thought, while Aronowicz countenances his possible Zionist tendency.

More specifically, the responses provide insights into Levinas' writings in the process of offering a sense of the parameters in which Levinasian thinking can transform contemporary understanding of subjectivity. Newton's response, as noted, questions Levinas' *oeuvre*, discussing it in terms of the Abraham/Ulysses couplet, especially in

relation to the "genre and intent" of the literary figuring of alterity in Levinas' writing. Smith's essay, which follows, questions, too, the extent to which Levinas should be understood primarily as a politically-focused critic of Western reason. For Smith, it is possible that Levinas institutes a "new hermeneutics" in which the ethical self is compelled to *choose*. Bernasconi's response questions identity: he suggests that Levinas did not necessarily promote the abandonment of social identity but sought to find another basis for thinking it whilst avoiding essentialism. Indeed, he suggests that there are good reasons for identity – Levinasian ones rather than those which are usually trotted out. Ward, using the terms *kenosis* and *analogy*, focuses on the question of otherness so integral to Levinas and so influential for other 'kenotic' thinkers. Ward uses the example of the gift and finds that kenosis and analogy illuminate the faultline of the Levinasian Saying/Said explicated by Ponzio.

At the centre of this special issue of *Subject Matters* is an extended response to Ponzio's 'The I questioned'. Roger Burggraeve's 'From the self to the other and back again – otherwise' contains in its very title an Odyssean/Levinasian trope. It is a disquisition on the fate of the 'I' as suggested by Ponzio, which not only furthers Ponzio's discussion of 'essence' and 'alterity' in relation to politics and the state, but also provides some persuasive contextualisation of aspects of Levinas' thinking. Bergo's essay extends the consideration of Levinas, the self and other by featuring, at its heart, a discussion of the first stirrings of Québécois resistance – a kind of "micro messianism" in which the "'perhaps' of messianic hope, coupled with the ambiguity that summons reflection" took a political form. As such, Bergo provides commentary on Ponzio's question of whether humans "may exceed the space and time of objects, the space-time of Identity?" (p. 6), a question which is bound up with Levinas' secularized Jewish messianism. Simmons, in similar vein, takes the issue of 'Rights' in Ponzio and Levinas and, through consideration of a series of "hendiades", asks to what extent Levinasian rights might "interrupt the concrete abstractions of the global capitalist system". In light of Badiou's *Ethics* (cf. the *Subject Matters* special issues, 1 (2) and 2 (1)), Simmons suggests that Levinasian rights have their work cut out; interestingly, the essay perfectly complements that of Bergo in its suggestion that the requirement of a radical rupture to effect emancipatory politics often goes against universals – although not always. Lastly, Aronowicz interrogates both Ponzio and Levinas regarding the extent to which the latter's re-framing of our relation to otherness can be considered a political panacea. One of Aronowicz's key points is that Levinas is resolutely Eurocentric, despite his critique of European philosophy (and, by association, Western reason). Levinas' thought is, perhaps, a recognition that critique of a system carries an extra burden if we are deeply mired in that system.

As in the foregoing, references to Ponzio's 'The I questioned' simply give page numbers. References to Levinas' work, in Ponzio's essay and in the responses, are given in the usual house style of *Subject Matters*, except in Burggraeve's essay – the length has necessitated the use of a short-hand reference to Levinas' works in the main text of the essay. A key and details of translations of Levinas' works cited in that essay are given in Burggraeve's list of references.

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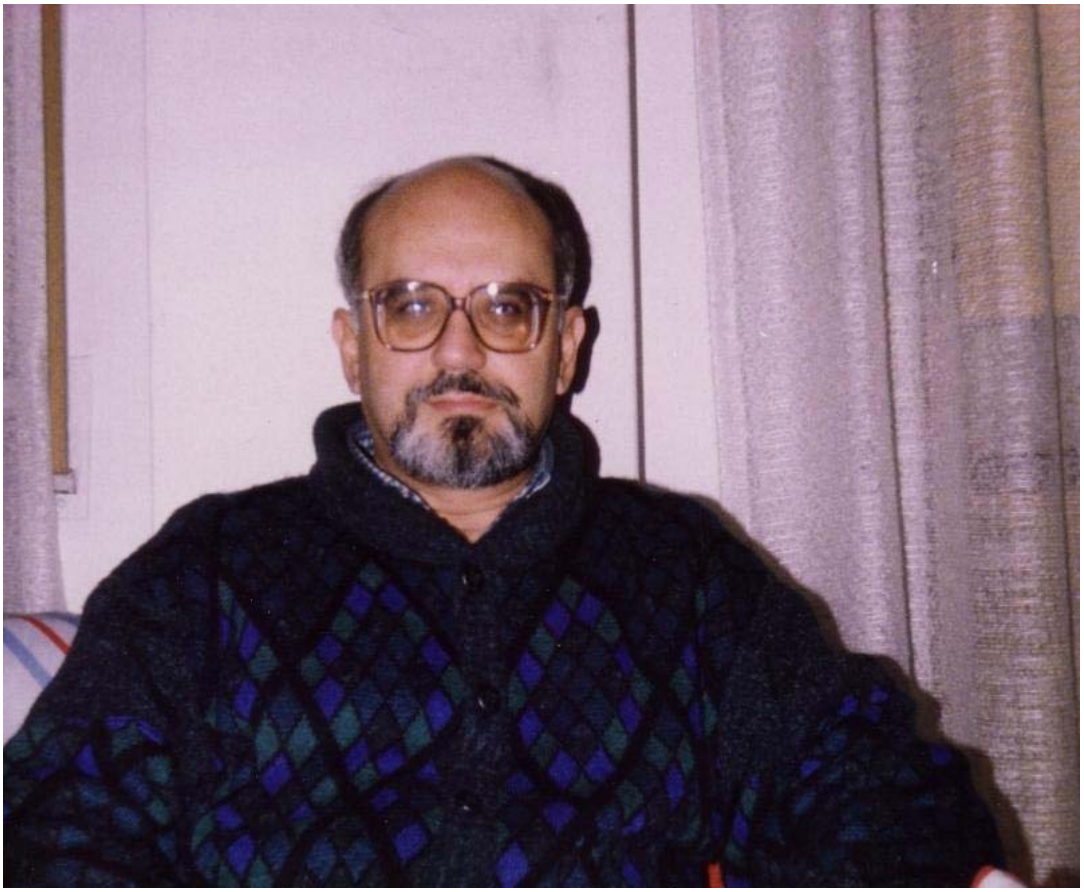

Ponzio in Levinas' Paris apartment (1990)

The I questioned: Emmanuel Levinas and the critique of occidental reason

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Identity in Western thought and praxis

The category of Identity is the category dominant in current Western thought and praxis. This category dominates even more over today's world because *concrete abstractions* (which form the *Reality* we experience) are constructed upon it. These concrete abstractions which are 'internal' to today's overall system of social reproduction include the World, History, Subject, Individual, Community, Difference, Truth, Reason, Freedom, Force, Power, Politics, Labour, Productivity, and the Market.

However, it is not only a question of concrete abstractions constructed as a result of the system, but even more radically the system itself is founded on the category of Identity. Its structural tendency (as manifested specially in the present phase of capitalism) is to develop in concretely identical and universal terms; that is, as a worldwide Production-Trade-Consumption process. The logic of concrete abstractions in the processes of social reproduction today is itself the logic of Identity. And the category of the Individual with its rights, obligations, responsibilities; the category of Community with its interests; the State with its Politics adhering as much as possible to Reality; the Market with its values and needs, etc. - all obey the logic of Identity.

The reason of Identity and War

The places of argumentation internal to the dominant order of discourse are the places of the logic of Identity. Reason, which includes the reason of war, even if in the form of *extrema ratio*, presenting war as legitimate, just and legal; Reason, which includes the reasons for the elimination of the other – from exclusion and segregation to extermination –, is the Reason of Identity. Its logic is asserted by secluding, isolating, expelling or exterminating the other, thereby favouring the construction of the concrete abstractions mentioned above. These also include the concrete abstraction 'Individual'

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which, in the first place, must sacrifice its own otherness to itself in order to assert itself as Identity.

The infinite insistence of waves on a beach

The problem of otherness and the critique of Identity as a pivotal category of Occidental Reason are the central issues in the whole work of Emmanuel Levinas.[1] Of all his works, *Totality and Infinity* (1969) is certainly the book which offers the best purview of the sense and purpose of his research as well as an excellent example of his investigative habits and writing style. Concerning the latter, Derrida writes,

> […] Levinas's writing, which would merit an entire separate study itself, and in which stylistic gestures (especially in *Totality and Infinity*) can less than be distinguished from intention, forbids the prosaic disembodiment into conceptual frameworks that is the first violence of all commentary. Certainly, Levinas recommends the good usage of prose which breaks Dionysiac charm or violence, and forbids poetic rapture, but to no avail: in *Totality and Infinity* the use of metaphor, remaining admirable and most often – if not always – beyond rehtorical abuse, shleters within its pathos the most decisive movements of the discourse (1980: 312 n. 7).

What Derrida says about *Totality and Infinity* may quite easily be applied to the whole corpus of Levinas' work:

> Further in *Totality and Infinity* the thematic development is neither purely descriptive nor purely deductive. It proceeds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself (Derrida 1980: 312; cf. Ponzio 1996).

The predictive and farseeing character of *Totality and Infinity* considered in relation to today's reality derives from its profound and lucid comprehension of the essential features of Occidental Reason and its regulator, the logic of identity, which the global communication system of the present age emphasizes.

War as the veritable face of reality

In the Preface to *Totality and Infinity* (1969) Levinas' reflection begins with the topic of war, considered as the very patency, or truth, of the real, as is evident even if we are not familiar with the ancient philosophy of Heraclitus. In war, reality obtrudes in its nudity and harshness. The state of war rescinds moral imperatives *ad interim*; more pointedly, it renders them derisory. Instead, it extols politics, the art of foreseeing and winning war by every means, as the very exercise of reason: "The trial by force is the test of the real" (Levinas 1969).

The face of being that shows itself in war is the face of Western reason. War reveals the connection between politics and ontology, as well as showing the subordination of individuals anchored in their identity to the totality, to an ontological order from which there is no escape. The concept of totality, which dominates Western philosophy, is confirmed in war, with the reduction of individuals to the status of bearers of forces that command them unbeknownst to themselves. Their sense is derived only from the totality; their uniqueness is sacrificed to objective sense, which exists only in this totality.

But war also reveals the connection between ontology and history. The totality of being is revealed in objective history, for only the future may show objective sense. There is no sense beyond the totality and beyond history. Individual and collective identities await the judgement of history.

Furthermore, in the logic of war, which is the realistic logic of being, of ontology, politics, totality, history, peace may only be the peace of war, peace understood as the end of war, as truce and preparation for war.

Identity and the properly human

But the humanity of the human subject cannot be englobed in the roles of identity; it cannot be reduced to them, but, on the contrary, exceeds and at once subtends the logic of roles and identities. No doubt these are differentiated on the basis of the otherness relation, but this is a question of *relative otherness*, a limited form of otherness with boundaries necessary to the delimitation of one's behaviour in relation to a given role and relative responsibilities. Instead, according to Levinas, the type of otherness that cannot be restricted to roles and identities may be identified as *absolute otherness*, and

is connected with the condition of unlimited responsibility, which does not admit indifference.

The properly human rests in our capacity for absolute otherness, unlimited responsibility, the relation of dialogical intercorporeity among non-indifferent differences, non-functionality with respect to the functionality of identity and relative roles. The properly human is the condition of vulnerability and exposition to the other.

World in global communication

By 'World', in Levinas' perspective, is understood the most vulgar forms of realism, dominant ideology, identity, being, the order of discourse, the functional subject with a clean conscience, the lying rhetoric of political systems or of mass media, which are all functional to a global and homogeneous world. The flourishing of special sign processes, of different languages in their multiplicity and cultures, represent the expression of the potential for resistance with respect to the tendency toward globalization reductively understood in terms of homogenization and levelling onto today's dominant values connected with the global market, power, control.

The World is connected to a consciousness, a subject, whether individual or collective, experienced as part of the World and at once a place of signification of the World as it is. The World is also indissolubly connected with politics associated with an omni-inclusive and functional system. We are alluding to the realism of politics which implements the strategies of productivity and efficiency, which is faithful to reality, which mediates the interests of subjects, individual and collective, which orients becoming according to a realistic view of the present. This present is defended at all costs, even at the cost of the *extrema ratio* of war, which belongs to the World, is part of it. Indeed, insofar as the World is structurally based upon Identity, it is predisposed or programmed for sacrifice of the other, of otherness in the name of Identity. In such a perspective, peace is no more than an interval, momentary repose, reintegration of forces, respite, a truce which ensues from war, preparation for war, similarly to rest, free-time, the night functional to the resumption of work, to the "madness of the day" (Blanchot 1973**).**

World and politics

According to Levinas, the World is tied to politics, already as a projection, a plan, as the space for the satisfaction of needs. The World is tied to politics indissolubly. This plan is in fact conceived as total planning, as the strategy of productivity, efficiency, as adhesion to reality, as economy of the lasting, of the persistent, of the progressive in *being*, even at the cost of war. And war is foreseen by it, is part of its logic, of the ontology of the *conatus essendi*. The World foresees war and given that it is structurally based on Identity, it exploits that which is other for the maintenance, reinforcement, duration, and expanded reproduction of the same. The World is ready, is prepared for the sacrifice of otherness.

Realistic politics (but if it is not realistic, it is not politics) is politics appropriate to the reality of world communication, to the being of communication-production. There is a logical connection between politics and ontology. For this reason, politics is pre-disposed for war, which is the most crudely and brutally realistic face of being. Today, politics qualifies itself as a relation with the ontology of world communication-production. Realistic politics must correspond to ontology, to the point of accepting the *extrema ratio* of war, in accordance with the strict law of the force of things.

The world of global communication and war

Levinas shows the connection between World, Reality, History, Identity, Truth, Force, Reason, Power, Productivity, Politics and War, that is inscribed in our experience, in our mentality as Westerners. It is a connection that has always been exploited and exasperated by capitalism, even more so these days. Global communication, functional to the reproduction of this social system, extends and consolidates this connection.

The strongest expression of the destructive character[2] of capitalism in this phase in the development of global communication is war. The world of global communication is the world of infinite war. We are now living in a world where international relations among Nations are regulated by so-called ‘just and necessary wars’, by wars described as ‘humanitarian’ wars or ‘preventive’ wars.

War requires increasing approval that acknowledges it as just and necessary, as a necessary means of defence against the growing danger of the menacing ‘other’, as a means therefore of achieving respect for the rights of one’s ‘own identity’, ‘one’s own difference’. The truth is that identities and differences are not threatened or destroyed

by the 'other', but by today's social system itself, which encourages and promotes identity and difference while rendering them fictitious and phantasmal.

Sacrificed otherness

The sacrifice of Otherness, in varying senses and degrees of 'sacrifice', is obvious in the construction of different identities:

a) Identity of the Individual with his/her self-protective definition of responsibility for which he gives up his uniqueness, his unreplaceablity in his attempt to escape unlimited involvement;

b) Identity of the various Genera in which the individual recognises himself and in which his duties and rights are determined separately (identity connected with one's Role, Profession, Social Status, Political Party, Sex, Nation, Ethnic Group, etc.);

c) Identity of the overall system of social reproduction with its concrete need for a universal production-exchange-consumption process and, consequently, with its need for the concrete generalisation or universalisation of Trade, Politics, Law, Ethics, the Human Being.

Madness emphasises sacrificed otherness at the individual level. War renders sacrificed otherness visible at the macroscopic level and in the relation among nations: sacrifice to the very point of death, extermination, genocide and destruction of natural life conditions. But the sacrifice of Otherness is also visible within one and the same nation, in the varying forms of environmental destruction, segregation, apartheid, elimination of the 'other' in the name of generalised identity, to the very point of slaughter.

Another sense with respect to sense in and for the world?

The question we must ask is that to which Levinas dedicated the entire course of his research: that is, whether there be no other sense than that of being in the World and for the World? Whether the *properly human* may exceed the space and time of objects, the space-time of Identity? Whether there exist relations that cannot be reduced to the category of Identity and that have nothing to do with relations between subject and object, with relations of exchange, equivalence, functionality, interest, productivity? Whether there be interhuman relations that are altogether *other*, yet all the same

material, earthly relations, to which one opens one's body? Whether there be a sense that is other with respect to sense in the world of objects?

A form of humanism that is different from the humanism of identity is that which Levinas (1972) proposes to call the *humanism of alterity*. This orientation regulated by the logic of otherness, this 'movement' without return to the subject, a movement which Levinas calls *œuvre*, is exposition – at a risk – to alterity, hybridization of identity, rupture of monologism and evasion from the subject-object relation. *Outside the Subject* (*Hors Sujet*) is the title of a book by Levinas published in 1987 (translated into English in 1993); 'outside the subject' also in the sense of being off the subject, not reducible to theme, to representation. This is made possible by the logic of otherness – the condition of possibility for a form of humanism where a good or clean conscience and human rights are interrogated in the light of the rights of others. The logic of otherness implies the capacity for otherness with respect to Western thought which instead incorporates and legitimises the reasons of identity, which allows for prevarication over the other, even to the extent of acknowledging the reasons of war.

Recognition of the other and critique of dialogical reason

However much we keep account of Reality and History in thinking about Future History, however much Politics is instructed by History, we continue repeating the same errors, the same horrors of Reality and Past History owing to our insistent reference to the category of Identity. To perceive such repetition and to avoid deluding ourselves that development, innovation and progress are possible on the basis of the Identical, we need a viewpoint that is 'other'.

Only by recourse to the category of Otherness will it be possible to imagine a development in history that is other with respect to past history: the category of Otherness reveals the extent to which the History of Reality and Politics, of War and Peace is constantly repeated. The other's point of view, comprising recognition itself of the other which makes such a viewpoint possible, interrupts the monotony of repetition.

The Critique of Occidental Reason thus understood requires a *point of view that is other*, and as such calls for a 'Critique of dialogical 'reason'. The critique of dialogical reason is the critique of the category of Identity. An approach that is radically critical calls for preliminary *recognition of the other*, or, better, acknowledgement of the fact that recognition of the other is an *inevitable necessity*. Recognition of the other not as a

concession, a free choice made by the I, the Subject, the Same, but as a necessity imposed by the alienation of Identities, the loss of their sense, by the situation of *Homo homini lupus*. The situation of *Homo homini lupus* is consequent and not mythically antecedent to (the allusion is to Hobbes's fallacy!) such concrete abstractions as Freedom, State, Politics and Law.

The breach of the harsh Law of War

The Preface to *Totality and Infinity* starts with the question of lucidity, the mind's openness upon the true consists in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war. On the basis of the connection between war, ontology, politics, history, totality, and truth in the perspective of Western Reason, the answer is necessarily affirmative.

The protestation of an individual in the name of his personal egoism or even of his salvation is of no avail: "[...] a proclamation of morality based on the pure subjectivism of the I is refuted by war, the totality it reveals, and the objective necessities" (1991: 25). Given the irrefutable evidence of the totality and the opposition of peace to war, "evidence of war has been maintained in an essentially hypocritical civilisation, that is, attached both to the True and to the Good, henceforth antagonistic"(1991: 24).

The only way out towards a non-naïve and non-hypocritical moral stance towards peace that is not based on war is the following: the possibility that 'irrefutable' evidence "refers from itself to a situation that can no longer be stated in terms of 'totality" (1991: 24):

> [...] we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other [visage d'autrui]. The rigorously developed concept of this transcendence is expressed by the term infinity (1991: 24-25).

Totality and Infinity presents itself as a defense of subjectivity, but it will apprehend subjectivity not at the level of its purely egoist protestation against totality, nor in its anguish before death and in its isolated 'being-for-death' (cf. Heidegger), but as founded in the relation with the other.

The relationship of the individual identity, or the same (*le Même*), with the other (the other person, the other man, *Autrui*) reveals the very possibility of breaching the totality, that is, in Levinas' words, the "possibility of infinity": the relationship with the absolutely other overflows the totality. The absolutely other is '*autrui*' (1991: 39). '*Autrui*' in French is a personal pronoun that means the personal other, the other person, the other man.

The other always overflows totality, reason, identity, conscience, thought. A real and proper '*infinition*' is produced in this overflowing of objectifying thought. The other is what the totality of being and of thought can neither embrace nor encompass. Infinity, that is**,** the breach of the totality, identity, order of discourse, which is produced in the relationship of the same with the other, "delivers the subjectivity from the judgement of history to declare it ready for judgement at every moment and […] called to participate in this judgement, impossible without it" (1991: 25). The relation with infinity, which is experience of irreducibility of the other to the same, to the totality – therefore, experience in the fullest sense of the word, if experience means precisely a relation with the absolutely other – is also the breach of the harsh law of war. The harsh law of war breaks up not against an impotent subjectivism cut off from being, but against the infinite, more objective than objectivity (1991: 21-26).

Identity and enjoyment

The relationship with the face of the other is a relationship in which individuals do not exist as identities, roles genera, ideological positions, but on the basis of themselves, of their reciprocal absolute (non-relative), irreducible, infinite otherness – therefore not on the basis of the totality. Such individuals have the possibility of producing 'signification without a context'. In the face of the other the individual is called to answer without alibis and, thus understood, the individual can speak standing outside the roles and parts played by the same in the ordinary system of functional and productive communication. Individuals can speak "rather than lending their lips to an anonymous utterance of history" (1991: 23).

"Peace" says Levinas, "is produced as this aptitude for speech" (1991: 23). This peace is the fundamental relationship with the other. There is not only the peace of war. The relation with other and the connected experience of the infinite are the foundation of consciousness, the I, thought, discourse, truth, reason, freedom, identity. Consequently, once we have abstracted from the intersubjective horizon of the I and from the world, that which remains as I is not a particular way of viewing reality, of figuring it, of

evaluating it, of possessing it and transforming it, all being operations that no doubt presuppose the intersubjective relation. At the level of the immediately experienced, says Levinas, of the pre-categorial, "For the I to be means neither to oppose nor to represent something to itself, nor to use something, nor to aspire to something, but to enjoy something" (1991: 120). The immediate relation with that which is alien consists of experiencing it in terms of enjoyment. At this level there is no distance between the I, that is the body, and that which the I flourishes on. The I is that which it flourishes on. Individuality is achieved through the special way one's body experiences things: "The personality of the person, the ipseity of the I, which is more than the particularity of the atom and of the individual, is the particularity of the happiness of enjoyment" (1991: 115). Enjoyment is the presupposition and limit of identity on a categorical level, its alterity with respect to identity, the otherwise than being with respect to the being of the world. That which constitutes the original uniqueness or singularity of each I and stops it from completely coinciding with another I is its corporeal life. Nonetheless, this same corporeal life that renders each existence unique is also that which relates the I to the other at an antecedent level with respect to any form of awareness, decision, convention, contract.

Infinite as in finite, inside the finite

The relationship with the absolutely other, that is, with what is irreducible to the Same, to Reason, to Identity, – the relationship of the same with the other, in which is produced the experience of infinity – is not only beyond the totality, but is also the very basis of the totality.

Subjectivity contains the experience of infinity. Essentially it results from welcoming the other, from hospitality. Identity is fundamentally a relation of otherness. All knowing presupposes the experience of infinity, which is experience of *non-adequacy* in the fullest sense of the word. The relation with the relatively other is based on the relation with an absolutely other.

Identity contains more than it is possible to contain, because it is founded on otherness: there is in the finite the idea of the infinite, as Descartes calls it. According to Levinas who refers to Descartes, 'infinite' means both *non-finite*, beyond the finite, and *in finite*, inside the finite.

Critique of a non-dialogic conception of dialogue

Dialectic from G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831) to Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) did not succeed in formulating an effective critique of Identity or of Western reason. Levinas' philosophy represents an alternative that needs serious consideration to the end of developing a critique of reason that is based on otherness, a critique of reason that is really dialectic, that is, *dia-logi*c.

With the shift in focus from identity (whether individual, as in the case of consciousness or self, or collective, as in a community, historical language, or cultural system at large) to otherness – a sort of *Copernican revolution* – the Levinasian critique of monologic reason questions not only the general orientation of Western philosophy, but also the tendencies dominating over the culture engendering it.

Levinas' philosophy is not a philosophy of dialogue but a critique of dialogue according to the dominant conception founded on the category of identity. Throughout his research Levinas developed his critique of a limited, that is, non dialogic conception of dialogue. For Levinas dialogue is not exchange, it is not communication between that which is *said* by one person and that which is *said* by another. Dialogism may be traced in *saying* itself, independently of exchange, in saying which is not dialogue understood as a relation between giving and receiving, nor therefore as respect, tolerance, sharing, pooling things together, common enterprise, accord, mutual agreement, equal distribution.

> Antecedent to the verbal signs it conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it [saying] is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one to the other, the very signifyingness of signification (2000: 5).

According to Levinas, dialogue is a 'relation to the other' beyond knowledge, and quite apart from the intention and the will of the I. Dialogue is understood as *inevitable exposition to the other*, impossibility of closure, witness to the inevitability of involvement, necessary non-indifference, finding oneself again and again, in spite of alibis and excuses, in the condition of having to answer to the other and for the other, irrevocable *responsibility*. Consequently, Levinas questions the reciprocity on which Martin Buber always insists in his conception of dialogue and of the *I-Thou* relation:

> We wonder whether the relation with the alterity of others which appears in the form of dialogue, of question and answer, can be described without introducing a

> paradoxical difference between the I and the Thou. The originality of I-Thou comes from the fact that that relation is known not from the outside, but from the I who brings it about. Its place is therefore not interchangeable with the place occupied by Thou. In what does this position of ipseity consist? If the I becomes I in saying Thou, I have obtained this position from my correlate, and the I-Thou relation is like all other relations: as if an external onlooker were speaking of I and Thou in the third person. The meeting, which is formal, can be reserved, read from left to right just as well as from right to left. In the ethics in which the other is at once higher and poorer than I, the I is distinguished from the Thou, not by any sort of 'attributes', but by the dimension of height, which breaks with Buber's formalism (1996: 32).

And again, in another passage Levinas opposes the formalist 'philosophy of dialogue' by resorting to Heidegger's notion of *Fürsorge* or 'solicitude for the other', 'care given to others', though he adds with biting irony, "It is not, surely, to Heidegger that one should turn for instruction in the love of man or social justice" (1996: 33). "Is dialogue possible without *Fürsorge*?". And in a letter (1963) to Buber**:**

> I think that the Saying Thou (the Bubers' Du Sagen) is already, ipso facto, a giving. Once the Saying Thou has been separated from this giving, even if it is established between strangers, it is a 'purely spiritual', ethereal friendship, i.e. already enervated, as it may become in a certain social milieu. That the Saying Thou operates immediately and already through my body (including my giving hand), that it therefore presupposes my body (as lived body), things (as objects of enjoyment) and the Other's hunger, that the Saying is thus embodied, i.e. beyond of organs of speech or song or artistic activity, that the Other is always, qua Other, the poor and destitute one (while at the same time being my lord), and that the relation is thus essentially dissymmetrical: such are the thoughts that were behind my 'objections' (1996: 38).

Levinas is strongly stating his opposition to the concept of dialogue understood as a relationship between two preconstituted and autonomous subjects who decide to exchange ideas. On the contrary, as formulated by Levinas, dialogue is passive witness to the impossibility of escape from the other; it is passive witness to the fact that the other cannot be eluded, to the condition of involvement with the other apart from initiative taken by the subject who is called to answer *to* the other and *for* the other. The 'I' is constitutionally, structurally dialogic in the sense that it testifies to the relation with otherness, whether the otherness of others or the otherness of self.

The relationship I-Other

According to Levinas the relation of otherness is neither reducible *to being-with*, Martin Heidegger's *Mitsein*, nor to Jean-Paul-Sartre's *being-for*. Otherness is located inside the subject, identity, the I, which is itself a dialogue, a relation between same and other. The other is inseparable from the I, the same (*Même* as intended by Levinas), and as *etranger*, absolutely other, it cannot be included within the totality of the same. The other is necessary to the constitution of the I and its world, but at the same time it is refractory to all those categories that wish to extinguish its otherness, thus subjecting it to the identity of the same.

Otherness is not outside the sphere of the I, which does not lead to its assimilation, but, quite the contrary, gives rise to a constitutive impediment to the integrity and closure of the I as Identity, as totality, as the same. The relation with the other is intended as a relation of excess, as a surplus, as the overcoming of objectifying thought, as release from the relation between the subject and the object and from the relation of work and trade. The same/other relation irreducibly transcends the realm of knowledge, the concept, abstract thought, even though the latter are all possible thanks to this relation. Instead the I/other relation, as proposed by Levinas, has an ethical foundation. But what does 'ethical' mean in this context? Levinas gives the following explanation:

> We call ethical a relationship between terms such as are untied neither by a synthesis of the understanding nor by a relationship between subject and object, and yet where the one weighs or concerns or is meaningful to the other, where they are bound by a plot which knowing can neither exhaust nor unravel (1987: 116).[3]

A movement towards the other without return to the self, to identity, connotes the *specifically human* present in any human enterprise, in "all human work [*œuvre*], commercial and diplomatic" (1948: 38; my translation) whatever this may be. As Levinas says, beyond perfect adaptation to its own goal, the human enterprise "[...] bears witness to an accord with some destiny extrinsic to the course of things, which situates it outside the world, like the forever bygone past of ruins, like the elusive strangeness of the exotic" (1987: 2). In a chapter entitled 'La Signification et le Sens' (1987: 75-107)[4] in his book of 1972, *L'humanisme de l'autre homme*, Levinas uses the term *œuvre* to designate a movement towards the other where the possibility of return to self is excluded : "An œuvre conceived radically is a movement of the Same towards the Other which never returns to the Same" (1987: 91). To accept the concept of *œuvre* as designating the specifically human, the orientation in which the human is

realized, means to support a kind of humanism**,** says Levinas**,** that inverts the usual itinerary of philosophy when conceived as that which "[…] remains that of Ulysses, whose adventure in the world was only a return to his native island - a complacency in the Same, an unrecognition of the other" (1987: 91). Identity and *étrangété*, otherness: these are the two faces of the real which realism does not capture. In a paper significantly entitled 'Reality and its shadow' (1948), Levinas says:

> Being is not only itself, it escapes itself. Here is a person who is what he is; but he does not make us forget, does not absorb, cover over entirely the objects he holds and the way he holds them, his gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin, which escape from under the identity of his substance, which like a torn sack is unable to contain them. Thus a person bears on his face, alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness. The picturesque is always to some extent a caricature. Here is a familiar everyday thing, perfectly adapted to the hand which is accustomed to it, but its qualities, color, form, and position at the same time remain as it were behind its being, like the 'old garments' of a soul which had withdrawn from that thing, like a 'still life' (1987: 6).

An unbounded 'responsability'

Taking their distances implicitly and explicitly from a tradition of thought on dialogue understood as the exchange of rejoinders among pre-constituted and predefined subjects, Levinas considers dialogism as a fundamental condition of human subjects, their consciousness and, therefore, as a sort of a priori. Our allusion is to what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981; cf. Ponzio 2003) calls *substantial dialogue* as distinct from *formal dialogue*, substantial dialogue which is also the structure of the I. Therefore, language as contact, proximity, being one-for-the-other, language as witness, involvement, intercorporeity, exposition to the other, intersubjectivity, complicity antecedent to accordance and to discordance is already dialogue. The dialogic relation is inseparably connected with responsibility. As Levinas states:

> Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made. […] The word I means here I am, answering for everything and for everyone. […] Responsibility for the others has not been a return to oneself, but an exasperated contracting, which the limits of identity cannot retain. […]

> [Responsibility for another] is a responsibility of the ego for what the ego has not wished, that is, for the others (1987: 114; cf. Levinas 1993: 182).

Responsibility is involvement, exposition, proximity of one-for-the-other. The condition of unlimited responsibility testifies to our obligation to the otherness relationship, to dialogism. The I in itself is already dialogue, an I/other relationship. Otherness is present at the very heart of identity; it is structural to identity, a basic condition for the very realisation of identity.

To speak not only means to speak with the words of others, but also to keep account of the other in a relation of inevitable involvement and implication, such that to speak is always to answer, also in the sense of to answer for, in the first place, to answer for oneself, to justify oneself. The I speaks and in so doing answers to the other. As Levinas says in 'Nonintentional consciousness'(1998a), the first case in which I is declined is not the nominative but the *accusative* (1998a: 129).

Instead, the other, in grammatical terms, does not appear in the nominative, but in the vocative:

> To speak, at the same time as knowing the other, is making known to him. The other is not only known, he is greeted [salué]. He is not only named, but also invoked. To put it in grammatical terms, the other does not appear in the nominative, but in the vocative. I not only think of what he is for me, but also and simultaneously, and even before, I am for him (1990: 7).

The other interrogates the I. And the question of the something, of being is inseparable from the question of the I itself which must first answer for itself, for the place it occupies in the world, and for its relation to others.

This means that *first philosophy*, as Levinas maintains, is *ethics*. As says Levinas, the main question is not *why is there being instead of nothingness*? (Heidegger), but rather *why is my being here in this place, in this dwelling, in this situation, while another is excluded*? The origin of human signification is not 'intentional consciousness' (cf. Husserl 1970) but, as Levinas says, *consciousness that is not intentional*, consciousness understood in an ethical sense and not in a cognitive sense; precisely 'bad consciousness'. This bad consciousness attempts to justify itself, to appease itself, to make itself comfortable regarding questions raised by the other simply because the other is present. Bad consciousness in so doing reconciles itself as illusory 'good consciousness'.

Trace and writing

The 'trace' is the sign of otherness and dialogic openness. It is what in *Totality and Infinity* and in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1981) Levinas characterizes as the *significance of signification* in communication: that is, the fact that signification signifies in *saying* and is not exhausted in the *said*. Characteristics of the significance of saying comprise:

a) autonomy with respect to the 'said';

b) the fact that it is a surplus nonfunctional to the exchange of messages;

c) dissymmetry and excess (that is, the significance of saying escapes being and the categories which describe it);

d) 'unproductivity', 'uselessness', 'unfunctionality' by comparison with the economy of 'narration', 'fabula', and History;

e) self-referentiality, ambiguity, equivocation, contradiction;

f) the fact that what is revealed in the significance of saying does not unveil itself, but remains invisible and cannot be reduced to the status of object, in other words, it does not lose its interiority, its secret;

g) in the last analysis, openness to absolute otherness.

Thanks to all these characteristics, the significance of saying is proximity, contact, intercorporeity, passive involvement and may be characterized as *writing*, *intransitive writing*. The term 'writing' is plurivocal: it may avail itself of the distinction made by Roland Barthes (1993-1995) between 'intransitive writing' and 'transitive writing' or 'transcription' and, therefore, between 'writers' and 'scribes'; or by Jacques Derrida (1976, 1980) between the concept of *différence* ('difference', from *différer*) and *différance* ('deferral, *renvoi*', from *renvoyer*); or again, it may keep account of Levinas' concept of *écriture avant la lettre*. Writing as we are describing it is all that which testifies to the opening to infinity, to the other, fragmentation of the totality, predisposition to innovation, creativity, and inventiveness.

For Levinas, as he explicitly states in his preface to *Beyond the Verse*, the human word is writing in itself, given its capacity to signify more than what it says, given the excess of the signifier with respect to the signified, of saying with respect to the *said* (1994a: xi). As the expression of otherness, as the trace, the presence of an absence, the invisible rendered visible while maintaining its secret, the word presents itself as writing independently of the fact of being written in the literal sense. Communication and language are not simply instruments, they are not exhausted in the literal sense of

what they prescribe, thematize, or disclose. Far more radically, communication and language are inhabited by writing, argues Levinas, writing understood as *œuvre*, as the capacity for otherness and dialogism before the stylet and the pen impress letters on tablets, parchment, or paper: "a literature before the letter!" (1994a: xi).

Otherwise than Being

We shall now return to the communication-ontology relationship in the current form of global communication. Our phase of social production is characterized by the globalization of communication, and the universalization of the market. This universalization consists not simply in the quantitative fact of expansion, but also and above all in qualitative alterations, represented both by the translatability of anything into goods and by the production of new goods-things. Communication is no longer just an intermediate phase in the production cycle (production, exchange, consumption) but has become the constitutive modality of production and consumption processes themselves. Not only is exchange communication, but production and consumption are also communication. So the whole productive cycle is communication. This phase of social production can be characterised as the 'communication-production' phase.

Communication-production is the communication of the world as it is today. It is *global* communication, not only in the sense that it has expanded over the whole planet but also in the sense that it sticks to and relates to the world, it accomodates the world. It may be better to say that it is communication of this world. Communication and reality, communication and being, coincide. Realistic politics (but only a realistic politics truly counts as politics) is the only appropriate politics for global communication, for the being of communication-production.

Certainly *social reproduction* in general, the process through which human society materially and culturally reproduces itself, is (as the expression 'reproduction' clearly indicates) regeneration, maintenance, conservation. But precisely because of insistence on the being of the human community, social reproduction assumes – and has done so historically – different forms of production passing from forms that hindered it – due to the discrepancy between the system of social relationships and the level of growth of human intellectual, transformative and inventive capacities – to more appropriate and favourable ones.

Therefore, social reproduction is achieved through the possibility of escape from being as established by a given social form. Such escape is possible through the re-invention and reorganization of social relations thanks to the human ability to interpret and respond *otherwise to being*, to take one's distance from actuality, to evade from and go beyond the limits of the world, and from the vision of the world. By contrast, persistence of communication-reproduction is *persistence of the same social form*. And thanks to the ideology functional to maintaining this form, *being* as it emerges in this particular phase in social reproduction is passed off as a necessary and unchangeable way of being for humans.

As already noted, *global* conveys the sense not only that communication expands over the whole planet, but also that it fits itself to the world and makes itself adequate for this world, so that communication is reality, and, also, so that communication and being coincide. World planning for the increase in communication and its control continues and develops the being of communication-production. Realism in politics must keep faith with ontology thus described, to the very point of accepting the *extrema ratio* of war, as dictated by the strict law of the force of things.

The problem of ontology cannot be reduced to the question of how being comes to existence and reveals itself through verbal language, for this would simply imply assuming an acritical stance with respect to ontology. We must leave the horizon of being; indeed, being is formed from this very 'exit', this 'outside' which is not nothingness. Nothingness is already inside the production mechanism of being, *essance* or *essament* (which is the meaning of the word 'essence' in Levinas' 1974 book *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*), that is to say, nothingness is part of coming to being and persevering in being, it is foreseen by the dialectics for the reproduction of being. Levinas writes:"The term essence, which we do not spell essance, designates the esse, the process or event of being […]" (2001: 187 n. 1; cf. xli n. 1).

In Levinas' use, the term *essence* expresses *being* different from *beings*, the German *Sein* distinguished from *Seindes*, the Latin *esse* distinguished from the Scholastic *ens*. Levinas underlines that *essence* does not mean *being statically* but *being as process*, although he has not ventured to write *essance*, where the suffix -*ance* deriving from -*antia* or -*entia* stresses an action.

We are referring to that complex and articulate problem which leads us beyond the horizon of ontology to concern what Levinas calls 'otherwise than being'. Unlike 'being otherwise' which merely proposes *an alternative* being, an alternative within

the field of ontology, 'otherwise than being' is not englobed by being, nor is it the alternative to being, but rather it is the otherness of being. Following Levinas we may call this other dimension with respect to ontology *metaphysics*. A significant contribution to the claim that metaphysics cannot be eliminated from ontology was made by Levinas through his close discussion of Martin Heidegger's philosophy.

Ontology presupposes metaphysics. That means that the *otherwise than being* is the condition of possibility of being, its foundation. The otherwise than being is *otherness* and concerns the relationship with the absolute other. Otherness, the otherwise than being, is located first of all in an ethical and not a cognitive dimension. It subsists, flourishes, intrigues, preoccupies, and confers on the I a responsibility that exceeds its identity.

Freedom and command of the face of the other

The supreme work of freedom consists in guaranteeing freedom. In its fear of tyranny, it resorts to institutions. It institutes an order of reason outside of oneself, it entrusts the rational to a written text. Freedom, to assure itself, leads to institutions, to a commitment of freedom in the very name of freedom, to a State. Freedom becomes obedience to law. But the impersonal reason of institutions and the command of written law can become alien to individual will; their rational order may become an order in which freedom no longer recognizes itself. Therefore the guarantees of freedom become another tyranny in the form of inflexible law that may be such a violent form of command that it commands to go to war. Individual as Identity is blackmailed in the name of its own freedom.

Nevertheless the law become impersonal discourse which realistically responds to the force of things has its *otherwise* in its very foundation, that is, the non-impersonal discourse with the other, in a relationship of command without violence. Before being obedience to the impersonal law, the relation with the other, as a relation with the absolute other, is the indispensable condition of this law. The individual act of freedom, which institutes the order of impersonal reason is not itself based in impersonal reason. Impersonal discourse presupposes discourse in the face-to-face situation, which is "a relationship of command without tyranny, which is not yet an obedience to an impersonal law, but is the indispensable condition for the institution of such a law" (1987: 18). Tyrannical or violent action does not consist of being in a relationship with the other as other. On the contrary this action does not see the face in

the other. The face, the countenance of the other is not an obstacle to freedom, but its starting-point.

Freedom is invested by the other. A freedom not justified is the absurd, the irrational, as in Heidegger, or an arbitrariness which the gaze of another freedom threatens and defeats, as in Sartre. The other puts in question the naïve legitimacy of freedom, the freedom which, reduced to itself, appears as a shame for itself, as usurpation.

> Freedom must justify itself; reduced to itself it is accomplished not in sovereignty but in arbitrariness. […]. Freedom is not justified by freedom. To account for being or to be in truth is not to comprehend nor to take hold of…, but rather to encounter the other without allergy, that is, in justice.
>
> To approach the other is to put into question my freedom, my spontaneity as a living being, my emprise over the things, this freedom of a 'moving force', this impetuosity of the current to which everything is permitted, even murder. The 'You shall not commit murder' which delineates the face in which the other is produced submits my freedom to judgement (1991: 303-304).

The face of the other opposes itself to me insofar as it turns to me, but this opposition is not the opposition of a force, it is not a hostility. The opposition of the face "is a pacific opposition, but one where peace is not a suspended war or a violence simply contained" (1991: 19).On the contrary, violence consists of ignoring the face of the other.

The opposition of the face of the other is a relationship of command without violence, a command prior to institution, to law, to State, which all have their foundations in this command. This opposition, which is a command, is the *no* inscribed on a face by the very fact that it is a face, which always affects us not in the indicative, but in the imperative: 'You shall not steal'.

Exposition and the outside

According to Levinas, the true problem for us Westerners is not so much to refuse violence as to question ourselves about a struggle against violence which could be a struggle against the institution of violence (2000: 177). 'Preventive war' is not a struggle against the institution of violence but is itself violence and feeding violence. On the contrary, that which is necessary is *preventive peace*. War against war, war

against terrorism, perpetuates that which it is called to make disappear, war against war consecrates war and its virile values in good conscience. Developing Levinas' reflections, we may say that 'just' and 'necessary' wars, 'humanitarian' and 'preventive' wars are wars made with a good conscience. Refusal of violence which languishes in passive non-resistance to evil, and refusal of violence which is war against war may benefit from the alibi of good conscience, but both encourage violence and prime 'infinite war'.

The way to preventive peace is the way of a *bad conscience*, of *patience* that does not ask patience of others and is based on a difference between one self and others, on an *inequality* in a sense absolutely opposed to oppression. Preventive peace is in *non-indifference*, non-indifference to the other, to another, non-indifference which is responsibility for the other, "the very difference between me and the other" (2000: 178). I am answerable before the other, responsible before all others for all others. I am responsible for the very faults of another. The condition of being hostage is an authentic figure of responsibility for the other.

Peace that is otherwise than peace of war is otherwise than being, is peace beyond essence. There is no peace without openness to the beyond essence, beyond inwardness to being, the beyond of being at home, "the being at home with oneself, of which European history itself has been the conquest and jealous defence" (2000: 178). Nevertheless this history of the West bears, in its margins, the trace of events carrying *another* signification, and the victims immolated and ignored in the big sense of History have a separate signification from this sense. Then the very signifyingness of different and exceptional signification is non-indifference for the other, 'the-one-for-the-other'.

Non-indifference for the other - that is, responsibility without alibis for the other - is openness towards the other than being. This openness is not the initiative of an intentional subject, an effect again of its will, inwardness in being, interest. This openness has another sense from that of accessibility through open doors or windows, another signification from that of disclosure, or of the will to dialogue. It is openness outside the subject, outside the theme, without the possibility of being absorbed in the 'object', without the possibility of seeing, knowing, understanding, grasping, taking in hand, operating and possessing, outside the good intentions of a subject. Openness is "disinterestedness" (*disinteressement*) (Levinas 2000), it is openness outside the *essence* (*essement*) – the process or event of being – outside *conatus essendi*.
Openness signifies the outside without cover, without shelter, it signifies non-protection, homelessness, non-world, non-inhabitation, layout without security. But the

significations of openness are not only privative: openness signifies the other side of identity, of inwardness, the demythization of the I, the situation before its closure in the abstract notions of freedom and non freedom, the situation in which one is not yet nailed to the I.

There is in openness "a complex of significations deeper and broader than freedom", where "inwardness frees itself from itself, and is exposed to all the winds" (2000: 180). There is exposure without deliberation, which would already be closedness, closure in identity, in its illusory barricades. Non-indifference is a passivity, wholly supporting. It penetrates identity even in the retreats of its inwardness and obsesses it before all thematization, before taking a foothold in being. Non-indifference is exposure of the subject without his 'as-for-me' of defence and aggression, exposure without reciprocity. "The exposure precedes the initiative a voluntary subject would take to expose itself"(2000: 180). It opens on to the world but is not in-the-world, is non being in the-world. The restlessness of passivity – a passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter – in the exposure to another, in responsibility for him, the restlessness which takes place without a decision, is restlessness in exposure to another exposure, that is to the openness of a face, the face of the other, the openness of its nudity.

Exposure to another is the asymmetric relation in the face-to-face position (2000: 189-193). The face-to-face position is exposition of one's own nudity, out of role, without position, function, power, defence. It is my relation in my alterity to the other in his alterity. Alterity in the face-to-face exposition is not relative alterity of roles, positions, functions, power. It is absolute alterity. The exposedness of an alterity to another alterity in the face-to-face relation is before identity, subjectivity, freedom, language, being and it is their condition.

Preventive peace, liberation from the world of war, this opening up, this *beyond*, is in the proximity of a neighbour. The other, my neighbour, concerns me with a closeness closer than the closeness of the being of things, of world, with a proximity closer than presence, a proximity in his same absence. Proximity of the other is responsibility for the other. Proximity means my not delegable responsibility – in my unicity, oneness, as a unique being – for the other, my subjection to the other, the support of a crushing charge of alterity. Singularisation is not a propriety of the subject itself, but the consequence of the not delegable responsibility of the subject in his alterity to the other in his alterity.

Non-indifference to the other – and ever more in the world of globalisation, to my neighbour – is an openness of self without a world, without a place, is the not being walled in being, the not being nailed to being, '*u-topia*' (2000: 182). U-topia with respect to unity, the community, which, in spite of incomparability, the oneness of each one of us, drags us off and assembles us on the same side, "chaining us to one another like galley slaves, emptying proximity of its meaning"(2000: 182). U-topia as beyond being, otherwise than being, disinterestedness (*dis-inter-essement*), the excluded middle besides being and not being. Exposed to the proximity of the other the I of each individual is virtually a chosen one, called to leave the identity of the ego and its extension in the unity of community, people, agglomerations of peoples, to respond with responsibility: *me*, *here I am*, that is, *here I am for others.* So in the order or disorder of the modern world, in which peoples and their agglomerations or dispersions are in the desert without the manna of their customs, their wretchedness, their illusions and their (already degenerate) redemptive systems, the subject breaking with identity loses his place radically or his shelter in being, to enter into ubiquity, which is also a u-topia.

Responsibility for the other cannot have begun in my commitment, in my decision. The unlimited responsibility in which I find myself comes from the hither side of my freedom, from a 'prior to every memory', an 'ulterior to every accomplishment', from the non-present *par excellence*, the non-original, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence. The responsibility for the other is the locus in which is situated the null-site of subjectivity, where the privilege of the question 'Where?' no longer holds (2000: 10).

U-topia of absolute exposition to the other, responsibility for the other has nothing to do with utopianism considered as such by the realistic vision of modern man who interprets himself as a being among beings, while instead the very character of modernity consists in the fact that it is impossible to remain solidly anchored to self, identity, territory, roots, being, in a word, to remain at home. Concerning his *book Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, which is exposed imprudently to the reproach of utopianism, Levinas says: *"This book escapes the reproach of utopianism – if utopianism is a reproach, if any thought escapes utopianism* – by recalling that what took place humanly has never been able to remain closed up in its site" (2000: 184).

The I questioned

In front of the face of the other, the I is called into question. Through its nudity, exposition, fragility, the face says that otherness will never be eliminated. The otherness of others resists to the very point of calling for recourse to homicide and war – being the evidence and proof of the other's irreducibility. Another one, *autrui*, this other, says Levinas, puts the I into the accusative, summoning it, questioning it, calling it back to the condition of absolute responsibility, outside the I's initiative. Absolute responsibility is responsibility for the other, responsibility understood as answering to the other and for the other. This type of responsibility allows for neither rest nor peace. Peace functional to war, peace intrinsic to war, a truce, is fully revealed in its misery and vanity in the light of absolute responsibility.

The relation to the other is asymmetrical, unequal: the other is disproportionate with respect to the power and freedom of the I. Moral consciousness is this very lack of proportion, it interrogates the freedom of self. However, such interrogation is at once constitutive of self and its freedom insofar as it sanctions the passage from spontaneity to consciousness, from freedom as passive *jouissance* and self's happy spontaneity, to freedom as a right, and speaking that right.

It is before the need to answer to others, it is under the weight of unlimited responsibility for others, that the rights and freedom of the self are instituted. The origin of self, which is an origin without an *arché*, in this sense anarchical, lies in an uneasy conscience in front of others, in a dirty conscience, therefore, in the need to justify one's presence, in one's responsibility without alibis and without escape from others. In the continued effort to achieve a clean conscience, the self in the nominative, understood as the subject, as intentional consciousness, as speech, derives from interrogating the self and putting it into the accusative. From such interrogation also derives the self's freedoms, the self's rights – 'human rights', elaborated to defend the self summoned by the face of the other to account for the rights of others, in this sense to defend itself as an 'I'.

Bad conscience and alterity

Prereflexive, confused consciousness, preceding all intention, all will, all aim, which is not acting, but pure passivity, is a *bad conscience* (1998a: 123-132).[5] Without identity, without the protective mask of responsibility delimiting itself in the mirror of the self — self-assured and affirming himself — without titles, stripped bare of all attributes,

consciousness is consciousness not in the world by virtue of its being-without-having-chosen-to-be, as in the Heideggerian *Geworfenheit* (being 'thrown': see Heidegger 1962), but in question: bad conscience. Bad conscience is consciousness on the hither side of the self that already puts itself forward and affirms itself, or confirms itself in the world and in being, in the very manifestation of its emphatic identity, in saying 'I'.

Consciousness preceding the consciousness of a subject already distinguished, identified, justified, posited as the 'indeclinable nominative', assured of its right to be, is a questioning of affirmation and confirmation of being, and the *accusative* in a sense is its first 'case'. The questioning of being by death, which is always premature, does not perturb or thwart the good conscience of being, or the rights of identity. Bad consciousness is questioning of the very justice of the position in being *by the other*. Being as bad conscience, being put in question is having to answer to another, to one's fellow man.

The pre-reflective I is the I pre-occupied, non-indifferent, before the face of the other, the I of the bad conscience. The I of the 'good conscience' is the I of the bad conscience who has shielded himself, but has also forgotten, under the justifications of identity and its indifferent difference, the first person of whom the accusative is his first case. Good conscience is the I of the interchangeable individual who has forgotten the first person who is subject to others and incomparable to others, non-interchangeable, irreplaceable, unique in his responsibility for others and who is precisely not an individual of a genus (1998b: 168-169). The I of bad conscience is the I exposed to the very uprightness of the face of the other who – writes Levinas playing on the dual sense of *regarder* as 'looking at', 'to concern'– whether he looks at me or not, concerns me [*qu'il me regarde ou non, il 'me regard''*] (cf. 1998b: 171).

The questioning of consciousness and its configuration as bad conscience is the basis of the I: The I starts from the accusative case, from responsibility without alibis for the other. Being in the first person, being myself, being 'I', is having to answer for my right to be, being as bad conscience: being put into question, but also put to the question, being responsible. Language originates from having to answer for one's right to be, that is, from bad conscience. Having to speak, having to say 'I': this is justification as regards the other. The essence of language is non-indifference, responsibility; it is "friendship and hospitality"(1991: 305). Identity is a combination of justifications. Bad conscience is non-indifference towards the other, fear for the other: a fear that goes back behind and despite my good conscience and comes to me from the face of the other. The rights of my identity originate in order to justify my 'being in the world' or my 'place in the sun', my home. They originate in order to

silence bad conscience and its fear for the other who has already been oppressed or starved by me, by my usurpation of a place that might belong to the other (1998a: 130-131). The question about my right to be is already my responsibility for the other. 'To be or not to be', says Levinas, is probably not the question *par excellence*. The question *par excellence*, or the first question, is not even the Heideggerian question 'why is there being rather than nothing?', but the question that is repressed by good conscience: 'have I right to be ?' (1998b: 171). Exposed to another in the face-to-face position, the I is without alibis, in the accusative case, in the situation of having to answer for his being in the world, for his place, for his usurpation, for the *Da*, here, of his own *Dasein* (here-being) from which the other is excluded.

Return to bad conscience and its responsibility and non-indifference for the other is a suspension of the rights of identity with their negation of all otherness and their exclusion of the other: "a suspension of war and politics which pass themselves off as relation of the Same to the Other"(1998a: 132). The human, Levinas writes (1998a: 132), is the return to bad conscience, to its possibility, as Socrates in *Gorgia* said, of fearing injustice more than death, of preferring injustice undergone to injustice committed.

Responsibility, justice, and state

Responsibility for the other is the original relation with the other. It is unlimited responsibility. This responsibility, according to Levinas, is the "secret of sociality" (1998a: 169). From the start, the encounter with the other is the responsibility for him, for one's 'neighbour', which is the name for the human, whoever s/he is, for whom one is responsible. Love, as non-indifference, charity, is original, and it is original peace (1998a: 103-121):

> Peace cannot be identified with the end of combats that cease for want of combatants, by the defeat of some and the victory of the others, that is with cemeteries or future universal empires. Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism (1991: 306).

Original peace is what Levinas calls an "asymmetry of intersubjectivity", an exceptional, extraordinary situation of the I. Levinas recalls Dostoevsky on this subject. In *Brothers Karamazov*, one of the characters says: "we are all guilty for everything and everyone, and I more than all the others".

Original peace is the absolute precedence of the face of the other. The face of the other, encounter with the other, requires me as the one responsible for the other. This responsibility is inalienable. It is a responsibility of the I as a singularity, as unique, and such responsibility is different from the responsibility you, as the individual of a genus, yield to someone. Unlimited and inalienable responsibility for others is the very possibility of the uniqueness of the one and only, beyond the particularity of the individual in a genus. In the relation to the face, to the absolutely weak, to what is absolutely exposed as bare and destitute, responsibility is an election, an individuation without the genus, a principle of individuation. As Levinas says: "on the famous problem: 'Is man individuated by matter, or individuated by form?', I support individuation by responsibility for the other" (1998a: 108). I am responsible for every man, my neighbour, and no one can substitute me. In this sense I am chosen. I am responsible for the other, although the other is not responsible for me. As Dostoevsky says, I am responsible for another more than anyone else. The relationship with the other is not symmetrical, it is not at all as in Martin Buber (see Levinas 1996: 17-39).

According to Levinas' analysis, "at the outset I hardly care what the other is with respect to me, that is his own business; for me, he is above all the one I am responsible for" (1996: 105). The other, my fellow, is the first comer. From the outset, encounter with the face of the other is my responsibility for him. The other, my fellow, is also a foreigner. I am responsible for the other even when he commits crime, even when he bothers me, even when he persecutes me. But I do not live in a world in which there is but one single 'first comer'; there is always another other, a third, who is also my other, my fellow.

The third is himself also a neighbour, and also falls within the purview of the I's responsibility. Otherness, beginning with this third, is a plurality. Proximity is a human plurality. The I has to know which one of the two others has precedence. The I, as responsible for the other and the third, is responsible for their interactions. The I is responsible for the other even when he commits crimes, even when others commit crimes. The I is responsible for the persecution of his neighbours. They have a right to defence. If self-defence is a problem for the I, this problem appears because one threatens his neighbour. For the I, the question of others is a demand for justice. There is a necessity for justice cf. Levinas 1998a: 166-167). There is the obligation to compare unique and incomparable others. This is the moment of knowledge. Justice emerges from responsibility for the other. Responsibility for the other precedes justice. Justice is born from non-indifference, love, charity.

Justice calls for judgement and requires a comparison of what is in principle incomparable, unique. Comparison, equity, objectivity appear with justice. Justice requires perception of the individual in a genus, it requires species and genus. The I, precisely as responsible for the other and the third, cannot remain indifferent to their interactions, and in the charity for the one, cannot withdraw its love from the other. The self, the I, cannot limit itself to the incomparable uniqueness of each one, which is expressed in the face of each one. Behind the unique singularities, one must perceive the individuals of a *genus,* one must compare them, judge them, and condemn them. There is a subtle ambiguity of the individual and the unique, the personal and the absolute, the mask and the face. This is the hour of inevitable justice – required, however, by charity itself.

> The hour of Justice, of the comparison between incomparables, who are grouped by human species and genus. And the hour of institutions empowered to judge, of states within which institutions are consolidated, of Universal Law which is always dura lex, and of citizens equal before the law (1998a: 229).

Justice requires judges, institutions, laws and, consequently, the state. A world of citizens, identities, individuals, persons, masks is necessary which belongs to a community, and not only the face to face relationship, of unique to unique. 'If there were no order of justice, there would be no limit to my responsibility' (1998a: 105). Thus the state emerges from the limitation of non-indifference and charity and not, as in Hobbes's vision, from the limitation of violence and fear of others (*Homo homini lupus*). According to Levinas, the problematic of justice is opened in terms of justice and defence of the other, my fellow, and not in terms of threat that concerns me (1998a; cf. Poirié 1987: 104-105 and 115-119). On the basis of justice and state there is not a fear of the other, the other that bothers and persecutes me. On the basis of justice and state there is a fear for the other, a fear of persecution of my neighbours, because I am, more than anyone else, responsible for the other even when he commits crimes, even when he suffers crimes and persecutions.

According to justice, asymmetry of intersubjectivity tends to become symmetry, equality, exchange, relations under the same conditions, equal rights. To treat all men with justice also means to treat myself with justice, and certainly my unlimited responsibility, my responsibility for all, can and has to manifest itself also in limiting itself. The I is himself third in the relation of the other to another and he too calls for justice. In the name of his unlimited responsibility, the I is called to look after himself, to care for himself. But unlimited and asymmetric responsibility which justifies this concern for justice, for oneself can be forgotten. In this forgetting, says Levinas,

consciousness is pure egoism (2000: 128). Egoistic interests "take dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another and are thus together (2000: 4). War is the "deed or the drama" (2000: 4) of egoistic interest. Nobody has patience, is patient with the other, there is no time for the other. Nobody can await his hour. The extreme synchronism, without time for the other, without patience, without alterity is War. In the "inevitable" determination of war there is "extreme contemporaneousness or immanence" (2000: 4).

To the extent that the face of the other relates the I to the third party, the irreducible relation of the face–to–face assumes the form of the We, moves into a state, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality. But politics left to itself deforms the I and the other, because it judges them according to universal rules. Politics bears a tyranny (1991: 300). Justice founded on non-indifference, charity and love for the other may become indifference and cruelty. Only the responsibility of I as unicity and his relation to the face constitute the reference to which justice and the work of the state must be reconducted, and which they must take as their model. It is in the name of responsibility for the other, in the name of mercy that the rigors of the *dura lex* may be mitigated and that justice may be perfected, may become juster.

Freedom and commandment

It will be necessary to institute a just State with just laws in order to guarantee freedom and avoid the danger of tyranny. Order based on the logic of closed identity, therefore of differences that are indifferent to each other may also backfire against self in the form of fixed and unflexible law, which, too, is tyrannical and violent. This is the case exactly because law thus conceived is based on the I's rights as regulated by the logic of closed identity – in the extreme form by commanding war, considered as an inevitable means of defense, the realistic face of being, of the interests of the individual and of the community. The I is open to blackmail from the impersonal order to the point of accepting without question the *extrema ratio* of war, in the name of its own freedom. The reasoning being that it is necessary to resort to violence in order to suppress violence.

The being of things as realistically administered by the impersonal discourse of law, in the context of which war is presented as ineluctable violence and self sacrifice, has its otherwise in its very foundation, in the condition of face-to-face with others. This condition is even more realistic, indeed this time truly realistic: the face-to-face

condition, as Levinas says, implies a relation of commandment without tyranny, which is not yet obedience to an impersonal law, but the indispensable condition for the institution of such a law.

The opposition of a naked face, the opposition of disarmed eyes, with absolutely no protection, as from which the self is constituted as responsibility, is not the opposition of a force, it is not a relation of hostility. It is a peace-loving opposition, where peace is not understood as suspension of war, violence withheld in order to be used more effectively. On the contrary, the violence perpetuated consists in eliminating this very opposition, in outwitting it, in ignoring the face, in avoiding the gaze. 'No' is written on the face of the other – firstly we find written, 'You shall not kill' – for the very fact of being a face. Having a sense for itself, having been absolved from the relation with an I, the other is such insofar as it may absent itself from the presence of self and its projects, not go along with it. Violence is achieved by converting the *no which is inscribed* on the face of the other into hostile force or submission. Violence consists in prevailing and prevaricating over the other, to the point even of murder and war, in spite of opposition to violence; opposition that is expressed in the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill', which is inscribed in the face even before it is made explicit in a formula.

Some biblical prescriptions: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' and "The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself" (Leviticus, 19.18, and 19.34). These refer beyond politics, to a form of peace that is antecedent with respect to political relations, a condition of peace that is fundamental and made of the relation with the other insofar as it is other, with the foreigner that every human is for every other. Extrapolitical or prepolitical peace, solicitation for another person (cf. Poirié 1987: 104), precedes rational thought, being as an 'I', statements made by the subject, knowledge and objectifying consciousness. Primordial peace is paradoxical and contradictory, it implies responsibility for peace that is foreign (Levinas 1995). It implies the interpersonal relationship where the subject "reaches the human condition assuming responsibility for the other person in the election that elevates it to this degree" (1990: 63).

The Bible and Greek writings in the Western world

In justice, which is born from responsibility, is the birth of the theoretical. Justice, which calls for judgement and comparison, for equity and objectivity, is the basis of the theoretical in general, of pondering, knowledge, verification, objective valuation,

system. Justice is the basis of philosophy. So philosophy is the appearance of wisdom from the depths of non-indifference, of charity, of love (1998a: 104). This is the hour of the Greek writings, expert in species and genera. What is unique, incomparable and extrinsic to all genera must be compared, must be reduced to concept, must be brought into the conceptual hierarchy, into the horizon of the universal, of the commonality, community rules, politics. But to the Greek writings and their effort to compare incomparables for love of justice must be added the Bible and its commandments which call for love, mercy, responsibility for the other. In fact, it is in the name of responsibility for the other, of charity that the entire discourse of philosophy, politics, and justice is set in motion. Comparison of the incomparable by means of concepts, as well as of laws and reciprocity of rights and duties is motivated, justified, mitigated by benevolence towards the other, and may be perfected for love of the other (1998a: 229).

The *conatus essendi*, the individualistic perseverance in being at all costs, the mean and short-sighted egoism of individual or collective totalities – ready for murder and war and in any case ready to sacrifice the other – are contrasted by the call of the Bible - *You shall not kill*, *You shall love your neighbour* - which is the original call of the face of the other. The Bible contrasts argumentation of the good conscience of the I according to which the other is none of his business, is nothing to him. The other concerns myself. Alterity is non-indifference, care, responsibility for the other. The Bible expresses the tacit imperative of the face of the other in his defenceless nakedness. Europe, says Levinas, is the Bible and the Greeks (1994b: 133-135):

> Greek is Europe's inevitable discourse, recommended by the Bible itself.
>
> Greek is the term I use to designate, above and beyond the vocabulary, grammar and wisdom with which it originated in Hellas, the manner in which the universality of the west is expressed, or tries to express itself […]. It is a language without prejudice […]. It is a language that is at once a metalanguage, careful and able to protect what is said from the structures of the language itself, which might lay claim to being the very categories of meaning. A language which intends to translate – ever anew – the Bible itself […] (1994b: 134-135).

But, in spite of the message of love and mercy from the Bible, and in spite of the tendency of Greek discourse to wisdom, the history of modern Europe attests to an obsession with an ultimate and sole politic order established on laws and rights which underestimate and forget the rights of alterity or incomparable uniqueness both of the I and of the other. "The history of modern Europe is the permanent temptation of an

ideological rationalism, and of experiments carried out through the rigor of deduction, administration and violence" (1994b: 134-135), as shown by the extremes of the Gulag and Auschwitz and as shown by today's crimes and massacres due to thirst for revenge and power.

Nevertheless, memory of the Bible may be traced in the face of the other, in its original imperative which requires an even more just justice. The entire Bible is concentrated in the two commandments *You shall not kill*, *You shall love your neighbour* which the face of the other signifies. In the *you* of these commandments the I is only called to his duty, responsibility, because the I is for the other in his innermost intimacy of identification as 'I'. The face to face relationship, of unique to unique, pierces the armour of the clear conscience, and summons the I to respond to the other and for the other. Through the face of others the two essential biblical commandments awaken the fundamental alterity of the I and produce a guilty conscience, an anxious feeling of 'having infringed on someone else's territory in positing oneself'(1994a: 111). In fact, as Levinas states,

> 'Thou shalt not kill' or 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour' not only forbids the violence of murder: it also concerns all the slow and invisible killing committed in our desires and vices, in all the innocent cruelties of natural life, in our indifference of 'good conscience' to what is far and near, even in the haughty obstinacy of our objectifying and our thematizing, in all consecrated injustices due our atomic weight of individual and the equilibrium of our social orders (1994b: 110-111).

Inverting the Hobbesian concept of *Homo homini lupus*

The situation of peace and responsibility in relation to the other, a situation where individuals give themselves in their singularity, difference, non-interchangeability, non-indifference, precedes politics and logic, says Levinas. Politics and logic share the fact that they consider individuals as belonging to a genus, as equals; the relation of alterity is prepolitical and pre-logical. And given my exclusive responsibility towards every other, it is this relation that obliges me to relate to another according to a genus, to the individual of a given system or group, which as such is interchangeable, indifferent. Knowing, judging, doing justice, confronting two individuals in order to establish who is guilty, all this requires generalisation through logic and the State, equalising singularities with reference to a genus, insofar as they belong to the same State as citizens. The relationship with the other is mediated by institutions and

juridical procedure, which generalises and at once delimits responsibility, responsibility of each one of us for every other. From this type of generalization derives the necessity of the State.

The action of the State is added to the work of interpersonal responsibility, responsibility as expected from the individual in its singularity – and in a sense denying it. The work of interpersonal responsibility is the work of the individual in its singularity, the person absolutely responsible: responsible in the sense of a hostage who must answer for something he did not do, for a past which was never his, which was never present to him (cf. Poirié 1987: 118).

The Hobbesian concept of *Homo homini lupus* is inverted: the State does not found personal responsibility towards the other but limits and defines it, though it guarantees responsibility through generalization of the law. Instead, responsibility for the other, unconditional, categorical, moral responsibility is not written and is not inscribed in the law. It does not coincide with State justice, which from this point of view is always imperfect with respect to human rights understood as the rights of the other as other, as foreigner. Preoccupation with human rights is not a state function, but rather a non-state institution in the State, it is the call to humanity that is yet to be accomplished in the State (cf. Poirié 1987: 119).

Fear of the Other: 'of the Other' as an 'ethical genitive'

Fear of the other, the fear we experience of the other, ensues from the constitution of Identity. The constitution of Identity, whether it be individual or collective Identity, requires separation from the other, definition of the interests of Identity by which is determined what is part of Identity and what is not, what regards Identity and what does not – as much as the gaze of the other regards me always. Identity means to determine one's own responsibility, which is defined and limited. As such, limited responsibility has recourse to alibis which enable the subject to circumscribe and limit not fear *of* the other, but fear *for* the other, for its well-being.

Identity is delineated on the basis of difference, but difference and Identity also require indifference. Difference related to Identity also relates to a given genus. Difference thus described requires indifference to the other, lack of interest in the other, disinterestedness, lack of fear for the other. Difference and Identity call for circumscribed, limited responsibility, a type of responsibility that is connected with a genus, that begins and ends in a genus which has the function of guaranteeing Identity.

From non-indifference to the other to difference and relative indifference: this is the trajectory through which Identity is constituted and delineated. With the delineation of Identity in such terms, that which regards us is progressively reduced to that which regards the interests of Identity, and such reduction finds justification in the condition of limited responsibility sustained by alibis. Moreoever, the more we get free of the condition of *fear for the other*, the more our *fear of the other* increases to the point of exasperation.

'Fear *of* the other' means fear that the subject experiences 'of the other' understood as object genitive: the other constitutes the object of fear. Logic distinguishes the *object genitive* from the *subject genitive*, the other subject of fear, the other who fears. Subject and object. However, to grasp the third sense we are describing, that is, fear *for* the other, it will be necessary to abandon the dichotomy or polarization as traditionally established by logic.

According to this third sense, fear of the other means to experience the other's fear, fear as experienced by the other, therefore, fear for the other. Here, we no longer distinguish between subject and object or refer to community identification. In other words, the relation among differences no longer implies community identification, indifference among identities and differences, but, quite on the contrary, the relation among differences is based on non-indifference among differences, absolute otherness.

Following this logic and developing Levinas' discourse, the expression 'of the other' may be designated, in our opinion, as an 'ethical genitive'. This third case of the genitive should be held into account by logic as the third sense according to which the expression 'fear of the other' may be disambiguated, that is, as 'fear for the other'.

Exasperated Identity

In today's world, fear of the other understood as fearing the other, fear that the subject experiences of the object, has reached paroxysmal degrees. However, contrary to the Hobbesian principle of '*Homo homini lupus*', such paroxysm is not the starting point but the point of arrival in the constitution of Identity. In Western history, Identity has always prevailed over otherness, difference and relative indifference has always prevailed over non-indifference, relations among individuals belonging to the same genus, with ever more restricted responsibilities, have always prevailed over relations without alibis among singularities outside genera.

Capitalism has constructed its socio-economic reproductive system on Identity, to the point of exasperation. This means to say that capitalist ideology has developed the subject's fear of the other – object - to paroxysmal degrees, ever more limiting and attenuating the attitude of fear for the other. A paradox connected with globalisation today in its current phase of development is that social relations emerge as relations among individuals who are separate from each other, reciprocally indifferent to each other. The relation to the other is suffered as a necessity for the sake of achieving one's own private interests. And exclusive preoccupation with one's own Identity, with one's own difference indifferent to the differences of others, increases fear of the other understood as fearing the other. Following this type of logic, the community is the passive result of the interests of Identity that are indifferent to each other. Indeed, the community so construed presents itself as a compact Identity only as long as its interests require cohesion and unification.

The egological community, the community of selves forming the Identity of each one of us presents the same type of sociality. This is sociality founded upon relations of reciprocal indifference among differences and identities. Such a condition results from and at once is evidenced by separation between public behavior and private behavior in the same individual subject, separation and mutual indifference among roles, competencies, tasks, languages, among responsibilities in the same individual, in the same subject, separation viewed as the 'normal' or 'standard' way of conforming to the social system that the subject belongs to.

Limitations on individual responsibility, limitations of an ethical-normative, juridical and political order, behavior regulated by the laws of equal exchange, functions fixed by roles and social position, distinctions among individual identities sanctioned by law, identities and differences whose sphere of freedom and imputability is at once delimited and guaranteed by law: none of this will succeed in undoing the intricate tangle between self and other, in eliminating the inherent asymmetry in the relationship between self and other, in impeding obsession for the other, in ending involvement, in avoiding substitution.

Responsibility for others has a dual orientation: the other is elevated and taken upon one's own shoulders, so to say, producing an asymmetrical situation. As Levinas states, the person I must answer for is also the person I must answer to. I must answer to the person whom I must answer for. Responsibility in the face of the person I am responsible for: responsible for a face that regards me, for freedom.

Beyond the verse of the Holy Scriptures

As mantained by Derrida in his 1963 essay on Levinas (see Derrida 1980), the philosophy of Levinas does have not the character of Jewish theology or mysticism. On the contrary, it is a critique of theology and mysticism. It is not a dogma, a religion, nor a morality. Levinas' thought does not resort to Jewish texts as in the case of one who appeals to an authority. He avails himself of the experience gathered in these texts, that is, experience of the other, experience of what in experience is mainly irreducible, that is, the other human. Levinas rejects the appellation 'Jewish thinker', understood as designating a thought founded uniquely on the Jewish tradition and on the authority of Jewish religion rather than on philosophical critique. In the same way, he denies being a 'religious thinker', if this signifies that his philosophic conception is founded on some revealed truth.

Responding to Poirié (1987) who asks whether Levinas considers himself a 'Jewish thinker', Levinas says:

> A philosophic truth cannot be based on the authority of the verse, even if one may find some suggestions in the verses, may take a religious text, for instance the Bible, as starting point for the analysis and research. But if you formulate the question differently asking me whether the Bible is essential to thought, I answer: yes (Poirié 1987: 110 and 113; my translation).

The philosophic sense of the verse consists in its capability to signify beyond the letter, to signify more than it says. Beyond the verse is its reference beyond plain meaning, beyond the word as instrument necessary for knowledge and maintenance of an objective and political order. In Scripture, language is vowed to the other, it co-ordinates me with the other. The word commands and vows me to the other. It brings into question my good conscience. It is a subversion of constituted order, of being 'that is how things stand', in which self-care and good conscience satisfy their need of justification. Its contribution to an unprejudiced philosophic attitude lies in its vocation to bring into question, to put in a critical position, it lies in its disposition to crisis and criticism.

In the beyond of the verse, which is beyond being, is expressed the presence or contraction of the finite in the finite. Surplus is openness to other, is expression before words, *ante litteram*, by which my responsibility for the other is called upon, a responsibility in which my Ego arises because my Ego is the complex of my replies to the other. Language which has become Holy Scripture signifies from the face of the

other, hidden from sight yet unforgettable. In this implication of the responsibility for the other, the writing of Holy Scripture is always prescriptive and ethical, a word which commands and vows to the other. It is, says Levinas, a holy writing before being a sacred text:[6]

> Beyond what it [the language of Holy Scripture] wants me to know, it co-ordinates me with the other to whom I speak; it signifies in every discourse from the face of the other, hidden from sight yet unforgettable: from the expression before words my responsibility-for-the-other is called upon, deeper than evocation of any images, a responsibility in which arise my replies. […] A word that is disproportionate to the political discourse, extending beyond information – a break, in the being that I am, of my good conscience of being-there. […] it brings into question the 'self-care' that is natural to beings, essential to the esse of beings. Consequently, there is a subversion of this esse, as dis-inter-es[se]tedness in the etymological sense of the word (1994a: xii).

Levinas (1960) stresses the laicism in Judaic thought, in which, the relationship between man and God is an ethical relationship with the other, before all theology or mythology. In addition:

> The Bible […] is a book that leads us not towards the mystery of God, but towards the human tasks of man. Monotheism is a humanism. Only simpletons made it into a theological arithmetic. The books in which this humanism is inscribed await their humanists. The task for those who wish to continue Judaism consists in having these books opened (1997: 275).

According to Levinas, Jewish humanism marks a break with a certain conception of the Sacred. It does not exalt a sacred power, a *numen* triumphing over other numinous powers. Jewish humanism neither unifies nor hierarchizes the numerous and numinous gods, but it denies them. Consequently Levinas goes as far as to say that as regards the Divine which it incarnates, Jewish humanism 'is merely atheism' (1997: 15).

Judaism, Christianity and Islam

The commandments 'You shall not kill' and 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' open a way through western philosophical reflection which leads to the question of alterity considered starting from the face of the other, from my responsibility for the other. This relation, says Levinas, is *anarchic* with regard to any

archè, any principle, law, decision which presupposes the individual Identity of the self, or the collective Identity of a community, a State. At all times, without beginning, cause, principle, the I is responsible for the other, in a relationship of peace that precedes rather than follows legislative justice, human rights, the light of reason (which one may lose, and which includes State reason) – that precedes rather than follows politics and war.

If we assume the prefabricated categories of sociology and politology, politics, force, and war appear as the sole resorts. This is the case – says Levinas *in The Time of the Nations* – of the Hebrew question and the problem of Arab-Israeli conflict, which are both interpreted in terms of territorial occupations, partitions, and balance of power. According to Levinas this perspective is limited and it loses touch with peace as a concept exceeding purely political thought and belonging to Jewish tradition (1994b: 1-8, 167-190).

Holy Scripture communicates the message of living together beyond the merely political concept of peace because it commands a relationship overstepping the ethnical or national boundaries of community. It appeals to a fundamental peace as a relationship with the other as other, with the foreign, the stranger, which is any other human being for any self. This congenital ethical and not conceptual universality of the Jewish spirit, deposited in the riches of Scripture and rabbinical literature, is the excellence or a strange and uncomfortable privilege of an exceptional message which compels obligations towards the other not demanding such obligation in return. This uncomfortable privilege of the Jewish people is what the awareness of being chosen is. Nevertheless, Levinas observes, "in the eyes of nations and in our own eyes", this awareness of the chosen people "happens to take on appearances of an irremediable particularism, a petitioning nationalism". And he adds: "This is a misunderstanding held in general opinion and a misunderstanding among ourselves" (1994a: 198-199). According to Hebraism God comes to mind in the face of the other, "and this produces a guilty conscience" (1994b: 111). Consequently all God's commandments concern the relationship to the other, which prevents the subject from resting with a clear conscience in accord with being. Through the face of others the word of God concerns and awakes me producing an uneasy feeling of having infringed on someone else's territory in positing myself (1994b: 111). In Hebraism, alliance with God is based on obligations to the other man who is inevitably our neighbour:

> My responsibility for the other man; the paradoxical and contradictory responsibility for a foreign freedom – going, according to an expression of the Tamuldic tractate (Sota 37 B), to the point of responsibility for his responsibility

> – does not arise from a respect destined to have the universality of a principle, nor from evidence. My responsibility is the exceptional relationship in which the Same can be concerned by the Other without the Other being assimilated to the Same. […] To the crisis of meaning that is attested by the 'dissemination' of verbal signs which the signified no longer succeeds in dominating, since it would only be its illusion and ideological ruse, there is opposed the meaning prior to 'things said', repelling words, and incontestable in the nakedness of the face, the proletarian destitution of the other, and in the offence of the Talmud who already knew a time in which language had eroded the significations it was supposed to carry, when they spoke of a world in which prayers cannot pierce the sky, for all the heavenly doors are closed except that through which the tears of the injured pass (1998: 13).

In a paper included in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (1997), Levinas stresses the long historical collaboration between Jews, Christians and Muslims – Mediterranean neighbours – joined by monotheism even if serious misunderstandings, dissents, discords, and conflicts separate them and oppose them to one to another. And monotheism is not an 'arithmetics of the Divine', but is precisely the word that cannot help but hear, and cannot help but answer: hear the other man and answer him. One man is absolutely like another man beneath the variety of cultures and historical traditions. Islam, similarly to Judaism and Christianity, has united innumerable peoples and races and is one of the principal factors involved in the constitution of human solidarity.

Monotheism, says Levinas, "is a school of xenophilia and anti-racism" (1997: 178). But the specificity of monotheism is in making one man non-indifferent to another and bringing him to reply. Monotheism incites to believe in the power of words devoid of rhetoric or diplomacy and in the efficacy of truth. And Levinas adds:

> Pious thoughts and generous words. I hear you say! I know that we can no longer believe in words, for we can no longer speak in this tormented world. We can no longer speak, for no one can begin his discourse without immediately bearing witness to something other than what he says. By denouncing mystification, they already seem to remystify.
>
> But we who are Jews, Muslims and Christians, we, the monotheists, we break the spell, we speak words that shake themselves free of their distorting context, we speak words that begin in the person who utters them, we rediscover the word that penetrates, the word that unties, the prophetic word (1997: 180).

The monotheism of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, obliges me to enter a discourse that unites me to the other. On the basis of Greek Logic, dialogue and argumentation, an accord between interlocutors is possible, but – observes Levinas (1997: 180) – there is a condition: our interlocutor must agree to hear and to reply. No argumentation can oblige an other to enter a discourse, nor can Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction function if the other does not hear, and remains silent.

Levinas' conception of the relation between Judaism and Christianity is connected to his reading *The Star of Redemption* (*Der Stern Der Erlösung*, 1921) by philosopher Franz Rosenzweig. Levinas attaches great importance to Rosenzweig's thesis on the philosophical possibility of thinking of truth as being accessible in two forms: Jewish and Christian (1994b: 150-160). Jewish commandments and Christian mercy are two forms of the same possibility of thinking. Levinas believes in the positivity of the relation between Judaism and Christianity, i.e. in their possibility of dialogue and symbiosis (1994b: 162-166).

Hitlerism as an essential possibility of Western reason

The moral conscience is the basis of cognitive consciousness and awareness of one's own self. In our terminology this is not a clean conscience which is produced through recourse to alibis towards the needs, requests and rights of others, and which is consequently a closed conscience, deaf and indifferent to others. The moral conscience is the effective and only access to the outside. Without this possibility of a way out, which is a way of an ethical nature, the I is confined to his own Identity, nailed to himself, reduced to his wretched and mean interests. As such the I is a closed self, conceited and narrow-minded, mistaking the situation to which s/he is bound for the very foundation of him/herself. Identity without alterity is impotent to retain the power to shake off the bewitchment of being and determining consciousness, being which does not appear foreign to Identity. Any possibility of discussion, criticism, scruple, guilty conscience, is deleted by total adhesion of the I to Identity, to being.

Nazism is the most evident proof of the situation in which loss of the human condition is consequent to the truth that the subject reaches the human condition only as a result of assuming responsibility for the other human, his/her neighbour, even if a foreigner. In his article 'Reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism' (1990), published in French in 1934, that is, shortly after Hitler came to power, Levinas expresses the conviction that the source of the bloody barbarism of National socialism neither lies in some contingent anomaly within human reasoning, nor in some accidental ideological

misunderstanding. This source is an essential possibility of Western reason itself into which we can be led by its logic.

This possibility is inscribed in the conception of being concerned with being, closed in its Identity. Such a possibility still threatens the closed self and closed society. These include the subject who believes freedom is its prerogative rather than a result of negotiations with others, the subject who thinks freedom is the freedom to buy and sell, and the correlative society which, in the name of liberalism and democracy, imposes itself and its interests upon others. 'Simplistic' 'philosophy of Hitlerism' goes beyond the philosophy of Hitlerians. "It questions the very principle of a civilization" (1990: 64) as Levinas states in the Prefatory note of 1990 to the English translation of his article – and is inscribed, as a permanent threat, in Western philosophy, allergic as it is to alterity. Its meaning does not show up in its opposition to liberalism. We may comprehend the contradiction between Western humanistic universalism and racist particularism if we go back to their source.

Hitlerism is not just opposed to a given point in liberal culture or to a particular dogma concerning democracy and parliamentary government. Similarly to any form of explicit or hypocritical suppression of alterity and its reduction to Identity, Hitlerism is opposed to the very humanity of the human being. Hitlerism is not incompatible with universalism. It involves a modification of universality. Universality becomes expansion, and the expansion of a force is very different from the propagation of an idea. Hitlerism brings with it its own form of universalization: war and conquest (1990: 70-71).

Liberalism and democracy are powerless in the face of nazism and fascism, if they do not overcome their own indifference and allergy to the other human. In fact, liberalism and democracy are born to defend individuals against tyranny, despotism and liberticide, but they are generally concerned with defence of the rights of the ego, rather than with the rights of the other, drawn up in defence of the members of the same community rather than of those who do not belong to it.

The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other

The title of Levinas' essay 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other' (1993), is symptomatic of the possibility of contradiction between claiming the rights of Identity as the rights of man and the rights of alterity, as the rights of the other man.

According to Levinas, since the eighteenth century, rights, understood in a rigorous and almost technical sense, claimed under the expression 'rights of man', are based on an original sense of rights which springs from responsibility for the other man. The rights of man belong to an original relationship with the other before any legislation and any justification. In this sense, they are *a priori*, independent of any initiative and any power, but also independent of the roles, functions and merits of individuals. They are prior to all permit, concession, authority, entitlement, prior to all tradition, all jurisprudence, all privilege, award or title, prior to all will and reason, but also prior to all theology (1993: 117). These rights, that do not need to be conferred, express the *absolute* alterity of the human individual, i.e. an alterity independent of all relative relationships, of all reference, of all membership to a social community, a social corps, corporation, etc. This absolute alterity is uniqueness beyond individuality as the specimen of a kind, as the member of a genus, of a class, of a group; it is uniqueness prior to any distinctive sign, uniqueness of the I responsible in the first person for the other.

Thus original responsibility for the other human, in which, as mentioned according to Levinas, lies primordial peace, is the real foundation of the 'rights of man'. These do not depend on the scales of justice. Limited by justice, the rights of man emerge as forced, compulsory rights, and the peace they inaugurate among men remains uncertain and forever precarious: "A bad peace. Better, indeed, than a good war!" (1993: 122).

Like real peace, human rights become repressed and abstract rights are obtained from the power of the State, by politics and its strategies and cunning dealings. Limited by justice the rights of man remain bounded within a community and connected with peace that the obedience to the law, imposed by force, obtains and ensures. Instead, as founded in original non-indifference and responsibility for the other man, the rights of man correspond, says Levinas, "to a vocation *outside* the State, disposing, in a political society, of a kind of extra-territoriality" (1993: 123) and independence. In a liberal State that guarantees this independence, justice is founded on the rights of man, and not vice versa. At the least tendentially, the rights of man and the rights of the other man should coincide. But liberalism and democracy are powerless in the face of fascism if the rights of man defended by their justice are not also, at least tendentially, the rights of the other man.

Like justice, freedom cannot be assumed as foundational to the rights of man, not only because freedom is itself one of man's rights, but also because it presupposes responsibility for the other man and is based itself on the prior peace of the relationship

of one non-interchangeable individual to another, of unique to unique, of incomparable to incomparable. In other words, freedom is itself based on the relationship of the one *facing* the other, that is, of the I *for* the other.

My own freedom starts in relation to the other who appeals to my irreducible and non-transferable responsibility. My freedom and rights, that is, the freedom and rights of any Identity, manifest themselves in non-indifference toward the other, in responsibility for the other, for the rights of alterity, prior to manifesting themselves as my freedom and rights, that is, as the freedom and rights of a particular Identity. These rights and this responsibility can never be exhausted given that it is not possible to extinguish our debt to others.

Notes

[1] Emmanuel Levinas (Haunas 1906 - Paris 1995), one of the most significant philosophers of the twentieth century, has profoundly contributed to semiotico-linguistic problematics by dealing with the question of alterity in terms of the critique of ontology. His work represents an original contribution, alongside Hartman, Block, Heidegger, Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Bakhtin to that multifaceted movement in philosophy concerned with the refoundation of ontology. Such refoundation contrasts with philosophies hegemonized by the logic of knowledge and stated reductively in epistemological terms. Levinas developed his thought in dialogue with Husserl and Heidegger whose writings he was the first to introduce into France after having followed their courses in Fribourg between 1928 and 1929.

[2] The destructive character of the global communication system – 'destructive character' is an expression introduced by Walter Benjamin (1972) to describe capitalist society at the dawn of nazism – is evident in the destruction of the environment, in the increase of poverty, in structural unemployment, in exploitation of the South of the World by the North of the World, and in the unjust distribution of wealth between a quarter of the world population inhabiting the developed world, on the one hand, and all the rest of humanity inhabiting the underdeveloped world, on the other. Consequently, life on the planet is in serious danger. But the strongest expression of the destructive character of capitalism in this phase in the development of global communication is war.

[3] The meaning of 'ethics' differs here from the received one. We may say with Jacques Derrida (1999) that in Levinas "Yes, ethics before and beyond ontology, the State, or politics, but also ethics beyond ethics". Levinas bequeaths to us an 'immense treatise of hospitality', a meditation on the welcome offered to the other.

[4] The English translation of this passage appears in 'Meaning and sense' in Levinas 1987: 75-107). In this translation, *Oeuvre* is translated as 'work'.
[5] In Levinas the French word '*conscience*' is used for both consciousness and conscience. Bad consciousness is ethical conscience.
[6] On the opposition sacred/holy in Levinas, see Levinas (1977).

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The I's double-answer

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I should like to begin this short response to Augusto Ponzio's cogent redaction of Levinas' oeuvre by focusing on the more specialized sense of *oeuvre* Ponzio calls attention to several times in his essay. Quoting Levinas, he captures it as that "movement of the Same towards the Other which never returns to the Same": the drive towards exteriority, the outside, which leaves behind the known precincts of *au-deça* for the elsewhere of *au-delà*. But rather than interpret this gesture in its "plain" sense, in the direction of what Levinas calls the curved space of ethical encounter (where such space is exposed, effectuated by the asymmetric relation itself, and curvilinear because of the twin dimensions of height and anachronicity), I wish to divert it slightly elsewhere - an *elsewhere* in line with the Abrahamic rather than Odyssean thrust of Levinas' own oeuvre. (Or perhaps that work is more faithfully described as traversing the cusp, "Odysseus/Abraham").[1] Put more plainly, using this trope of Ponzio's as *point d'appui*, I want to speak about Levinas in *his* twin dimensions as writer and as reader, and the ethics of reading - and writing about - Levinas, in turn.

There is a hint in that direction very early in Prof. Ponzio's essay when he cites the "waves on a beach" figure from Derrida's 'Violence and metaphysics' (1967), evocative of Levinas' compellingly fugal prose-style; and there are further connections to be made with the Professor's own substantial work on dialogue in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (see also Newton 1995). But in the context of 'The I questioned', such hints and implications remain just that, a Saying in advance or on the hither side of the Said. Here, conversely, I want to inflect Derrida's insight more explicitly in the direction of that "separate study merited in itself" and still unwritten, of Levinasian *ecriture* and *lecture* as their own deeply complex ethical performances.

In a later essay, 'At this very moment in this work here I am' (1980), what Derrida had earlier identified as Levinas' penchant for repetition or seriality is tied to a coefficient trend of self-interruption - a stylistic caduceus (rhetoric in the service of ethics), of which Jill Robbins has remarked, "The tying together of cut threads, the knotting of interruptions, characterizes Levinas' writing" (1999: xviii). Robbins refers her own cross-grain treatment of the literary Levinas and the literary *in* Levinas to the paradox of "radical generosity" as a species of ingratitude. In 'The trace of the other', Levinas

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suggested that because "gratitude would in fact be the *return* of the movement to its origin," a work compels itself to be altered or put in question, and thus "requires an *ingratitude* of the other" (1986: 349).[2] Even more pertinent to what I wish to sketch in very preliminary form here is Nidra Poller's "Translator's Note" to the volume *Unforeseen History* about the dynamics of *translating* Levinas:

> I think we can, without stretching the point, apply Levinas' thought to the process of translation: a passage from Same to Other that is never a loop back to the Same. ... Isn't translation the gift of recognizing the face (*visage*) of a text, of attaining what is eternal and divine, beneath and beyond the text, and carrying it intact into another language? Bringing it to its senses? (2004: xxvii)[3]

In suggesting an ethics of translation, Poller captures Levinas' challenge to Buffon's adequation of selfhood and style according to the logic of identity, "Ces choses sont hors de l'homme le style est l'homme même". For even at the stylistic level, the level of idiom, syntax, timbre, trope, and sentence-shape, Levinas engages himself in an insistent "outward bound", his lyrical filigree a kind of *flanerie*: "Levinas strolls. .. Levinas the writer follows his thought as it ambles (but never aimlessly)". Accordingly, Poller announces her own consequent answerability - her task - as a translator who, after the model of Abraham, is bidden to "go for [her]self" (Gen. 12:1) through an after-trek that is also, in Benjamin's term, an afterlife reanimating a translated text[4] - "What a challenge for me! To walk along with Levinas, listening with all my senses, getting lost but not losing track" [xxviii]. And evidently, part of getting lost - the middle-ground or middle-voice between "translate" and "betray"? - means allowing features of Levinas' thought or discourse to remain in shadow, inexplicit, nicely counterpointing Maurice Blanchot's estimation of the man as "our clandestine companion" (1986: 41).

That said, I want to suggest that Derrida's wave-metaphor, if applied "to the whole corpus of Levinas' work" (p. 2), risks flattening, even totalizing pronounced differences in genre and intent. In addition to the schism between explicitly philosophical (Greek) and Judaic (Hebrew, but also Aramaic, French, and German) texts,[5] a partition that some readers of Levinas wish to elide and others to preserve, there are essays that do the work of reason and theory (even if they contest the totalizing thrust of such constative modalities), and those that are more discursive, more liberally performative (such as the essays collected in *Proper Names* and *Outside the Subject*). Put more pointedly, does the literary unproblematically *translate* the philosophical in Levinas' work, as well as vice versa? Even 'Reality and its shadow',[6] the early essay after the brief excursus on *oeuvre*), while it certainly may be deployed

as continuous with the critique of identity and ontology Levinas mounted in the *Collected Philosophical Papers* and the longer philosophical works, is saying something very particular, and very vexed, about the phenomenalist domain of art in contradistinction to the curved space of ethics - Hellenic philosophy's as well as Hebrew Scripture's permanently provocative semiotic Other and not-so-clandestine companion.[7]

Robbins, Edith Wyschogrod, and Gerald Bruns, among others, have dealt at length with this arresting and troubling piece (Pierre Hayat, in his introduction to *Unforeseen History*, calls it "severe, corrosive, disconcerting"), and I mention it here in passing only to suggest that one consistent challenge the "knotted" quality of Levinas' oeuvre presupposes is to leave entangled what cannot be disentangled but also to disentangle (differentiate, distinguish) what can. As space limitations prevent much more than tying a thread or two of my own, I will therefore pivot towards a conclusion with a few words about two of Levinas' Others, two figures from outside the subject who introduce a more refractory instance of exteriority: Arthur Rimbaud and Marcel Proust.

The latter is discussed in an essay published one year before 'Reality and its shadow" entitled The Other in Proust' that treats what it names *le mystère de l'autre*. This is that essay's terminal sentence: "But Proust's most profound teaching - if indeed poetry teaches - consists in situating the real in a relation with what forever remains other - with the other as absence and mystery, in rediscovering this relation also within the very intimacy of the *I* and in inaugurating a dialectic that breaks definitively with Parmenides" (1996: 104-105). The qualification between the dashes sounds the sobering note about the distance (perhaps untraversable) art has to travel before it stands under the summons of ethics and *its* shadow; yet, even after assigning ambiguity to the Proustian "poetry" which "creates" an object, rather than "expresses" it, (as do more denotative discourses like philosophy), Levinas allows that literature, too, has the capacity to forego recuperative Odyssean circuits for Abrahamic ex-cendence: "... in Proust ... the *I* is already separate from its state, in the very intimacy in which it normally stands with itself, like a stick immersed in water, breaking while remaining whole" (1996: 101).

What kind of reader of Proust is Levinas? The answer exceeds the confines of this response, but in certain respects, he is similar to the one for whom Talmudic discourse reflects back to him his recurrent and signature concerns with alterity and outsideness, with ethics and the face. A perhaps too-generous reader, an Odyssean and reflexive reader, a reader who hears and makes resonate in the texts he annotates or refracts the

infinite insistence of waves on a beach, return and repetition, where the otherwise-than-Levinasian (e.g., S. Y. Agnon, Paul Celan, Fyodor Dostoevsky,[8] Vassily Grossman, Edgar Allan Poe) *illustrates*, *analogizes*, or *thematizes* the Levinasian. The Proust essay is only the first of several dotting the landscape of Levinas' oeuvre that show us Levinas *reading*, and each one of them traces, if often problematically, the movement called "*oeuvre* ... exposition - at a risk - to alterity" (p. 6).

That movement is perhaps never more provocative than in the first sentence (after the preface) of *Totality and Infinity*: "'The true life is absent'". The text continues,

> But we are in the world. Metaphysics arises and is maintained in this alibi. It is turned toward the 'elsewhere' and the 'otherwise' and the 'other' ... it appears as a movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us, whatever be the yet unknown lands that bound it or that hides it from view, from an 'at-home' which we inhabit, toward an alien outside-of-oneself, toward a yonder (1991: 33).

Totality and Infinity's first sentence is in quotation marks because it cites, without naming, Arthur Rimbaud (or more accurately, Rimbaud speaking through the voice of Paul Verlaine). Thus, we might say, does poetry, contra Plato, invade the precincts of philosophy at their very commencement. To that extent, whatever Levinas' intentions for it, and the ways in which it either justifies those intentions or not (ably analyzed by Robbins (1999: 117-131)), an enclosure (an unattributed quotation inserted into an encompassing text), marks the paradox of an opening: Rimbaud reading Levinas alongside Levinas reading Rimbaud, Odysseus (re)inscribed in Abraham. Let me conclude by glossing such an irony with a final citation of my own, from Giorgio Agamben's reading of Kafka's 'Before the law':

> If it is true that the door's very openness constituted ... the invisible power and specific "force" of the law, then it is possible to imagine that the entire behavior of the man from the country is nothing other than a complicated and patient strategy to have the door closed in order to interrupt the law's being in force (1999: 174).

When questioned, will that man from the country - either on his way back or never to return - announce himself as Abraham, or will he do so, incognito, like Odysseus? For that is one of the permanent fascinations, and ethical tensions in reading, in questioning and being questioned by, Emmanuel Levinas. Call it a patient waiting in the face of closure that produces interruption. Or else an insistent "panting," like that

inspired figure from the final pages of *Otherwise Than Being* that promises the unsaying, or re-spiration, of every said: "a fission of the subject beyond lungs. .. a further deep breathing even in the breath cut short by the wind of alterity" (1998: 180).

Notes

[1] Silvia Benso offers a delicate account of that divide: "In this chronological reading, Abraham is not a non-Ulysses (negation in which the other is constituted in terms of the same), but a Ulysses whose circular nature has been perforated and othered by the insertion of the other, which now ethically constitutes him; Abraham is an otherwise-than-Ulysses" (2000, 13). See also Ward, 'Kenosis and the problem of analogy' and Burggraeve, 'From the self to the other . . .' in this issue.

[2] In both "At this moment in this work here I am" and *Given Time* (1992), Derrida analyzes the gift in its "impossibility," outside of the circular economy of exchange, restitution, and *rendez-vous*, and according to an alternate rhythm of interruption, asymmetric response, and non-reciprocation. The polarity between performative and constative energies and the double-bind it seems to pose for Levinas' writings is something Jean-Francois Lyotard addresses in "Levinas' logic" (1986).

[3] One will recognize certain affinities to Walter Benjamin's influential essay, 'The task of the translator' (1969), which has generated a healthy literature of commentary. See in particular, Jacobs (1999) and Handelman (1991), and also compare Derrida (1998) and Žižek (1997).

[4] "... no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife - which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and renewal of something living - the original undergoes a change ... Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own" (1969: 73). (Cf. the tropes of *dénucleation, éttonement,* and especially *pneumatisme* in Levinas' *Otherwise Than Being* (1998)).

[5] By which I mean not just the hermeneutic commentaries in *Talmudic Readings, In The Time of Nations* (1994a)*, Beyond the Verse* (1994b)*,* and *Difficult Freedom* (1990)*,* but also the more contemporary and topical pieces on French-Jewish, German-Jewish, and Israeli culture and letters.

[6] First published in *Temps Modernes* 38 (1948), and republished in *Les Imprévus de l'histoire* (1994c) in the company of three other essays that detail Levinas' engagement with Sartre's existentialism and aesthetics.

[7] As Robbins notes, even the terms Levinas favours threaten to cross the boundaries they articulate: 'literature' can denote the national, the modern, the secular, the generic, but it can also signify the Biblical and the Rabbinic. (Here, by the way, lies one of several crossroads between Levinas and Bakhtin, as it locates the question of intertextual dialogue common to both thinkers. And "dialogue", despite Prof. Ponzio's appositional formulation on page 9, may well be otherwise than dialectic, as per both Levinas' essay on dialogue (1998) and the following late observation by Bakhtin: "Dialogue and dialectics. Take dialogue and remove the voices (the particular voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualizing ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness - and that's how you get dialectics" (1986: 29)).

[8] And here, conversely, is one of the very instructive gaps between Levinas and Bakhtin, as the latter's more textually sensitive discussion of *The Brothers Karamazov* (Levinas' premier novelistic example) so perspicuously and trenchantly shows. See Bakhtin (1984).

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A critique of reason and an autochthonous heteronomy

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How can we give an overall characterization of Ponzio's essay on Levinas? First of all, by qualifying the preceding question. The essay is not primarily 'on' Levinas, but rather it paraphrases Levinas' texts as they pertain to a specific theme: that of the "reason of identity". The overall message, baldly stated, is that the solution to the world's problems is to be sought in an ethics of unilateral peace at the individual or personal level. If fire can be fought with fire, war cannot be with war.

Ponzio begins by depicting contemporary reality in the Western world in terms of "concrete abstractions" a term reminiscent of Evald Ilyenkov's analysis of Marx's *Das Capital.* Given the fact that Levinas' analyses are traversed by the dichotomy between being and beyond-being, the notion of the concrete abstraction to characterize phenomena within the realm of being does not seem to do violence to the Levinasian dispensation. War is the face of 'reality', then, assuming that Ponzio's reality is something akin to Levinas' realm of being. Of course one might object that reality for Levinas would seem to belong to the metaphysical realm of otherwise-than-being; but in fact Levinas himself tends to use reality in the limited sense of 'hard reality', a formulation he calls redundant, thereby indicating that he associates the term with the experiential domain. Reality seems to be used more or less interchangeably in this essay with 'the World'.

In the early part of his essay, Ponzio gives us his own rather dramatic setting, the tragic world doomed to repetition in the "processes of social reproduction today", and then introduces a different logic, the logic of Otherness, which has the potential of saving us from that impasse. He situates this Levinasian Otherness within the context of many other contemporary thinkers who were forces in the thought-world of Levinas: Hegel, Sartre, Heidegger, Rosenzweig and Buber. One feels only a mild discomfort in the juxtaposition of these names, the authors of such distinct philosophies, since they are here used merely as shorthand for Levinas' reading of them: Hegel's totality, for example, Rosenzweig's critique of it, Buber's symmetry of

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the I-Thou relation, as opposed to Levinas' revised version of the dialogue as non-reversible, and so on.

It is the fact that Levinas develops a level of discourse situated below that of previous linguistic and psychological analyses, and one that is only expressible in ethical (or proto-ethical) terms, that is of particular interest to Ponzio. The notion of proximity, the '*oeuvre'* or 'work' (Levinas drops this latter term after the publication of *La signification et le sens* in 1964) and responsibility lead to a reformation of the ego: the birth of a non-egotistical ego or unselfish self.

I will studiously avoid in this brief account any paraphrasing of Ponzio's (quite able) paraphrasing of Levinas, as obviously superfluous. I will, however, point out a few occasions in which I believe Levinas would have been uncomfortable with the way Ponzio puts things. In characterizing Levinas' "said", Ponzio enumerates the traits of "self-referentiality, ambiguity, equivocation, contradiction". True enough, but it is hard to square "equivocation" with Levinas' insistence on the sincerity and straightforwardness of the face, and the face includes the mouth, the speaking face. It may be that Ponzio should have given separate treatment to the "trace" (p. 14), that passage of the infinite in the realm of being, and not have conflated it with the "saying". Furthermore, the inclusion of "creativity" in Ponzio's list would seem better suited to Merleau-Ponty's 'speaking word/spoken word' distinction than to that of Levinas' 'saying/said'. It must be pointed out in passing that Ponzio misquotes Levinas in having the face say "You shall not steal". The correct quote is of course "You shall not kill." (That this is simply an oversight is indicated by Ponzio's later use of the expression "You shall not kill" in the same context).

Ponzio is at his strongest in prolonging Levinas' meditations on war and the "good conscience" with which it is waged, as opposed to the "bad conscience" (which is really good) that makes us wage preventive peace at our own expense. And Ponzio actualizes the dialectic by introducing an allusion to the current 'war on terror'. He is also one of the rare commentators on Levinas to highlight the concluding pages of both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* in which the consequences of Levinas' philosophy, which are far from being merely philosophical, are explicated.

The motivated, necessary birth of justice out of proximity, the introduction of the third party, the necessity of social institutions and their dangers - all this is traced with convincing dedication and accuracy. It is the acute sense of the importance of Levinas' ethical thought beyond the strictly philosophical precinct that gives Ponzio's work its value.

I shall round off my remarks with a question. It is a question that I address not to Ponzio, but to Levinas - though it is through reading Ponzio that the question has come to a head. In his portrayal of Levinas' contrast between the philosophical discourse of the Greeks and the prophetic discourse of the monotheisms (Jewish, Christian and Islamic), Levinas points out that Plato recognizes, in a well-known passage from the *Republic* (327C) that all philosophical argument is dependent upon the other's willingness to hear and respond. This is indeed the principle of the difference between persuasion and force. The implication seems to be that in the monotheistic operation there can be no non-listening. But such language evokes an unacceptably forceful proselytizing, which is very far indeed from the spirit of Levinas' work. We therefore should revisit the text from Levinas in question here, to try to resolve the difficulty.

The text in question is titled 'Monotheism and language'. It was originally a speech given at the French Students' Union at the Mutualité in 1959. In it, Levinas characterizes monotheism as being a force for the recognition that beneath cultural particularity man is essentially one and the same. It is this conception of a moral universality of beneath contingent cultural differences that Levinas retains throughout his later philosophy. Further, we should take note of the "beneath." The level at which the monotheisms address man is not that of theology, which could hardly be spoken of as "the word that unites" (p. 35) but that of the proto-ethical. We have here, before the letter, an example of what Levinas will later call "the saying", an absolutely straightforward language of proximity not yet subject to the vagaries of the "the said". Further obscuring the discussion is the circumstance that Ponzio quotes from the Seán Hand translation, unfortunately the only one available. Hand has omitted an important sentence in the passage quoted by Ponzio, which I supply in italics.

Pious thoughts and generous words, I hear you say! I know that we can no longer believe in words, for we can no longer speak in this tormented world. We can no longer speak, for no one can begin his discourse without immediately bearing witness to something other than what he says. *Psychoanalysis and sociology lie in wait to ambush the interlocutors*. By denouncing mystification, they already seem to remystify (Levinas 1990: 180).

Clearly, then, Levinas rejects psychoanalytic and sociological efforts to rid language of the contingent and relative distortions of what he will later call 'saying,' since they begin – and end - in the domain of the *esse* in which all communication is, at its best and worst, a betraying of 'sense,' or *sens*, as opposed to *signification*, the latter term designating by stipulation the cultural level of communication. What the monotheisms

have contributed is the recognition and addressing of universal man at the level of saying.

Ponzio's essay closes with an examination of the Levinasian understanding of the rights of man as essentially the rights of the other, and this is the logical end-point of his theme, 'The I questioned'. The "I" in fact fails felicitously in its recurrence to self, is short-circuited in its return to identity, and becomes a candidate for the highest ethical realization of humanity, substitution for the other.

I am not convinced that Ponzio is justified in ascribing to Levinas the doctrine that "justice is founded on the rights of man and not vice versa". In the last part of Ponzio's piece, subtitled "The rights of man and the rights of the Other", Ponzio is right in equating the rights of man with the rights of the other man, but it does not appear to me that there are any grounds in Levinas' text for Ponzio to place the rights of man as the basis of justice and not the other way round. In fact, the term "rights" suggests that we are in precisely the same domain when we speak of justice and the rights of man. There is, to be sure, a basis or foundation for the rights of man *and* justice in Levinas, and that is the "extraterritoriality" of which Ponzio speaks: it is what Levinas terms "goodness" in the following formulation. "A bad conscience of justice! It knows it is not as just as the kindness that instigates it is good." A delicate and difficult formulation, in which justice approaches goodness as toward a limit. The restrictions placed upon justice in a plurality, which are by no means extraneous to its very nature, require endless adjustments. The modality or mood of such justice is uneasiness, fear for the other: a 'bad conscience'. If Ponzio were to substitute for "rights of man" or "rights of the other" such expressions as solicitude for the well-being of the other, care for the other, charity/love for the other, I would be more in agreement with his interpretation.

A propos of "extra-territoriality," it should be noted that Levinas first uses that term not as the domain of the bad conscience, the other-in-the-same, but rather as the locus of a nascent subjectivity, separate, happy and 'at home' in its interiority (cf. Levinas 1969: 131). It is not till 24 years later in "The rights of man and the rights of the Other" (Levinas 1993: 123) that it designates "a vocation outside the state", which Levinas likens to "that of prophecy in the face of the political powers of the Old Testament, a vigilance totally different from political intelligence . ...". The trajectory of this word suggests that we must take care not to sever the nascent self of the earlier Levinas from its later avatar qua other-in-the-same, the hollowed-out or selfless self.

Is Levinas to be understood primarily, as Ponzio portrays him, as a critic of Western reason? Does the 'psychism' as understood by Levinas have its reasons that Reason does not understand? Is Levinas not perhaps rather leading us away from reason in the direction of a new hermeneutics: a hearing of the commandment of God, leaving the ethical self the task of hearing this commandment in its own articulations, i.e. as prophetic word, of striving toward the realization of something on the order of what I shall dub oxymoronically an autochthonous heteronomy? But perhaps the point is not to choose, for if we do so, we may be led too far in a direction against which Ponzio rightly warns us (p. 32), that of theology and mysticism, clearly inimical to the Levinasian project.

Still, the point of view from which Ponzio has chosen to read Levinas is an interesting one, and could be pursued further. As Levinas often remarks, our tools of comprehension have been honed to the comprehension of being. While this is not, he argues, the entirety of the realm of meaningfulness, it is not to be rejected out of hand. While Kant's critique of reason aimed at the limitation of the latter's improvident ambitions, Levinas would renew and expand the power of reason -though in a direction quite different from the dialectical reason developed by Hegel. His method - emphasis, hyperbole, exaggeration! Consider the following footnote, in which Levinas reveals his view of formal logic, and his own method:

The significations that go beyond formal logic show themselves in formal logic, if only by the precise indication of the sense in which they break with formal logic. The indication is the more precise in the measure that this reference is conceived with a more rigorous logic. The myth of the subordination of all thought to the comprehension of being is probably due to this revealing function of coherence, whose lawlike character formal logic sets forth, and in which the divergency between signification and being is *measured*. ... It is the superlative, more than the negation of categories, which interrupts systems (Levinas 1981: 187 n.5).

It is true that Levinas' rejection of the logic of identity plays a more significant role in the development of Levinas' overall philosophy, especially in *Totality and Infinity*, than does this new assessment of formal logic. Nevertheless, this later critique (or at least limiting characterization) of formal logic belongs to the same problematic. What conjoins the two is doubtless the challenge opened up by the meaningful in the anarchic domain of the beyond-being. In describing the subjugation of the subject, Levinas must also convey a responsibility that increases as it is assumed, and a distance of proximity that increases with the approach; hence a new method of expression - which Levinas does not believe to lie entirely outside the reach of

phenomenology, and the possibility of finding a meaning beyond the reason of identity: the possibility of substitution.

It has been said that it is part of the nature of phenomenology to 'come after'. I believe Levinas recognized this. Ponzio gives the impression that there is a fight to the death between the logic of identity and some other logic, thereby giving the impression that Levinas was unaware of the absolute permanence of the weave of being in which the I is forever enmeshed. This would explain why the "bad conscience" is really the good one for Levinas, and why the ethical is not our natural penchant.

In the late 1960s, my students and I (we were almost the same age) would debate whether it was best to fight the system from within the system or to drop out. Most of us took the latter option, believing the work of saving society had to begin at least in an inner change, person by person, that could only begin by dropping the goals - the very categories - of an America that seemed unduly competitive, wasteful, aggressive and arrogant. *Mutatis mutandi*, doubtless we were looking for a Levinasian inspiration - an inner conversion that opened us inwardly to the Rabelaisian game of 'He who loses wins', a serious game, the rules of which were already being explored on the other side of the Atlantic by a philosopher whose name we had not yet heard.

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The defection of identity

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A certain conception of identity underlies the Western philosophical tradition and Emmanuel Levinas' attack on it is central to his whole philosophical trajectory. I will show briefly that this agenda governs from the outset the concern for transcendence as excendence that preoccupies him already in his 1935 essay 'On escape' and his 1947 book *Existence and Existents*. Even after Levinas dropped the term "excendence", the structure it named was retained, and when in 1968 he introduced the idea of "substitution", it fulfilled a quest begun thirty-three years earlier (Bernasconi 2005). But what was the motivation guiding Levinas as he pursued this trajectory? Once I have clarified this, it will be relatively easy for me to explain why I welcome Professor Augusto Ponzio's essay and yet, at the same time, am not without some reservations.

Levinas reveals the underlying motivation for his work in 'Reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism'. Published in 1934, it predates the essay 'On escape' by a year. Both texts employ the same evidence of a pain or nausea that one cannot escape, revealing that one is riveted to oneself, even while one aspires to break these chains (2003a: 55 and 1990b: 68). It is this evidence that leads Levinas to posit a duality of self and ego (*le moi*) in place of a logical or tautological conception of identity. However, this duality is still an identity, a self-reference, even if one perceives it as a type of duality because one needs – in one's pain, for example - to get out of oneself, to break the fact that the I is oneself (2003: 55). 'Reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism' makes clear that this conception is opposed the two dominant models of identity: a racial essentialism, represented by Hitlerism, and a liberal universalism, represented by France (1990b: 68-71). Essays written in the late 1930s confirm that Levinas understands his relation to Judaism in the same terms. For example, Hitlerian anti-Semitism makes it impossible for the Jew to flee Judaism: "The Jew is ineluctably riveted to his Judasim" (1991: 144).

The same guiding concern can be seen in Levinas' writings in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. In *Existence and Existents* he rejects the idealist conception of identity that remains tied to the logical idea of identity (that is to say, the detached liberal conception of identity) in favor of a focus on the event of identification of the subject, where the enchainment of the ego to the self is again revealed as a form of

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identity (2001: 88-89). At almost the same time, Levinas wrote an essay entitled 'Being Jewish' that used some of the same concepts and structures to describe Jewish identity. The experience of Hitlerian anti-Semitism leads the Jew to rediscover the irremissibility of his or her Jewish being: "one is not able to flee one's condition" (1947: 260).

If Levinas' early reflections on Jewish identity were written directly as a response to anti-Semitism, the brief essay from 1963, 'Means of identification', was shaped by the idea that Jewish identity was being clung to even though it was in a sense already lost. On that basis Levinas describes it as an identity that refers only to itself, that is not defined by attributes, and yet, whether one adheres to it or not, one is elected: "one is in Judaism as one is in oneself" (1990a: 50. Trans. Corrected). Nevertheless, that is not the end of the story. Jewish identity is described as inscribed in the Scriptures and is understood with reference to a sense of responsibility that echoes the philosophy of *Totality and Infinity*.

However, Levinas' most radical treatment of identity awaits the 1968 essay 'Substitution' that was reprinted with major revisions in 1974 in *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas here rehearses his critique of the traditional conception of identity as self-coincidence in order to open the way to that "defection of identity" that is "a for-the-other in the midst of identity" (1981: 153). This "identity aroused behind identification is an identity by pure election" (1981: 145). Similar ideas are presented in 'Without Identity'. He explicates "the impossible identity" in the following terms: "The difference that gapes between ego and self, the non-coincidence of the identical, is a thorough non-indifference with regard to men" (2003b: 66-67). As later lectures confirm, identity has come to mean my responsibility for the Other (2000: 20 and 110). In other words, the reference of identity to responsibility that we already noted with respect to Jewish identity, is now said of the self's identity in general. It is what he elsewhere calls "the soul": "The soul is the other within me, a sickness of identity, its being out of phase, its diachrony, gasping, shuddering" (1996: 103). Indeed, if the parallel was not clear enough, a 1977 essay, 'Revelation in the Jewish tradition', describes Jewish identity as "a pure insufficiency of identity, a mark of self-inequality" (1994: 149).

I have tried to show that Levinas, guided in part by his own experience of his Jewish identity, theorises the way in which one is never simply oneself, any more than one could ever simply *be* a Jew. One exists only in one's responsibility for the Other. This is not to be without identity in the way that a teapot might be without a handle. The sense in which a self or an Other might be without identity is like the saying (*le dire*)

be without the said (*le dit*) (1981: 45). The saying does not take place in the absence of a said. It takes place in the midst of the said, but transcends it (see Bernasconi 1990). Levinas' achievement is to have radically transformed our thinking of identity while retaining a sense in which one might still be able to speak of something like a Jewish identity. The problem is that what he says about Jewish identity and identity in general are almost too similar. It leads him to the bizarre claim that "perhaps the soul is naturally Jewish" (1947: 260). But, of course, it is worse than bizarre. It is insulting, albeit without meaning to be. There is thus a problem about the fate of other identities in this way of thinking. Because Levinas has little to say about them, it opens the way for an interpretation, like that of Professor Augusto Ponzio, that seems to talk as if identities should be abandoned without regard for why they should be retained. Failure to attend to Levinas' discussion of Jewish identity of identity and especially the way it parallels the account in his philosophical works makes it far too easy to focus on a Levinasian critique of a certain conception of identity without reflecting on what replaces it.

If the great merit of Ponzio's paper is that he gives renewed attention to Levinas' account of identity and does so from a commitment to engaging contemporary political reality, his account nevertheless seems at times too sweeping in its denunciations. One hears little from him about how Levinas sought from the outset to develop another way of thinking about identity, especially Jewish identity. Levinas was not a philosopher against identity but only against a certain idea of identity, identity as unity or self-equality. When Ponzio writes that "identity contains more than it is possible to contain" (p. 9), he comes close to recognizing the need for a rethinking of identity and not just for offering a critique of it. This is also suggested by his observation that Otherness is a basic condition for the very realization of identity. However, Ponzio does not develop these possibilities for an alternative conception of identity based in Levinas. His failure to do so leads one to wonder whether, for all his radicality, Ponzio does not explore fully the possibilities of Levinas' thinking for an inventive politics of the kind we desperately need today.

Because Levinas is concerned to establish another conception of identity and not merely to critique the Western philosophical conception of identity, it would be better to highlight how Levinas' critique is directed specifically against the conceptions of identity to be found in liberalism and in racial essentialisms such as Hitlerism. It is true that Levinas was clearly against what today is often called identity politics, but this is because identity politics is associated with multiculturalism and Levinas was against the diverse cultures that are not based on the Bible. Unfortunately Ponzio repeats some of Levinas' statements about the relation of the Bible and the Greeks, but does not

complain about its clear corollary for Levinas - Levinas said in an interview: "I often say, though it's a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated: all the rest – all the exotic – is dance" (Morley 1991: 18). Unfortunately this extraordinary and unacceptable statement is not an isolated remark. I have documented the presence of this attitude elsewhere (Bernasconi 2005a. See also Sikka 1999). But if Levinas highlights Jewish identity at the expense of other identities, it is in part because he dismisses what they stand for: "I am skeptical with regard to a literature that seeks to show that all humanity is one, since I would not build the future of humanity on exotic cultures" (Levinas 2004: 85). Remarks like these at very least call one to approach Levinas' philosophy with rather more suspicion than Ponzio exhibits.

Levinas' thinking on the relation of the Bible and the Greeks also threatens to complicate Ponzio's attribution to Levinas of a critique of Occidental reason. There is a critique, if it means placing limits on Occidental reason, but Levinas never rejected Occidental reason. Take, for example, Levinas' essay 'Peace and proximity' from 1984. In this essay the mature Levinas addresses the violence of Europe and its "long indifference to the sorrows of an entire world". What makes the essay important in the present context is that it provides one of Levinas' fuller statements about the relation of the Biblical heritage and the Greek heritage. Even though Levinas begins the essay by highlighting the contradiction between two conceptions of peace, the Greek one based on truth and the Biblical one based on a relation with alterity, he ends the essay by refusing to choose between the Bible and Greece.

To a great extent, it is the ethical order of human proximity that gives rise to or calls for the order of objectivity, truth, and knowledge. This is extremely important for the very sense of Europe: its Biblical heritage implies the necessity of the Greek heritage. Europe is not a simple confluence of two cultural currents. It is the concreteness where theoretical and Biblical wisdom do better than coverage (Levinas 1996: 168). Again this quotation raises more questions than can be resolved here, but it suggests that Greek reason is not cast aside.

Levinas undercuts Greek reason but only so as to place it on a firmer foundation, albeit nothing is quite the same once this new foundation is uncovered. There is a "defection of the identity that identifies itself in the same" (1981: 153) in the sense that it points beyond itself to the Other. But this rethought identity, this event of identification through substitution, can also be thought from the other direction. It is part of the genius of Levinas' approach that he locates the infinite within the totality (1969: 23). This means that ethics happens within the realm assigned to ontology, even while the

former transcends the latter: one cannot approach the Other with empty hands (1969: 50). That is the sense in which the defection of identity is, as I quoted earlier, "a for-the-other in the midst of identities". There is a perspective from which group identities survive. One sees it even in the flawed essay, 'Peace and proximity' where we learn that the relation between the Greek model of identity and the Jewish conception of identity is mirrored by their two conceptions of peace: "Peace as love of the neighbor, where it is not a matter of peace as pure rest that confirms one's identity but of always placing in question this very identity, its limitless freedom and its power" (Levinas 1996: 167).

My argument here has been that Levinas was not motivated by a desire to abandon all ideas of social identity in what might be thought of as a radicalization of the Enlightenment project. Levinas sought to find another basis for thinking social identity, one that avoided essentialism but without dissolving identities altogether. Levinas' account is flawed because his privileging of Jewish identity is at the expense of those cultures he calls "exotic". One has to say against Levinas and against Levinasians who deny identities that they are at fault in ways they should understand better than others.

My singularity cannot be entirely separated from those identities that I share with others and that constitute my solidarity with them (see Bernasconi, 2006). Does not the Other have the right to be addressed in terms of his or her identity, particularly if he or she was persecuted for that identity? (For a fuller discussion of the role of identities, see Bernasconi 2001).

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Kenosis and the problem of 'analogy'

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It is as difficult to approach the work of an ethicist (even of a highly philosophical kind) as it is a theologian, when the person has taken on something of the charisma of a saint. Approaches to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, like approaches to the thought of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, are too frequently hagiographical - and that impedes any critical appraisal of their thinking. Because Levinas was Jewish, because he suffered (even if he finally escaped) some of the worst atrocities ever perpetrated against that race, because he reframes the ethical debate of I and Thou and calls, on the basis of that reframing, for new understandings of justice, critical analyses of the coherence and implications of his thesis are so much the thinner. His work is handed down to us through a certain pre-given reception in which respect is paramount. Can any attack upon this most Jewish of late twentieth century philosophers avoid the charge of anti-Semitism? Is it because we see him wrapped in a prayer shawl, pouring over pages of the Talmud that we are predisposed to think the resources of his work provide a way of healing our current disaffections? One thinks here of Zygmunt Bauman's *Postmodern Ethics* (1993), and the attention paid in that volume of the work of Levinas. Ponzio too easily dismisses the appellation for Levinas of 'Jewish thinker'. I doubt anyone working with Levinas' philosophy is unaware of his Jewishness and the way it impacts upon his work. While I agree his thinking "does not have the character of a Jewish theology" (p. 29), the relation between man and God that is the fundamental ethical relationship with the other, issues from a Jewish conception of monotheism. I will point to this as I respond to this thinking from a Christian theological perspective. It is in the context of such a monotheism that one must understand Levinas' comment about 'atheism' (p. 29). His Jewishness is a factor in the way his work is received and read. And I would argue that a pervasive guilt by western Europeans concerning its own history of anti-semitism and the Shoah itself, impacts upon the extent to which Levinas' thinking is critically engaged.

The essay by Augusto Ponzio does nothing to disturb these receptions and the predispositions they foster. I celebrate the politicisation of Levinas' work with respect to global communication and war in this essay. The relation of politics to a violent ontology (in Levinas' understanding of the totality of being) and the examination of what Ponzio describes as "The world of global communication [a]s the world of

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infinite war" (p. 4) are important advances in Levinas' social ethics. If I have a worry here, it concerns recent trends in critical thinking and social theory that find resources for depictions of the contemporary in the Hobbesian *Homo homini lupus* and reappraisals of the work of Carl Schmitt. One thinks of Agamben's work and Zizek's. Ponzio does not enter the debates about Schmitt's 'state of exception', but the political ontology he exposes reiterates the same underlying theme. It is this Hobbesian worldview that, of course, Levinas' thinking offers the possibility of inverting. But I think critical thinking must be reflective here: to what extent is this Hobbesian trend a reflection on the current situation and a production of a certain ideology for this situation; an ideology which is useful for what it can offer as criticism of another pervasive ideology, liberal democracy? Having raised the question, I leave it to one side, for the main focus of my response concerns engaging with Levinas' answer to the Hobbesian concept. And my question is whether we might now move forward, dialectically (even polemically) and respond to this thought in the way Derrida did in his two brilliant essays on Levinas ('Violence et metaphysiques' (1967; 1978) and 'En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici' (1980; 1991). Unfortunately, it seems to me, by the time Derrida came to put together the work that formed the book *Adieu a Emmanuel Levinas* (1997), he himself had, in mourning, succumbed to the aura of sanctity that generates so vast a respect for its subject that analysis is deflected.

With respect to fostering a more critical approach to Levinas, allow me to examine briefly two notions central to his work to which Ponzio draws attention. My analysis of them will open up avenues of difference between my own exposition of Levinas and Ponzio's. The first I name *kenosis* after Levinas himself; the second I name the problem of 'analogy' which Levinas (as far as I am aware) does not speak of explicitly though Derrida will when defining the heart of Levinas' project.

What associates and invokes analyses of both kenosis and analogy is Levinas' devastating critique of totality: the going out from and the return to the Same in some Hegelian feedback loop; what he determines as the metaphysics of Being, and Ponzio visits under the "category of Identity" (p. 1). This takes narrative form in the story of Ulysses "whose adventure in the world was only a return to his native island" (1987a: 91). What Levinas' phenomenology explores is a concrete diachrony - the wounding mark or trace of the infinite, the transcendent, an exteriority that forever disrupts this return to the homeland of the Same and therefore totality. His is a thinking orientated towards the other, the wholly other, a "departure with no return, which, however, does not go forth into the void, [but] would lose its absolute *orientation* if it sought recompense in the immediacy of its triumph ... As an orientation towards the other ... a work is possible only in the patience, which, pushed to the limit, means for the agent

to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering the Promised Land" (1987a: 92). This thinking, too, takes narrative and paradigmatic form in the story of Abraham and the journey he takes into ever deepening exile. But Abraham's kenotic journeying finds other Pentateuchal parallels: in Adam's exile, in Jacob's, and with Moses' sojourn towards a Promised Land, he will see from the slopes of mount Nebo but never enter. These Biblical accounts of a kenotic living beyond oneself are figurative translations of Levinas' phenomenological concern with an orientation towards the other, in which oneself is hostage to the other, totally responsible before this other, accused in the eyes of the other. Oneself is always for-the-other. This is the basis for ethics, for him – as it was for Kierkegaard with whom Levinas shares so much (not least their understandings of dialectic). The infinite distance of the wholly other does not proceed simply to an ethics of moral prescriptions, but rather to an ethics commanded by a Good beyond being whose infinity calls all our human productions and fabrications into question. We are summoned to live beyond our home-making, beyond our own autonomy and its sense of universalised duty. In fact, the ego is never synonymous with itself. Like Kierkegaard's (1973: 351-7) claim that man is not yet himself, Levinas' self, adrift in time, is always displaced, wandering from city to city of refuge. This wholly other in whose wake we follow, is recognised in the face of the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and it calls each of us in turn to "go forth", even if that going forth is not "into the void". There is redemption only in this movement out to the other, only in this obedience to the calling. In a passage entitled '*Pieces d'identite*', Levinas writes: "A Jew is accountable and responsible for the whole edifice of creation. Something engages man even more than the salvation of his soul. The acts, utterance, thoughts of a Jew have a formidable privilege of destroying or restoring worlds" (1963: 27).

What is foundational for Levinas is that being in exile before the other, allowing the call to cause us a radical disquiet, is the condition of being human that demands our welcoming, our being received and our being hospitable. It demands a risking with respect to the other that fissures liberal humanist notions of autonomy, demanding an ethics in excess of Kant's deontology, Mill's utilitarianism, and Rorty's pragmatism. As Ponzio describes it, it is "exposure without reciprocity" (p. 19). In the growing plight of dispossessed persons it demands that we leave the safe havens of our self-conceived sanctities and risk maybe the charge of heresy, maybe the disfavour of those we most wish to win approval from. This is a work, as Levinas points out, of patience. "[A]s responsible", Levinas writes,

> I am never finished with emptying myself of myself. There is infinite increase in this exhausting of oneself, in which the subject is not simply as awareness of this expenditure, but is its locus and event… *The glory of a long desire!* The subject as hostage (1987a: 169).

If I am critical of Levinas, and even more so of other modern philosophers of the kenotic or endless self-emptying (Vattimo, Derrida, and possibly Ponzio, for example) my critique rests upon a twofold basis. First, there is a tendency to fetishise the other, and, in doing so play down the shared relations that qualify the degree of alterity that every encounter with another person is implicated in. There are webs of affinity and identity that cross the greatest cultural divide. Even in the recognition that this other is a widow, an orphan, homeless commonality is established through notions of family, bereavement, ownership and the lack of it. The other is never wholly other. Levinas would answer that the other person bears the trace of an infinite alterity, *illeity*, and this is perhaps a difference between Judaism and Christianity. For in Christianity the Word being made flesh, God becoming human in Jesus Christ, means that however much God remains beyond all our thinking, imagining and wording because he shared in what it is to be human that we might share in what it is to be divine (Athanasius - *Contra Arianos* i.42), the infinite difference has been crossed, by God himself. Transcendence is not unsayable entirely, because there has been a revelation of God's inaccessible hiddenness in Christ. Furthermore, that revelation then is generative of both now and what will be. And maybe it is because of this theological framing that the Christian Scriptures (like *The Letter to the Hebrews*) use the phrase "strangers and pilgrims" to describe the saints, those who are part of the community, a community still on its way, still being performed. And when the Christian Scriptures give an account of people outside of the community (as in the parable of the Good Samaritan in *The Gospel of Luke*) it does not speak of foreigners but neighbours. The neighbour, according to the parable, can indeed come from outside one's own ethnic grouping and be unknown prior to the encounter, but in the encounter they are brought near and therefore are given that each might work out their salvation through that encounter.

The philosophical difficulty with the fetishisation of the other, the wholly other, is there can never be any knowledge, understanding, relation with such an other. This is where the question of analogy is raised with respect to univocity and equivocity. Wittgenstein puts it boldly but simply: If a lion spoke, how would I know? The possibility for communication is the condition for the impossibility of a private language. There can be no communication where equivocity reigns; there can be no naming of the other as other or the same as same. In 'Diachrony and representation' (1987b) Levinas seeks to overcome Hegelian dialectic and "the logic of the same",

which for Levinas announces a univocity of being that institutes various forms of totality. With the God who comes, the wholly other, radical difference is installed. But pure difference would lead to equivocation, and equivocation leads to agnosticism, because there is no mediation or comparison possible whereby what is different might be accessed and assessed. Equivocation does not give itself to communication, for it imposes a non-relation. With Levinas the possibility for a movement between the face of the wholly other and the faces of human beings lies in the trace, and it is his requirement that such a movement takes place that announces a form of *Paradoxdialektik* (which shares features with Kierkegaard's, as other commentators have noted). Levinas requires then, as Derrida himself pointed out in '*En ce moment*...', "a certain analogy" to clarify the nature of the dialectic. In the same essay on Levinas, Derrida explains:

> Just as there is a resemblance between the face of God and the face of man (even if this resemblance is neither an 'ontological mark' of the worker on his work nor a 'sign' or 'effect' of God), in the same way there would be an analogy between all proper names and the names of God, which are, in turn, analogous among themselves (1980: 30).

Levinas is seeking then a resemblance discovered in a movement, a relation, that avoids the proportionalities of the *analogia entis*. But as Derrida points out "a hierarchizing dissymmetry remains" for the *tout autre* can never be grasped in and of itself. So what then becomes the basis for this 'resemblance'?

The trace of the other is always the trace of its withdrawal. Furthermore the trace is never defined as intentional. If it were intentional then the giving of the trace would be an intelligible effect of the passing of God. As it remains the other, in its absence and withdrawal, is indifferent. This appears to differ from Ponzio's exposition where "*absolute otherness* ... does not admit indifference" (p. 3). But while I agree for Levinas there is the self's "Non-difference to the other" (p. 20) the *absolute otherness* does remain indifferent for it cannot establish relation without compromising its alterity. In an essay entitled 'Bad conscience and the inexorable' (in French it is much more Husserlian: *La conscience non-intentionelle*), Levinas writes: "The call of God does not establish between me and the One who has spoken to me *a relation*" (1986: 37). If there is no relation established, is an analogy between "the face of God and the face of the neighbour" possible?

Perhaps this is why Derrida speaks of a "certain analogy". But the question is whether it is an analogy that can overcome the dual positions of same and other that stage and

yet require it. In *Au dela du verset* Levinas informs us of a messianic hope that is "a science of society, and of a society which is wholly human. And this hope is to be found in Jerusalem" (1982: 219). And he adds, significantly, "in the earthly Jerusalem". But one cannot see how the fulfilment of this messianism is possible without God becoming contaminated by being; and a more adequate dialectic announcing itself.

Attention to the philosophical problems of naming the other as other, the problems of equivocity, raises a profound question related to the production of the other. Who names the other, even in its self-revelation, as other? Who manufactures alterity, and on what grounds? The cultural difficulty of fetishising the other, in our present cultural situation, is that the other whose actions we do not understand, the one who is being wrapped in the impenetrability of such an alterity, is the terrorist. I write in the months following the London terrorist attacks when the newspapers devote pages to picturing and naming those who were the suicide bombers. Their neighbours, colleagues, friends are speechless with incomprehension. In their encounter with the other they are already trying to find those others who made them other. The widow, the orphan, and the hungry are perhaps the acceptable side of a Levinasian alterity; acceptable, that is, on liberal humanist grounds even though Levinas is frankly anti-humanist in his anthropology. The question raised here is that it is not simply that the other appears or manifests its radical alterity. Such an account of alterity fails to appreciate a more active role that is undertaken in the production of the other.

The failure to give an account of the dialectical response to the other brings me to my final comment on Levinas' project: his lack of attention to receptivity such that kenotic responsibility (Ponzio's "exposure without reciprocity") constitutes "the secret of sociality" (Levinas 1989: 169). I am unsure a community of hospitality is possible if founded only upon kenosis. As with Abraham at Mamre - the host must receive her guests and the guests must receive the hospitality offered. For Levinas, this omission is explicable, in part, in terms of the attention given to receptivity in Kant and also Husserl's phenomenology – how the self constitutes its transcendental ego. Levinas turns his attention to examining that which is prior to receptivity: being obligated or *sub-jectum* to the other. Levinas is also wishing to describe an economy, a work towards the other, that "requires the ingratitude of the other"; since gratitude would be the "return of the movement to its origin" (1987a: 92). In other words, in Levinas' understanding of the economy of the gift there cannot be mutuality or reciprocity. The economy envisaged - and Levinas is emphatic about this - is "a one-way movement." The American philosopher, Edith Wyschogrod, reiterates this position (explicitly indebted to Levinas) when she writes: "In response to the other who has come one

must be willing unconditionally to offer oneself as hostage for that other so that self-donation is, in its pure form, the gift of death" (2005: 53-61). Maybe it is a matter of there never being a pure form or rather that the impure forms of self-donation are actually what count or even that there is no place in the world of people from which self-donation can be judged as either pure or impure. Certainly the emphasis on the "one-way movement" accords neither with the Christian understanding of grace and a co-operation with it, nor, I think, with what in *Totality and Infinity* (1969) Levinas examines as the 'Phenomenology of Eros'.

Allow me to unpack this somewhat, again taking up a position as a Christian theologian responding to this analysis of endless self-donation. For what this other brings or evokes is desire; "desire for the other" (1987a: 94, 97) is key to Levinas' account of oneself, one's neighbours, God and ethics. The other is recognised in the economy of the desire it evokes. But sociality is not simply desire *for* the other, it is also the other's desire for me. Levinas conceives that in the unending emptying of oneself, in the way the other empties me, I discover "ever new resources. I did not know I was so rich" (1987a: 94). But from where can these resources spring if the ego is always a hostage, always accused? They can only come from that which is continually being given such that what I am being emptied of is that which I am being given. That is, such sociality, which moves beyond ourselves and an economy of mutual exchange and into a permanent journeying towards the other, is only possible within an economy of a transcendent giving through which I am constituted, in the transit of its grace. Only then can my desire for the other not be an appetite – that having the other would satisfy, but an infinite generosity, beyond appetite and beyond even attraction. There are alternative economies of the gift that do not figure mutuality in terms of a return to the same. This is an economy of the gift that Levinas inherits from Marcel Mauss in which giving incurs a debt to be repaid. Giving is fundamentally associated with exchange, so non-reciprocity is needed to forestall a return.

Non-reciprocity stands in relation to the question of kenosis as equivocity stands in relation to the question of analogy. So while I agree with Ponzio that Levinas developed a "non dialogic concept of dialogue" (p. 10), I am questioning the philosophical coherence of his account of the Saying and the Said as I am questioning what can be understood as 'relation' when Ponzio writes of "a relation with the absolute other, [a]s the indispensable condition of … law" (p. 17).

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From the self to the other and back to the self – otherwise. Levinas' redefinition of the subject

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Introduction

To comment on a work is first and foremost to listen attentively and to reflect along the same lines in concert with its author. In and through this listening and reflecting one can then think further and differently. My comments on the essay of Ponzio are furthermore typified by the awareness that they refer back to the way in which I encountered, listened to and read Levinas himself, not once but time and again, returning to his texts that persistently give much to think about. To comment on Ponzio's interpretation of Levinas is also to re-read Levinas himself and perhaps also to understand him differently. My comments have likewise come about in the acknowledgement of a shared obedience to the same master, Emmanuel Levinas, who was born one hundred years ago (Kaunas, Lithuania, December 30, 1906)[1] and who died over ten years ago (Paris, France, December 25, 1995).[2] There are various possible ways of entering into a conversation with Ponzio, since the author attempts to link a huge number of themes organically in his topical reading of Levinasian thought, following a spiral movement of thinking that constantly returns to reflect on itself and then proceeds to think further. I would like to approach Levinas in a progressive perspective of development, whereby certain aspects of Ponzio's argument not only will be developed but also critically radicalised, with special attention to the way in which Levinas not only questions but also redefines the 'I' by means of which new light can and must be shed on politics and the state.

Peace as the victory over multiplicity and alterity

Our comments commence where Ponzio begins, namely with the way in which Levinas understands war. For that purpose, we turn to Levinas' study "Transcendance

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et hauteur", which is his first commentary on his first major work *Totalité et Infini* (1961). Levinas was allowed to present this commentary at the *Societé française de philosophie*, under the chairmanship of Jean Wahl, the promoter of his 'doctorat ès lettres' at the Sorbonne in Paris on January 27, 1962. According to Greek thought, multiplicity is the origin of 'opinion' (doxa) and irrationality as well as conflict and violence. Furthermore, both opinion and violence are inextricably linked to each other. Our daily experience constantly brings us into contact with a tremendous multiplicity and diversity, creating an unmanageable number of contradictions in the eye of the perceiver. The multiplicity of opinions expressed by humans (and gods) gives rise to never-ending discussions and oppositions. This never-ending discussion becomes a continuous source of annoyance in which the relationships between people are not based on harmony but rather on resentment, tension, opposition and conflict. According to Greek thought, violence can be attributed solely to the realities of multiplicity and diversity, meaning to say that violence is the product of the separation and rupture in being between the same (the one) and the other. Since multiplicity and diversity are the first experiences to present themselves to our powers of observation, the thesis seems obvious that war is the father of all things: '*polemos patèr pantoon*' (LC 55-58).

It is clear that this phenomenology of reality in its conflict-ridden multiplicity and diversity evokes a particular concept of peace and harmony. The only possibility to annul the violence that flows forth from the one and the other consists in reducing everything to the same, meaning to say, to assimilate the other into the same. This is precisely what philosophy as 'love of wisdom' – which is what philosophy literally means – sees as its task. Philosophy thinks it can fulfil this task only by knowing. Indeed, knowing here is understood in a certain manner, not as an acknowledgement of the other over and against the same, not as respect for separation and difference, but as understanding, grasping, or comprehension. From the very beginning, according to Levinas, Western philosophy has understood itself as an attempt to determine the other ('l'Autre') by means of the same ('le Même') (TI 8/38),[3] in order to tailor down the other to the measure of the same, and to find in oneself the measure of the other. Stated alternately, philosophy is engaged "in reducing to the same all that is opposed to it as other" (DEHH 166/48). Western philosophy presents itself mainly as the reduction of the other to the same (TI 13/43).

The manner or mode in which this reduction of the other takes place is knowledge, which applies itself to draw in and to understand reality in its conflicting multiplicity and diversity. And thanks to this knowledge, a scientifically founded technology is then developed, which must enable people to become 'lord and master of the world'

(Descartes). Knowing is characterised by absoluteness: it does not want to leave anything out or leave anything to chance; it wants to investigate and understand everything, so that all becomes 'manipulable', meaning to say accessible to our actions. In this sense knowledge is not only power, but also the abuse of power. An immediate consequence of human comportment to knowing as understanding is the fact that we have been burdened with tremendous social ills during the previous century – the need for understanding has led to technical externalisation and the underlying ideology of manufacturability. The most notable examples along these lines are nuclear armaments, the 'globalising' neo-liberal economic technocracy and "the globalisation of communication", and, last but not least, the environmental problem,[4] which Ponzio also discovers as forms of identity, sameness, and totality.

The logic of Essence: identity and totality

From the beginning of his independent thought, as is apparent from the introduction to *De l'exitence à l'existant* (1947) (EE 9/15), Levinas generally characterises the search for identity, sameness and totality, meaning to say the dynamics of identification and totalisation, with the Platonic term 'Essence'. He will then completely develop this concept in his second major work *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974). Levinas does not make use of the term 'Essence' in the usual significance of 'eidos', 'quidditas' or being-ness. For him, 'essence' is the synonym for 'being', namely the Heideggerian *Sein* as distinct from the *Seindes*, the Latin *Esse* as distinct from the scholastic *ens*. In order to present the content of 'Essence' Levinas refers to the history of language, where it has been demonstrated how the suffix 'ance' is derived from 'antia' or 'entia'. Since as endings of the participle they indicate an action, they gave rise to abstract 'action nouns' ('*noms d'action*'). The term 'Essence' should then be more designated in this sense, just as Levinas more clearly begins to do so in his studies after *Autrement qu'être*.[5] From this linguistic clarification regarding the use of "Essence" (or "ess*a*nce") as an action noun, it is clearly apparent that Levinas means by the term Essence: "the event or the process of *esse*" (DVI 160/203). We need to understand the term 'to be' literally in its sense as a verb: 'to be' as dynamics, process, fulfilment, '*actus essendi*'. In this sense, Levinas labels the verb 'to be' as 'the verb of all verbs' in contrast to the usual superficial designation as 'auxiliary verb'. After all, the Greeks did not hesitate to speak of the 'pure act' with regard to being (DVI 78/43). The verb 'to be' does not primarily indicate a real or ideal entity, but the very process of being of this entity (AE 29/23). In line with Plato and Heidegger, in no way whatsoever does Levinas mean with Essence and 'to be' the plain or merely formal, factual 'there is', namely that something 'exists', but rather the self-unfolding act of

being. With that he takes over the qualitative-dynamic meaning of the Heideggerian term '*Wesen*' (or 'being' as verb).

Now, what is typical of 'to be' understood thus is that it is universal and all-encompassing. As an event of being, it penetrates and bears all beings and as such it comprises their unity. As the encompassing dynamism, it poses itself simply as *totality*: "the inescapable fate" (AE 6/5). It leaves nothing outside of it; it draws all things into it so that, ultimately, nothing can escape. All that happens belongs to the Essence: "*la totalité de l'être serait l'essence même de l'Être*" (AT 59). Nothing is foreign to it. Everything falls under its jurisdiction, or at least can be reclaimed under it. It is Essence as restoration, therefore. In this regard, Essence is also a striving for an 'ultimate totality', meaning to say "*un Tout absolu*", made explicit as history, being, world, God, wherein everything will ultimately be integrated and wherein all plurality and difference will be brought to rest (AT 62-63).

Since Essence is a dynamic process of being, it implies, however, everything - not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. This leads us immediately to the second essential trait of Essence, namely *identity*. Indeed, nothing stands by itself independently or absolutely; something only appears as a mode of Essence wherein and whereby it unfolds itself. In spite of their diversity, all beings or data belong together. As modes of expression of Essence, they represent the same Order, that of being. Diversity counts only at first sight, since everything is ultimately a mode of realisation of Essence. In this regard, Essence encompasses not only everything but it also penetrates all things with its energy of being. It is totality because it reduces all things to the same. As the all-penetrating and all-bearing ground, being draws back all things to itself. However diverse and irreconcilable the data and events may seem at first sight, they have a common fate, namely the unfolding of Essence. That is why Levinas also speaks of the arrangement or conjunction of Essence. As the activity of Being it brings together ('*con-jonction*') all diversity into the encompassing unity that it is itself (AE 54/42).

One other equally important aspect of Essence as the process of being is the revelation of being – which makes one think of the '*Lichtung des Seins*' of Heidegger. Essence is not only the effective unfolding of being but also the manifestation of being, or rather unfolding of being *through* revelation of being. Both are inextricably linked with each other. The event of being shows and proclaims itself outwardly in everything that is done, thought of and said. All truth, intelligibility and language are likewise always the truth of being, the understanding of being, and the articulation of being. In this regard,

Essence is affirmative, manifesting and confirming itself – in its phenomenological structure (AE 30-31/24-25).

Now, we can synthetically indicate the internal quality or nature of Essence, understood as adventure or epic, as a conjunction of 'interest', literally 'inter-esse': 'to be in between'. It is not static being but an attempt to be ('*conatus essendi*'), work, effort and energy, striving for self-preservation and invincible tenacity of being: "The adventure of essence, which consists in persisting in essence and unfolding immanence" (AE 19/16). Its identity is a striving for identity, an inaccessible attempt to remain itself and become itself even more. It is essential, structural immanence. It does not want to leave anything outside of itself that could disturb or threaten it; it literally does not want to leave anything to chance; it wants to have and keep everything in hand; it wants to be the one in all things (AE 23-24/19-20).

This concretely means that Essence is anything but free of conflict. On the contrary, it fulfils itself precisely through these conflicts and clashes as a drama. The self-interest of being dramatises itself in and through the individual selfishnesses, which are competing with each other, the one against the other or all against all. Essence concretises itself in and through the many forms of self-interest of beings, in this case of humans who in their mutual allergy are at war with each other. War is the heroic deed of Essence itself. However, it does not remain in a condition of war. It immediately introduces reason into the situation, in order to avoid or to resolve the clashes between the beings. Reason invites them to make use of their intellect, to practise patience, to desist from their mutual intolerance and to come to an agreement of reasonable peace. This simply remains, however, an expression of the selfishness and tenacity of the being of Essence. Reasonable peace, as patience in struggle or postponement of violence, is calculation, intervention and politics and thus also the organisation of an 'ecological community', as Ponzio might have it, and of the state. The struggle of all against all becomes exchange and trade. The clash, where all are with all because all are against all, becomes mutual delimitation. Notwithstanding this change, however, there remains in force an interest of being of Essence since one installs compensations for the part of the interest of being that one renounces in the compromise in exchange for other, possible future advantages, which must be in balance with the patiently and politically arranged current concessions. Nothing is for free: *quid pro quo*!

Within the perspective of Essence, the peace striven for only remains a suppressed and constrained violence. The peace achieved then remains unstable; there always is the possible regression into the war of all against all. Internally, it is not protected against

selfishness. Reasonable peace does not surpass the particular interests since it relies on these interests, which only imply mutual control and delimitation and no internal demolition or conversion. The achieved peace remains completely a product of Essence, notwithstanding the real difference that exists between the Essence in the time of war and the Essence in the time of peace. The peace negotiated amongst each other remains in fact a war against the war, as is also apparent from the present-day arguments for 'preventive war' and 'war against terrorism', to which Ponzio refers (p. 18). Even when it concerns a 'just war', which can be considered as an improvement with regard to the original universal violence, it still remains a war. In this regard, war remains the 'extreme *ratio*' of politics, as Ponzio says. As a war against war, it accords us a clear conscience but it does not desist from being conflict and war (AE 223/177). The resistance against the primary violence testifies only to a primordial and wild humanity that is only prepared to momentarily suspend and moderate its aversion towards others, and precisely for that reason – jealous as it is of its tenacity of being – surrounds itself with military accolades and virtues. The tough self-complacency of energetic self-affirmation, by means of which Essence is thus Essence, remains unaffected, or rather, realises itself in a new and higher manner through its reasonable and justified struggle against violence and war.

From this description of the drama of Essence, it becomes perfectly clear how the human 'I' is not only an exponent but at the same time an eminent expression of Essence. Since the 'I' is a return to oneself via self-consciousness, thought and language, Essence becomes, as it were, doubled. The 'I' is not only moved by the energy of being but also experiences and reveals it so that Essence arrives at a peak point or at fulfilment in the 'I'. In this way, the 'I' is no mere coincidental given; on the contrary it is an essential sublimation of Essence. As a conscious and free striving for identity, the 'I' is the indispensable *sacrament* of Essence (DVI 78/43).

It is clear that the thought of Thomas Hobbes on humans as '*homo homini lupus*' – out of which the fear of the other ensues, as well as the war of all against all, which can only be controlled by the state as a powerful and threatening Leviathan – is simply an expression of Essence and thus of the dominant current in Western thought. Nazism, too, according to Levinas, is no '*accident de parcours*' in Western history. He situates Nazism as the extension of Essence and the *conatus essendi*, even though it cannot be denied that it is a supreme and diabolical expression of Essence. This thesis regarding the content of being of Nazism is clearly apparent in the (brief) Postscript of Levinas in the second publication (1977) of the article 'Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme' (1934), to which Ponzio likewise refers (pp. 35-6). Racism, which is inherent in Hitlerism, is a possibility "*qui s'inscrit dans l'ontologie de l'Être, soucieux*

de l'être – de l'Être 'dem es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht', *selon l'expression heideggerienne*" (QRPH 25).

Traces of alterity and transcendence in Western thought

Ponzio demonstrates acutely how Levinas wants to abandon the dominant Western logic of Essence, with its striving for identity and totality, and thus searches for a logic of alterity and transcendence. Against the mainstream of Greek thought, he is even convinced that it is not plurality that leads to violence, oppression, terror and war, but precisely the unity that reduces plurality to the same, as we have intended to explain above. Hence, Levinas reaches 'beyond the same' towards the 'wholly other', which he characterises starting from his own earliest independent thought as "the Good beyond Being" (EE 9/15). It is not because identity and totality in Essence seem to determine Western thought in a prominent way that no other dynamism is at work interstitially or 'in the margins' in that same Western history. Along with Levinas, Ponzio is also convinced of it: "Nevertheless this history of the West bears, in its margins, the trace of events carrying *another* signification, and the victims immolated and ignored in the big sense of History have a separate signification from this sense" (p. 19). In this regard, Levinas also refers to the "suffering servant" as the one who reveals the 'other' side of Western history, or stronger still, unmasks it as being obfuscated and shoved aside (DL 223-224/170-171), whereby it can only continue to exist in the background or as abuse of language (AE 10/9). According to Levinas, however, a tradition of alterity and transcendence has been operative in Western civilisation, which is at least as old as that of the thought on identity and totality. In this regard, it can no longer be simply called marginal or accidental, even though it often does not get the opportunity to unfold itself unrestrainedly and in full. Indeed, Western thought has never been able to suppress entirely this 'other' movement so much so that it comes to the fore time and again, at least as unrest and unease within the present culture, which has become the model, certainly since the Enlightenment, of 'civilisation': "*l'inquiétude de la transcendance*" (AT 59).

Concretely speaking, Levinas discovers the impossibility of totalising totality and thus the possibility of the other than the same in Anaximandros' dualism of opposite forces and values. In Antiquity, however, he finds points of contact, especially in Plato. In his work, *The State*, he refers to "the Good above being" (TI 53/80,76/102, LC 99; DEHH 171, 189; AE 23/19). Not only does the Good grant to the objects of knowledge the fact of their being known but also their existence ('*einai*') and being ('*ousia*'), even though it is itself no being ('*ousia*'). The Good is something that is situated in no side

of being ("*epékeina tès ousias… hyperechontos*") and, moreover, that surpasses the '*ousia*' in old age ('*presbeia*') and power ('*dunamis*') (*The State* 509b; cf. also 517b,c,d and 518d). This attention to radical transcendence is also apparent in the fact that Plato defines 'true dialogue' in the Phaedrus (273-274a, 275b-277a) as a dialogue with the gods (DEHH 189; DL 270/209). And finally, Levinas likewise refers to the way in which Plato reflects on the One in the first hypothesis of Parmenides (137c-142a) as withdrawn from every definition and boundary, from place and time. It escapes both the identity with itself as well as the inequality with regard to itself. It is no whole and possesses no parts either. It does not even manifest an external form. It is neither at rest nor in movement. It eludes all knowledge, which implies that it cannot be expressed or named. Hence, Plato can also affirm that the One has no part in being (AE 10/8; DEHH 189-190). In connection with Plato's view on the One, Levinas also refers to the way in which Plotinus not only places the One above being but also above thinking ('*epékeina nou*') (DEHH 189). In both Plato and Plotinus, this 'beyond' must be understood as a 'precedence', meaning to say that the Good and the One precede being, which means that being is younger than the Good and the One,[6] even though it would seem that we discover the Good and the One only after we have become involved in being. In Aristotle, too, Levinas finds traces of transcendence thought. Firstly, in the idea of the '*intellectus agens*', that comes in from the outside – through the door ('*thuraten*'). And although Aristotle accepts nothing above being, he still affirms the ambiguity of being. This only admits an 'analogous' unity so that he can still affirm the transcendence of the first unmoved Mover (TI 53/80, 278/301; AT 67). Levinas even dares to think that the stoic nobility of the resignation and the subordination to the '*logos*' already derives its energy from the openness to what Essence surpasses (AE 225/178). In the Middle Ages, the Aristotelian doctrine of the analogous unity of being was carried further and developed in the theology of the analogous attributes that are ascribed to God (TI 53/80). It was thusly that a transcendent God could be thought of, One who 'does not form any totality' with creation (TA 67).

It is not only in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages that Levinas finds 'seeds' of a radical thinking on alterity, but also in Modern thought, starting from Descartes. In line with Scholasticism, Descartes indeed affirms the same ambiguous meaning with which the word 'being' is applied to God and the creation: "the impossibility for the transcendent being and the being that is separated from it to participate in the same concept also comes from Descartes" (TI 53/80). In particular, Levinas repeatedly and preferentially points to the Cartesian idea of infinity, which as an 'innate idea' cannot be designed by the 'I' (autonomy) but was put into the 'I' (heteronomy). Throughout the entirety of his thought, Levinas remains inspired by the formal pattern of

Descartes' idea on infinity in order to present his view on transcendence, alterity and infinity. Levinas finds a point of contact even in Kant, namely in his sublimation of theoretical reason to practical reason, which at the same time implies a surpassing of theoretical reason by practical reason (EN 105). Even in the dialectical, radically totalising thought on unity by Hegel, Levinas is able to unravel a thought on alterity, namely where Hegel searches for 'recognition' (*Anerkennung*) by the other. Levinas also finds further initiatives for the surpassing of the thought on totality in the *Sollen* of Fichte. The *Sollen* is indeed not so much the impossibility of thinking about being but likewise the surpassing of being. Furthermore, this surpassing cannot be recuperated by the surpassed being, which ultimately saves the surpassed being from illusion (AT 67). Likewise, the pure transcendental 'I' of his master, Husserl, makes Levinas suspect a transcendence in immanence, meaning to say a dimension that situates itself before or at this side ('*en deça*') of the world *and* of the transcendental subject (HAH 94; AE 10/8). Bergson likewise opens up a perspective onto transcendence in and through his idea of the ever self-renewing 'duration' (*durée*), which as openness, from the future – literally from that which comes toward us – questions every completed or self-moved totality (AT 67; EN 105-106). Even the Nietzschean man is able to suspect something of the breakthrough of immanence towards an '*au-delà*' (beyond). In his transition to the '*Übermensch*' he indeed shocks the being of the daily, common world by means of the violence of unheard of words and by means of the nihilism of his poetic writing style. Stronger still, he dissolves language by means of the non-speech of the dance, and by means of the refusal to speak – a refusal that manifests itself in the scornful and sceptic laugh, even up to its very lunacy. And last but not least, Nietzsche returns from the time of ageing – and thus from progress and continuity – by means of his thought on the eternal return (HAH 94-95; AE 10/8). Levinas also finds the motif of transcendence quite explicit in Rosenzweig's radical criticism on the Western idea of totality. For him, God, humans and the world form radically separate regions of being (AT 67-68). Finally, Levinas even finds in Heidegger, his greatest antipode, a trace of transcendence, namely in the sobriety of lucid reason and in his idea of 'resignation' ('*Gelassenheit*'), that is marked by a radical passivity (EN 106).

In conclusion to this sketch, it is important to point out that the search for traces of a "metaphysical extraction from being" (cf. Ponzio) in Western culture does not lead Levinas to take refuge in mysticism, nor to the religion or the 'blind touch' of a supernatural faith, and also not to one or the other eastern wisdom (TI 194/218). The Good, just like the One above being, is not sophism (DEHH 190). We must not renounce philosophy. The entire thought of Levinas can be considered as an attempt to

prove the contrary: "The place of the Good above every essence is the most profound teaching, the definitive teaching, not of theology, but of philosophy" (TI 76/103).
Levinas even goes a step farther, for he does not remain fixated upon the thesis that the Platonic idea of the Good above being possesses philosophical force and worth. Throughout his entire thought he also makes every effort at deformalising the idea of alterity and transcendence. In other words, his thought does not remain limited to a kind of 'negative philosophy' that demonstrates the impossibility of a totalising totality, but he searches for a concrete form of 'the other than the same', that 'otherwise than being', which is so radical that it cannot be reduced by any writing of history, thematisation or practice to the same, meaning to say to the immanence of Essence. It is widely known that Levinas discovers this concrete possibility in the relation with the other, just as he states in the introduction to his first independent work *De l'existence à l'existant*: "The study we present (…) examines a certain number of broader research topics concerning the problem of the Good, time, and the relationship with the other as a movement toward the Good" (EE 9/15).

Primacy of the relationship with the other

In his discussion of this relationship of human to human, we discover a double trace which we can link to his two main works *Totalité et Infini* (1961) en *Autrement qu'être* (1974). We also locate this double trace in the development that runs from the first to the second work. In *Totalité et Infini* we discover especially a phenomenological approach that – starting from his preceding works *De l'existence à l'existant* and *Le temps et l'autre*, which both appeared in 1947 – applies itself, on the one hand, to a multifaceted description of the 'I' as the same *par excellence* and, on the other hand, to the other as the radical other. Since the exodus towards the Good lies rooted in being, Levinas begins with a description of the being of the 'I' as hypostasis and bodily autoposition, which at the same time implies a victory over the impersonal '*il y a*'. Likewise the subject has its exodus, in the sense that the hypostasis develops into an ecstasy or involvement in the world. This dynamism takes place concretely throughout the phenomena of enjoying, residing, work, knowledge. The 'I' thereby unfolds itself – on the basis of the reduction of the other to oneself – into a self, which remains radically separated from the others. It is only in this manner that an encounter with the radical other, namely with the face of the other, becomes possible without negating either the radical separation between both or the radical alterity of the other. From the very outset, Levinas makes clear throughout his phenomenology of the face that the relationship between the self and the other is all about an ethical relationship, in the sense that the face to face is no ontological necessity nor an inescapable factual

givenness, but an appeal and a task. This implies that the irreducibility can also be denied or violated – which Levinas labels as 'murder' and this can manifest itself in various ways, namely as indifference and forgetfulness, or as tyranny and terror, as homicide and hate. He is even convinced that hate is in a certain sense more serious than murder because hate endeavours at the destruction of the other without already destroying the other. In hate one still keeps the other alive so that throughout the extreme humiliation, of which hate is the expression, the other can bear witness to the hate (TI 216)!

The ideas of Levinas on the 'I' and the other and the ethical content of their relationship are quite sufficiently known that they do not need any further discussion, just as Ponzio likewise presupposes these ideas in his essay. Yet we still would like to reflect for a while on the view of Levinas on the alterity of the other because we have this lingering impression that a certain misunderstanding exists amongst particular commentators, which has pernicious consequences for the ethical interpretation of the face to face. The misunderstanding has to do with the confusion between alterity and difference. Along with Levinas we would like to make explicit how it is not difference that makes alterity, but alterity that makes the difference: "*Ce n'est pas du tout la différence qui fait l'altérité; c'est l'altérité qui fait la différence*" (VA 92). Alterity, for Levinas, means the irreducible uniqueness of the other who speaks to me, or better who appeals me to responsibility. If the other is only appreciated because he displays certain characteristics, attributes and qualities whereby for me he becomes interesting 'to learn from', and because in so doing he confirms and reinforces my identity, then, according to Levinas, we end up in one or the other form of racism. Racism consists in the appreciation or rejection, inclusion or exclusion of the other because the other, in his or her individuality, either belongs to my own particularity ('blood and soil') and is thus 'recognisable' and 'interesting', or differs from my individuality in such a way that its difference forms a threat to me, which I then reject out of 'self-defence' (exclusion, destruction, persecution…). Of course, persons all belong to certain 'genres' ('genera') and 'types' ('species'). By experience and thus by phenomenological description, we immediately and incontestably come upon many forms of difference – and thus of individuality – between people. And each of these differences – 'specific individualities' – can be traced back to attributes, characteristics and qualities. These characteristics, usually in a cluster, with its own internal cohesion, united and 'arranged', show forth the particularity of persons: culture, country, race, religion, gender, profession, place of birth, etc. We can call this the 'natural' existence of persons, and in this regard it is not reprehensible but valuable and worthy of consideration: "*Le tribal n'est pas à proscrire, et comporte bien des vertus*" (VA 96). It only becomes problematic when this individuality, which is coupled with difference,

begins to count as the first and final word about value – the surplus or inferior value – of persons. According to Levinas, this appreciation or depreciation of 'characteristic difference' is precisely the source of a racist position. That which is 'humane' is the awareness that we must take a next step farther than the particular or the 'tribal': "*apaiser le tribal: scandaleuse exigence*" (VA 96). We can only evade racism if we direct ourselves 'beyond the tribal' ("*au-delà du tribal*"). The radical other is marked by a foreignness that cannot be annulled or destroyed: "Thou shall not kill". Put positively, this means thou shall recognise and respect the other in his or her radical, irreducible otherness (VA 100).

Against the background of this sharply stated view on the alterity of the other, we now would like to reflect on a central thought in the essay of Ponzio, with the intention of further making it explicit and taking it as a prelude to the radicalisation that Levinas carries out in *Autrement qu'être*. In *Totalité en Infini* we discover a kind of ambiguity, which is a sign of deeper underlying unrest. At first sight, the emphasis is put on plurality, meaning to say on the radical separateness and irreducibility between the same and the other, in concrete between the 'I' and the other. In the subtitle, Levinas indeed labels the entire work as 'an essay on exteriority'. The 'I' and the other seem so irreducible to each other that they have nothing to do with each other; they lie totally outside of each other. There is indeed mention of a movement between both, that runs from the one to the other, or rather, upon closer inspection, from the other to the one, namely the *face-à-face* that is a relationship of responsibility by and for the other, which at the same time is based on a 'calling into question of the same'. In this double phenomenology, namely the phenomenology of the 'I' and the phenomenology of the epiphany of the other as face and ethical appeal to responsibility, another movement manifests itself reluctantly, in the sense that the relationship to the other already plays a part in the working and expressions of the 'I' in its reductive relationships to the other. At first sight the description of the 'I' as the same seems to come first, and then afterwards – at least according to the phenomenologies carried out – only then is there mention of the appearance of the other, including its ethical appeal to responsibility. Throughout his phenomenological analyses, however, Levinas realises along the way that that which was described only 'afterwards' – at second place – must actually already be presupposed in his descriptions of that which is obvious and thus comes at first place, namely his phenomenology of the dynamics of the same. He concretely discovers that his descriptions of residing, as a specific transformation of the world by the 'I' into a '*chez soi*', already presupposes the presence of the intimate, female other (TI 124/151). In that sense, the relationship with the other is the condition of possibility of residing. At the same time, he also discovers that work, as the transformation of the world into objects, which can be used and consumed,

presupposes the relationship with the other. The objects can only be transformed into objects when they can be given to the other and thus can be detached from the 'I'. Worldly data only become 'objective' in the literal sense of the word because, insofar as they are mine, they can also be given to the other. And this once again means that the relationship with the other is the condition of possibility for work as a subject-object relationship, whereby the world as a whole and in its parts become an object of the 'I', who as the same *par excellence* attempts to reduce the other into a means and function of itself (TI 145/171). The same must be said of knowledge, which on the basis of concepts and categories not only understands the things of the world but also makes them into things that can be grasped and arrogated and thus also given, which again presupposes the presence of the other. No knowledge without objectification, which also presupposes the objectivity of knowledge, in the sense that the knowledge of the world and its data can be shared with the other. The relationship to the other, in other words, makes possible objective knowledge and thus also science. Or as Ponzio states it succinctly: "All knowing presupposes the experience of infinity" (p. 9).

Conflict and war presuppose the face to face

In the context of our commentary on the essay of Ponzio, we continue to reflect especially on another aspect of 'transcendentality', which Levinas brings to the fore in *Totalité et Infini* and to which Ponzio likewise alludes: "the relationship of the same with the other is not only beyond the totality, but is also the very basis of the totality" (p. 9). In his analysis of war, which at first sight refers back to the collision between egos that are moved by the same dynamism of the 'reduction of the other to the same', Levinas discovers that war presupposes the *face-à-face* as the condition of possibility. In other words, Levinas feels challenged to think through conflict further, further than he - and many others - have initially. We follow him in his penetrating analysis that tries to fathom the slumbering and forgotten, left out dimension of the face to face. When we look at conflict more closely, then we can hardly call the conversation of the *face-à-face* primary and original, since as an attempt to arrive at an agreement, it comes after the apparently original conflict situation, where the subjects stand before each other as rivals and enemies. In order to settle this problem, according to Levinas, a renewed analysis of violence and war is needed, since only thus will it become possible to demonstrate that conflict is secondary with regard to the direct encounter 'eye to eye' between the other and me. In other words, through his renewed analysis Levinas wants to make clear that violence already presupposes this encounter.

At first sight, we can bring back war to an "antagonism of forces" that measure each other up amongst themselves (TI 197/222). Thus, violence apparently lies along the line of 'work' or the manipulation of the 'things' and 'forces' of the world: "Action on things, work, consists in finding the point of application where the object, by virtue of general laws to which its individuality is completely reducible, will submit to the worker's will. Work neither finds nor seeks in the object anything strictly individual" (LC 37-38/18-19). Apparently, violence is ruled by an analogous dynamism: the violent 'I' acts at first sight not really in relationship with the other, onto which violence is committed. It behaves precisely *as if* it were alone. It approaches the antagonist as a 'force', as a brute and wild force, nameless and without autonomous value. It leaves out, as it were, the individuality of the other in order to approach the other as a mere part of a totality, or as a 'particularised' element of a general calculation and thus overpower the other (DEHH 168).

This comparison of violence with work, however, is misleading since the one attacked does not wholly behave as a 'blind force' that needs to be overcome by a 'greater force'. This is, after all, also apparent when we look more closely at the way in which the attacking 'I' approaches its antagonist. It belongs, indeed, to the mode of inter-human violence that the attacking 'I' does not look the other directly in the eye or attack with an open visor, but always attempts to approach the other *from the side* in order to be able to overcome the other by surprise or through an indirect route. Violence is guile and ambush *par excellence*. It is no mere opposition of forces whereby the strongest would be victorious. On the contrary, it concerns a relationship between two, separate, free beings that transcendently take up a position against each other. "They affirm themselves as transcending the totality, each identifying itself not by its place in the whole, but by its *self*" (TI 198/222). In this relationship, the unforeseen possibilities, both of the attacker as well as of the attacked, play a great role, like courage, dexterity, self-sacrifice, inventiveness, cunning, guile, creativity (DEHH 168). The so-called 'force' before which the 'I' comes to stand is of an unforeseen and incalculable nature precisely because it is the 'force' of a free antagonist. Its resistance against the violence of the 'I' is not blind, like that among things, but free and conscious. As a free being, the antagonist always maintains the possibility of undoing the very best calculations of the attacker. The violent 'I' continuously runs the risk that its tactics fail since the other that is targeted can see through these tactics and confound them by means of its own, secret tactics. "No logistics guarantees victory. The calculations that make possible the determination of the outcome of a play of forces within a totality do not decide war. It lies at the limit of a supreme confidence in oneself and a supreme risk. It is a relation between beings exterior to totality, which hence are not in touch with one another" (TI 198/223).

Hence, Levinas can likewise state that "war presupposes the transcendence of the antagonist" (TI 198/222). The fact that the 'I' thoroughly takes into account the 'incalculability' of the other, whereby the very best calculations of the attacker can be undone, means that it has in fact acknowledged the other in its separation and exteriority, meaning to say as an 'other', as a foreign and ungraspable presence that comes from elsewhere: "War aims at a presence that comes always from elsewhere, a being that appears in a face" (TI 198/222).

That the violent 'I' really takes into account the other, and thereby inadvertently recognises it as other, is indeed also apparent from the fact that the 'I' shall avoid attacking the other directly. 'If you can't be strong, be smart', the proverb goes. We have already mentioned it above: the essence of war is guile and ambush – thus indirect, disguised attack. Precisely for that reason the attacking 'I' will search for vulnerable spots of the other, for its 'Achilles' heel', in order to overpower the other through a cunningly laid out ambush or unexpectedly from the back. This 'indirect' approach precisely implies the encounter '*face-à-face*'. After all, that the violent 'I' avoids the face of the other, that it evades the other in order to approach the other indirectly or from behind, implies that the 'I' has first acknowledged the other as other. Precisely because the 'I' experiences the other clearly as a 'transcendent' freedom, it will try to *approach* the other as if it were not free, but as a wild and animal freedom, or rather as a force to be overpowered against which one must resist in an equally forceful, or at best in a more forceful way. Precisely because the violent 'I' experiences the other as 'transcendence' it will try to 'forget' and 'disregard' the other. That is why it does not attack the other with an open visor, but throws itself upon the other indirectly. This *pretending*, this *turning away* from the other and *averting* one's gaze from the other is only possible when the 'I' has first looked the other in the face and thus has experienced him as other, that asks for acknowledgement as other. We cannot pretend that we have not seen the other as other, without having seen the other as other! To attack the other, to subjugate him or even kill him is, paradoxically speaking, only possible by turning away and pretending that he is *not* an other who has the right to respect. Consequently, the acknowledgement of the other as other must precede the denial of another person's freedom, which forms the basis of violence (LC 39/19).

Levinas thus arrives at the conclusion that preceding all violence and war is a situation where two free beings stand over and against each other 'face to face'. The primary experience is that of the other, who turns directly to the 'I'. "War can be produced only where discourse was possible: discourse subtends war itself. (…) Violence can aim only at a face" (TI 200/225). In that sense, Levinas can rightly affirm that the '*face-à-*

face' is not so much one of the possible or one of the many relationships amidst other relationships. On the contrary, it has an ultimate, meaning to say foundational, significance (TI 196/221). Or still: the ethics of the I-other-relationship stands at the origins, it comes first, and is at the same time original, meaning to say, foundational. Ethics is indeed the first philosophy!

Ethical redefinition of the self

It is our conviction that in his second major work, Levinas not only explicitly extrapolates transcendental thought, which he had begun rather hesitatingly but nonetheless really in *Totalité et Infini*, but also radicalises it in an uncommonly sharp and challenging way. This radicalisation takes place, in our opinion, as a shift, or stronger still as a change of perspective. In his essay, Ponzio does what so many commentators on Levinas do, namely linking immediately with each other the insights from both works and making use of them interchangeably, as if the ideas from *Autrement qu'être* are the direct continuation of the ideas from *Totalité et Infini*. Undoubtedly, there is no mention of a radical break or discontinuity between both works. Yet it must be acknowledged that both works employ an entirely different language and style, which at least suggests the idea of a certain change in the mode of approach. Levinas himself has tried to explain this difference by pointing out that in *Totalité et Infini* he wanted to avoid especially a psychologising language in favour of a more eidetic language. In order to avoid the risk that his phenomenological descriptions would be understood as psychological concepts and expressions of subjective experience, with his phenomenological analyses, he intends to expose alterity and responsibility especially in the 'essence' of the described phenomena anchored in reality like identity, enjoyment, residence, work and especially the face. In the Preface to the German translation of *Totalité et Infini* he writes: "Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence *évite déjà le langage ontologique – ou, plus exactement, eidétique – auquel* Totalité et Infini *ne cesse de recourir pour éviter que ses analyses mettant en question le* conatus essendi *de l'être, ne passent pour reposer sur l'empirisme d'une psychologie*" (EN 249). In the same Preface Levinas speaks, on the one hand, of the philosophical discourse, that was begun in *Totalité et Infini* (1961) and was continued further in *Autrement qu'être* (1974) and *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (1982) but, on the other, he also mentions the "*variations non contingentes*" (p. 42). Notwithstanding the clear and unambiguous continuity between the work of 1961 and that of 1974 (and in extension thereof, the later work of 1982), the difference or the change should indeed not be taken too lightly. And maybe the change of perspective is

indeed more radical than what Levinas wants us to believe. At least, this is our conviction, which we now would like to present and discuss further.

In *Totalité et Infini* we see especially a movement of "transascendence" (TI 5/35), meaning to say a movement that searches above or beyond the identity and the totality of the same for the radical other. In *Autrement qu'être* Levinas no longer directs himself to the alterity or exteriority of the face of the other, an insight that has been acquired phenomenologically (*and* transphenomenologically), but he turns back to the subject, the 'I', which he has described till then, in contrast to the radical alterity of the other, as the radical separateness of the 'I' as the same. He arrives at a redefinition of the subject, out of the awareness that there is something not entirely correct with his first description of the 'I' as the same. He retraces his steps and asks himself whether in his description of the 'I' as the dynamics of 'reduction of the other to the same' he has not forgotten and disregarded something essential. We can also call this an important Husserlian moment in his thought, in the sense that according to the Husserlian phenomenological method, he turns back '*zu den Sachen selbst*'. Throughout the development of his thought regarding the alterity of the face and especially of the appeal to responsibility that is coupled with its epiphany, Levinas comes to the awareness that with his description of the 'I' as identity, or rather as the dynamics of identification and totalisation, he has not yet exposed something essential – the true matter itself – of the subject. We can call this turn a movement of 'transdescendence', in the sense that Levinas now descends into the 'I' itself in order to penetrate through – or under – identity to the true being of the 'I'. Starting from what we can call the 'objective' or external alterity of the face of the other in *Totalité et Infini*, in A*utrement qu'être* and later he already directs his attention to the 'subjective' or internal alterity, namely the alterity that is at work in the subject itself. In this way, the impression of dualism and even of irreconcilable opposition that is evoked by the bipolar dynamics of the same (totality) and the other (infinity), prominently present in *Totalité et Infini*, is corrected. Totality and infinity do not stand over and against each other but are linked to each other, just as it is indeed apparent in the title of *Totalité et Infini* itself. They are thus linked to each other by an intimate intrigue that the same is not only radically separated from the other but is also the bearer and guardian of the other.

Levinas concretely discovers how the 'I' as the same *par excellence* is not only the same, but how the 'I' is already marked from the beginning, or rather 'pre-originally', meaning to say even before the 'I' can pose itself as origin and principle of being and action, by the other than itself. It is no coincidence that in *Autrement qu'être* Levinas speaks about "the other in the same", "heteronomy in autonomy" and about

"transcendence in immanence". We are faced here with a very exceptional paradox. On the one hand, Ponzio rightly states that we must abandon or surpass the domain and the logic of being (identity, totality) in search for an 'exit', an 'exodus', an 'outside' - namely an "outside the *essence* (*essement*) – the process or event of being – outside *conatus essendi*" (p. 19) outside the theme, outside the subject". However, when we read carefully *Autrement qu'être*, we see how this externality as internality must be interpreted: the 'outside' of alterity is 'inside' the subject, just as Ponzio also indicates: "otherness is not outside the sphere of the I". The 'I' is not simply and plainly an egocentric 'I', in the sense that its so-called natural selfishness is already troubled and traumatised by the other than itself. The 'extra-versive' movement toward the other is at the same time an 'intra-versive' movement inwards: the subject *is* opened up toward the other, and this standing towards the outside is its intimacy. The 'I' is created as being attuned to the other than itself. It stands outside of itself, it is ecstatic, and thereby is it an 'I', not in the nominative but in the accusative, just as Ponzio also indicates. Levinas expresses this acutely in the familiar French expression "*me voici*", an expression that for him offers the translation and interpretation of the Hebrew "*Hinneni*". What is remarkable in both the Hebrew as well as the French expression is that it concerns an accusative form without a nominative form. This is to be contrasted to the English: 'Here I am'. Precisely because it stands in the nominative, the English expression suggests too much that I offer myself and make myself available, while the Hebrew-French expression, precisely as an accusative form, wants to convey that the 'I' is already 'offered' even before it can offer itself. I find myself in the condition or the situation of 'the one already offered', and thus stand precisely from the very beginning in the accusative, even before I can pose myself in the nominative as an actively choosing and self-offering subject. I stand, literally, accused: I stand in blame by the other, even before I as an active and free being can commit a mistake towards the other. We can express at best this accusative-significance of the responsibility-despite-myself as an heteronomous and original, or rather pre-original "being indebted", in the sense that in spite of myself I am indebted with my own being to the other, before the other. In spite of myself I find myself turned outwards - my interiority, my psyche, my soul, are turned outwards by 'being moved in spite of myself'. My being-self consists in standing turned outside of myself, without first turning myself, as an active subject, towards the outside. The 'I' is to be bare, exposed, without first actively having exposed oneself – this active exposing is only something that the 'I' can take upon itself as a second resort, as an 'assent' to its pre-original exposure, whereby it literally chooses to be what it already is! In that sense is the 'I' marked, animated and inspired by the other than itself: already dedicated to the other than itself, even before it can pose a free act of 'dedication to the other than itself'. The active entering into a relationship with the other goes back to a radical passivity, namely a passivity that I cannot instigate myself, but a passivity wherein I already find

myself: I already stand in relationship with the other than myself. I am already in dialogue with the other, I am already attuned to the other, even before I can attune myself to the other, even before I can exchange ideas with the other. I am already linked to the other, even before I can link myself to the other. In this regard, the covenant precedes every contract. We are not 'wolves towards each other' (Hobbes), but each other's 'keeper and brother' (the Bible). Even before we can behave as each other's brother, we are already 'geared up' – preceding our freedom – as 'each other's brother'. I am my brother's keeper in the literal sense of the word, in the sense that I am already linked with him even before I can consciously and freely link myself to him. The '*au-delà*' (beyond) is '*en-deça*': that is the true paradox. The transascendence out of the same toward the other, in concrete out of the self toward the other, becomes in *Autrement qu'être* a transdescendence, meaning to say a descent into the same under the same, under the self, in order to discover – to surmise – that by which the self is already marked and also 'constituted' before all else. By means of this recurring movement of introversion we discover, in other words, that the 'I' is for all else an 'otherwise than being'. It is no coincidence that Levinas labels this 'being by and for the other than the self' as '*creaturalité*', as createdness, wherein the 'I' already finds itself – from time immemorial. We can label this with a Heideggerian term as an ethical '*Befindlichkeit*', or stronger still – as Ponzio does (p. 22) – as a "*Geworfenheit*": being thrown. In what is at the same time a recurring and ever further deepening search for the right words, Levinas also qualifies the subject as 'subjectedness', namely a '*subjectité*' that can be read literally from the word 'subject'. It is 'being subjected' to the command that proceeds from the face of the other: through this order it is already marked even before it can *de facto* 'hear' the command that proceeds from the appearing face of the other. In that sense the 'I' 'stands' under the irrefutable appeal to responsibility, even before it can experience itself – in the encounter with the other – as being called and appealed to in order to respond, meaning to say in order to take up the responsibility for the other (AE 61-68/48-53).

Levinas arrives at this radical redefinition of the subject on the basis of his thorough reflection on the ethical appeal of the face that proceeds from the face of the other. The face directs itself towards me as an ethical imperative, in the sense that I am touched by the vulnerable and injured face of the other. I cannot remain indifferent towards the other, or rather I can indeed but should not be indifferent. This ethical dynamism between the other and me, however, presupposes that not only am I touched by the face of the other, but also that I am 'touchable'. The condition of possibility in order to be affected by the epiphany of the other is that I am affectable. Hence, Levinas not only describes the 'I' as the same that closes itself up, but also and especially as the 'I' that stands open, or rather as that which always must stand open, in order to be able to

be touched by the other that presents itself. In order to be able to stand exposed before the other the 'I' must be 'exposable'. It is precisely for that reason that in the period of *Autrement qu'être* Levinas characterised the 'I' as '*sensibilité*' or 'sensitivity', which is bodily through and through. One does well here to pay attention to the fact that this sensibility should in no way whatsoever be actively understood as a conscious choice and attitude of attention and openness for the other. On the contrary, it must be understood as a radical passivity, meaning to say as a passivity more passive than any passivity, which all too often is still understood as an active 'disposition', meaning to say as a self-opening and self-authenticating passivity. Sensibility is a movedness by the other than oneself, a movedness that has happened to me – in me – in spite of myself, a movedness that is already there even before I can make myself move towards the other. And it is precisely thanks to this heteronomous and passive movedness that I can actively set myself in motion toward the other. First, I am in spite of myself already responsible for the other, and that is my being, before I can actively behave responsibly for the other. And it is thanks to my heteronomous already being held responsible, thanks to this condition of possibility of the affectivity that has already happened to me previously so that I am also affectable, that I can effectively take up the responsibility for the other. My sensibility by and for the other is then no merit, but – especially when looked at from the perspective of being – rather an inconvenient condition of existence whereby I am an ethical being, meaning to say I can be appealed to (AE 86-91/53-56).

The reverse order of the subject turned inside out – an order that seems to be rather a disorder from the perspective of Essence – manifests itself in and through the 'bad conscience', just as Ponzio rightly indicates (pp. 18, 21-3). My self-complacent consciousness, the identity that unfolds itself by unabashedly drawing the other to myself, becomes disturbed, stronger still, is shocked and questioned by the other than myself. Or rather, I discover my identity as an already troubled and questioned identity, as a bad conscience, that actually has always already been a bad conscience. My consciousness is an 'affected' and 'moved' consciousness and precisely for that reason it is also a 'disconcerted' conscience, whereby I – since an 'immemorial past' – already find myself involved with the other than myself, with the other who is already thrust upon me before any free choice. I already stand in an ethical relationship with the other, even before I can actively relate in an ethical way to the other. That is why, according to Levinas, ethics is the ground, or rather the underground, or stronger still, the 'non-ground' of my being. Ethics constitutes my being. The paradox, however, is that ethics characterises my being without itself again becoming ontological, in the sense that I am not doomed to be ethical, meaning to say to be ethically good. I am marked by the other than myself, I am sensitive to the other than myself, in spite of

myself, but this sensitivity is no more than an ethical appealability, meaning to say an ethical addressability, and thus not ontological natural law, necessity or coercion. In this regard, I am already at peace with the other,[7] without this being an unavoidable, inescapable peace, like a natural phenomenon - like a stone that on the basis of its 'nature', (on the basis of the force of gravity) falls to the ground. I can refuse to authenticate and to incarnate myself, my already being linked to the other self. I can thus choose to simply 'be', to give in to my 'natural being' or '*conatus essendi*'. This then does not mean, however, that I am surrendered to the being of my being. Even my being is no mere natural phenomenon; it is not an ontological logic with its own laws of necessity and inevitability. I am, as such, marked in my being by the other than myself that I *can* choose, and also *must* choose for the other than myself, for the other, without having to be surrendered to it like a natural fate. This is not about an irresistible must, in the sense of a not-being-able-to-do-otherwise, but about an incontrovertible must, to which I indeed can duly resist. I can renounce my 'true self', my 'being by and for the other'. I can indeed turn a deaf ear to the appeal that proceeds from the face. I should not do that, however; even though that is the prohibition against killing the other, I am indeed able to do so. I do avail myself of the freedom to use violence and to kill, meaning to say, to make my 'being' a fundamental option and deliberately and willingly authenticate and experience it according to this being, on the basis of self-interest. If necessary, I do so on the basis of mutually well-understood self-interest, in line with what we have discussed at the beginning of this commentary. Most preferably, we do so avoiding war, but if it must be the case, then up to the struggle for life and death.

Finally, in this context we must also point out how the redefinition of the subject as 'the other in the same' and as 'otherwise than being' also has for Levinas a theological significance, whereby 'theological' does not have a confessional but only a strictly philosophical meaning. Since it does not belong to the theme of Ponzio's essay, we would like to briefly indicate it here, although it is not without importance, as will be made apparent later. The responsibility for the other, that precedes my freedom, and through which I am thus 'signed' even before I come to the act of consciousness, links Levinas to the idea of the divine in me. As being dedicated to the other than myself in spite of myself, I am touched and inspired by the other than myself. I already find myself along the tracks towards the other, which means that I am already animated by 'the idea of the Good in me' (*l'idée du Bien en* moi'). Or put even more paradoxically: my soul is the divine in me, or God in me, who as 'the Good above being' appeals to me and moves me to take up responsibility for the other. In this regard, Levinas can state: "*le psychique est originellement le théologique*" (TrI 39). Levinas also calls it the essential 'religiosity' and 'spirituality' of the self, in the sense that the 'I', insofar

as it is inhabited by the other than itself *and* stands turned towards the other, is also inhabited by God. He interprets his theological redefinition of the human person also on the basis of the idea of the 'Infinite One'. For that purpose, he refers to the literal meaning of "*In-fini*": the Infinite One is *in* the finite, in the sense that the more finds itself in the less, or stronger still, that the more, the Transcendent, is at work in the less, the immanent of the finite self. And since for Levinas the God-idea can only be linked to the idea of goodness, to be understood as 'above being', the presence of the Infinite One in me can mean nothing else than that I, in spite of myself, preceding every initiative and every choice by myself, am destined to responsibility by and for the other. When consistently thought through, this means that according to Levinas the ethical – as the other in me – is founded in the divine. I cannot be ethical, meaning to say called in spite of myself to responsibility for the other, unless I am inspired by God – as the Good above being – down to the intimacy of my self. Hence, the religiosity of the 'I', insofar as it is inspired by the Infinite One and the Good, counts as the condition of possibility of its ethically standing towards the other. From this, it is apparent how this reference to the 'theological' and 'religious' underground of ethical appealability by and for the other does not simply have a formal character, in the sense that it is useful to refer to it for the sake of completeness. This is indeed apparent from the fact that the theological redefinition of the subject is already offered extensively in *Autrement qu'être*, which then finds its culmination in a compilation of essays, in *De Dieu qui vient à l'idé*e. It is thus also a question of honesty to refer to the foundational theological and religious, in short spiritual, dimension of Levinas' ethical redefinition of the subject precisely because in that way it is apparent how God as the Good in me is the condition of possibility of ethics as responsibility by and for the other.

Ethical view on politics and state, and further

On the basis of the ethical redefinition of the 'I', that from now on can be described not only more, or even not in the first place, as a rapacious, totalising process of identification, but counts as an 'otherwise than being', in the sense of 'being for the other in spite of myself', Levinas likewise arrives at describing society and politics and state (understood in the broad sense) in a different way. While in *Totalité et Infini* he has an especially Hobbesian interpretation of state and politics, and thus emphasises particularly negative aspects – although the 'other' movement is indeed not entirely absent, as is apparent among others at the end of the work and to which Ponzio also refers[8] – in the period of *Autrement qu'être* Levinas arrives at rethinking politics itself out of the face to face as a primary, foundational ethical relationship between people, and out of the subject as an eminent expression of the otherwise than being in its being

itself. Levinas is in search of "a peace that is not based in war" (cf. Ponzio), whereby he even more clearly manifests himself as a radical 'anti-Hobbesian', precisely by "inverting the Hobbesian concept of *Homo homini lupus*" (pp. 28-9). It is clear that Levinas in his later works, namely starting from the period around *Autrement qu'être*, develops a concept of state and politics that no longer starts from the brutal and restrained 'being' of the many 'I's that come into conflict with each other, whereby war is the 'extreme ratio' of politics, even when these 'I's arrive at peace but from both the passive as well as active responsibility of the one for the other. The fact of the 'third party' indeed challenges us to broaden our original responsibility face to face into justice for all others. The other and I are not alone in the world; we are amongst many, likewise called by Levinas as the datum of 'humanity'. Inspired by our heteronomous responsibility we must not only take into account the unique other but everyone: the second and the third, the fourth, the tenth, the thousandth, the millionth… That is why we must judge, classify, distinguish, calculate and weigh out on the basis of priorities and urgencies, and thus treat everyone in an equal and fair manner. Only by means of this care for a fair and balanced justice can we remedy the initial (non-intentional) violence that is inadvertently fixed in the exclusive *face-à-face*: if I do everything for the one other, I automatically do injustice to the other others that are forgotten and excluded. There still is more, however. Since we cannot immediately reach those who are far off, meaning to say the true 'third parties', we must realise justice via 'mediations' ("*Vermittlungen*", Hegel). We can only concretely substantiate our responsibility for the others in plural when we introduce 'intermediary terms' between ourselves and the absent third parties, whereby we do reach them indirectly but indeed in actuality (HS 185/). These intermediary terms are all sorts of forms of social, economic, financial, legal, political structures, institutes, organisms, agencies, systems, both infra-national as well as national, international and global. With Levinas we can call this organisational and structural network 'state' and 'politics', understood in the broad Aristotelian sense of '*polis*'. In this regard, state and politics are for Levinas utterly positive and ethically considered an obligation, in the awareness that a choice can also be made for a 'Hobbesian' politics and state, that approaches society and develops it on the basis of a fundamental option for the image of humanity as 'one's own being' and the approach to the other as a threat, which flows forth from that image. The dominant Western, Hobbesian, view on politics, in other words, must not only be critiqued as a wrong concept but it likewise deserves all attention insofar as it is a factual possibility, which was also developed historically and has returned time and again and still *can* return. Or rather, it remains an ethical possibility precisely because a politics that returns to the responsibility of the one for the other is not an ontological necessity but only an ethical possibility that can be substantiated not automatically but only on the basis of ethical choices that need to be

renewed time and again. Hence, it is important to return to that which precedes all politics and all societies, namely the subject being ethically marked by the other and the responsibility for the other (LPI 49).

However desirable it may be, an ethically inspired social and political order, according to Levinas, can never have the final word. A political order constantly runs the risk of deteriorating. Since it takes shape in laws, structures and institutions, it demonstrates inadvertently an objective, distant and anonymous character. Its nameless objectivity is the cause that subjects are no longer treated as separate persons, but rather as elements that are considered under a generalised term or totality. In this sense the objective generalisation, that the social order must carry out in order to guarantee its task of justice for all, including the third parties, signifies the constant threat of structural violence and tyranny, whereby individuals are partly rid of their irreducible separateness and unique characteristics (TI 276/300).

This reverse side of the social, economic and political order is experienced in an exceptional manner in a totalitarian socio-political regime, that in the name of justice proclaims itself as a definitive regime. Historically we have seen this happen in Stalinism. The Stalinist system was rigid and unrelenting. Moreover, Stalinism raised itself into a final, insurpassable system of well-being in the name of the 'good' for the proletariat. This is the horrible paradox of Stalinism: evil takes place in the name of the good: the good (of standing up for the poor, the oppressed 'other') is transformed into its own opposite. In this regard, Stalinism is in a certain sense even worse than Hiterlism. While Hitlerism rests on an immoral foundation, namely the racist exclusion and destruction (proclaimed in the 'blood-and-land-ideology'), Stalinism rests on a fundamental moral inspiration, namely the preferential option for the 'other', understood as the vulnerable 'poor, widow, orphan and stranger' (which indeed also form the core of the heteronomous responsibility by and for the other). In other words, Stalinism is the terror of the inherent perversion of one's own ethical movedness. It is so convinced of its own 'absolute right', meaning to say its 'vocation', of having to establish the utter Good and Purity of its own socio-political order that it rejects and also attempts to exterminate all dissidence as chaos and undermining of justice and truth with all its accompanying coercion, dogmatism and persecution. Or to put it differently, Stalinism inadvertently turns against its own original 'good will', precisely because it has absolutised its choice for the good (of the other) into an all encompassing and final system. The worst that can happen to ethics is when, in the name of the face of the other or the proletariat, one creates – as it has happened in Stalinism – a socio-economic and political system and proclaims it as the absolute

good whereby it literally becomes the evil of the good and thus destroys ethics itself in the name of ethics.

Now this counts not only for historical, political Stalinism, but also for all forms of social, economic and institutional design. Social agencies or organisations as such can raise themselves as the final word on justice, such that they elevate themselves as the definitive and decisive answer to all questions that have to do with that specific social sector. The same can be said of economic organs, structures and institutions. The economic reality of producing and trading goods and services, that at the same time concretely realises itself via money and finance, can as such be ruled by the financial network of banks and stock exchanges and others that they become an anonymous, almost divine (or should we say demonic) omnipotence (SA). One does well to pay attention to the fact here that this is not simply an accidental evolution, but is a pseudo-inevitability inherent in the system itself, as we have already stated above. Its structural and objective externality brings along that it presents itself inadvertently as a fixed and definitively valid social or economic regime. Its inherent conservatism implies the temptation of a social or economic Stalinism. That is why we must not turn a blind eye to the Stalinism or the 'Stalinist' traces that are inherent in our own socio-economic system, whereby this laboriously constructed welfare and well-being system effects the deterioration of its own noble goals. In our society we have developed an immense social and economic technocracy, that not only becomes even more complex, but it reaches even farther with its tentacles like a globalising octopus, whereby the evil in the good itself lurks around every corner.

Socio-economic justice, however, never fulfils the responsibility of 'the one-for-the-other', just as it is neither fulfilled by a political order. The options, priorities and achieved balances that are laid down in the educational system and the health and welfare services (to take just two examples), create ever-new injustices. That is why 'an even better social, economic and political justice' is needed - yes, even sometimes a new social, economic and political justice that tries very attentively, as a critical corrective, to recognise, to prevent and to remedy every deterioration of the structural forms of justice, or even radically question it. This is only possible in a non-totalitarian regime, also called by Levinas a 'liberal regime', which in principle proceeds from the idea that the justice achieved is always incomplete. This implies the need for the questioning of the social, economic and political act, even when it is just. Indeed, it is never 'just' enough. By means of this questioning, or this 'permanent sobering up', we can avoid the absolutising of our social, economic and political realisations, meaning to say the terror of the good that raises itself to the absolute good and thus transforms itself into evil (AS 62).

According to Ponzio (pp. 29, 33, 37), entirely in line with Levinas, this surpassing is only possible by creating space for human rights that take to heart in their pure, non-political formulations the rights of the unique other, going against every system (EFP 98). From within human rights, which by definition are not equated with a regime, one can radically question not only a fossilized politics but also a socio-economic system or break it open for greater justice and more humanity. They have at the same time a critical and prophetic character. They go against the resigned and self-confirming conservatism of all social, economic and political institutions *and* they provoke or literally call people to come forth and strive for a better justice, without degrading itself however into the evil of a totalitarian system of justice that pretends to avail of 'true justice' (PM 178). A society that accepts human rights as an internally critical and prophetic agency is a non-totalitarian, flexible socio-economic and political order that likewise accepts the possibility of speaking and acting by the individual when something – according to the individual's conscience and awareness of responsibility – no longer contributes to a better form of justice (HS 185). This 'free place' and 'transcendence' is authenticated by the unique, responsible subject, that is never identified with the system and the organised forms of society and precisely in that way – as poet, singer, innocent child, simple mind, fool, dreamer, journalist or prophet – can, may and must put the achieved system under critique (EN 216-217).

The responsibility of the one for the other still functions, last but not least, in another way as a critical corrective and surpassing of the social, economic and political justice, namely as the 'miracle' of the "small goodness" ("*la petite bonté*"), whereby every political and socio-economic system is relativised. There are, if you will, tears that no single functionary or whichever socio-economic and political system can see.These are the tears of the one, unique other. So that matters would work well and end up humanely, the singular responsibility of everyone, for everyone, towards everyone is and remains – over and above every system – necessary. In every social, economic and political establishment, individual consciences are needed who are sensitive and vulnerable in their bodily affectivity to the suffering of 'individuals' and who thus take upon themselves unconditionally the fate of others, not only of those who are near but also of those who are far. They alone are capable of seeing the violence that ensues from the good functioning of the socio-economic and political rationality itself. Precisely for that reason, Levinas argues for the 'ethical individualism' (TH 82/24) of the 'small goodness'. He calls it small because it runs from the one to the unique other, because it does what no single system ultimately can do - it enters into the needs of the singular other with concrete contributions. Small is this goodness, too, because it is anything but spectacular, as it has no desire to be total. It is about a modest, partial

goodness that does not have the pretence of solving everything once and for all and thus create a paradise on earth. Filled with enthusiasm and dedication it does what it can, without wanting to get everything in its grasp. It bears the world, even though its deeds have no magical power to change the entire world and history and make them come to a happy ending (LAV 116-117).

In conclusion: Jerusalem and Athens

To conclude, we can interpret Levinas' view on the relationship between responsibility and politics on the basis of the way in which he understands as a Jew and as a philosopher the relationship between Jerusalem and Athens. For him, first comes the "wisdom of love" ("*la sagesse de l'amour*"), based on the heteronomous responsibility just sketched which does justice to the other – by not killing the other – and thus acquires unique knowledge from the other, based on ethical 'recognition'. This Jewish "wisdom of love", however, also needs the Greek "love of wisdom" in order to transform – on the basis of deliberation and consideration, comparison and knowledge of affairs – responsibility into justice on the social and political level. But in its turn, this love for wisdom cannot have the last word. It needs to be surpassed by that which must precede it, namely the wisdom of love that reveals itself in the face to face, to which Ponzio (p. 28) also rightly alludes. The Bible must not only be added to Greek wisdom but must also precede the Greek love for wisdom. In other words, Levinas does not place the Bible and Greece beside each other but he involves them with each other. They need each other, although the Bible is more fundamental than Greece. This does not mean, however, that Greece would be unimportant. Greece is necessary, but must be embedded, from the front and from the back: '*en deça*' and '*au-delà*'! The responsibility of the one for the other forms, in other words, an inclusion – inspiration and perspective – for society, state and politics. Or to extend Ponzio's remark: the initial peace of the *face-à-face* does not only precede politics, it subsequently inspires and orientates legislative justice and peace, in order in its turn to surpass them once again, insofar as the achieved social and political peace can never be peace enough. The first *and* the last word come to the 'small peace' of the face to face.

This view on the relationship between Jerusalem (Bible) and Greece, however, is for Levinas not a religious or theological thesis, but an utterly philosophical thesis. The Jewish character is not in contradiction to the philosophical slant of this thought. Ponzio is simply correct (p. 32) when he reflects that Levinas is not a Jewish thinker in the sense that his being-Jew, and the Jewish scriptures to which he refers, would form an argument for his thought. Never do the verses of the Bible and the Talmud form an

authoritative argument. Only on the basis of their intrinsic truth value do they have any right in his philosophy, in the same way as the verses of Homer, Hölderin and Trakl can only acquire any philosophical authority precisely and only insofar as they provoke and give rise to thought. Levinas' thesis regarding the primacy and the ultimate character of the Jewish wisdom of love, meaning to say of 'Thou shall not kill' and the 'responsibility by and for the other' only has value insofar as it can be made insightful and communicable in a philosophical – phenomenological, transphenomenological and transcendental – manner.

Notes

[1] According to the Julian calendar, which was still enforced during the former Czarist empire, and therefore according to his first, Lithuanian passport, Levinas was born on December 30, 1905. According to the Gregorian calendar, which was (and still is) operative in Western Europe and which was introduced in Eastern Europe only after the Bolshevik revolution, Levinas' birth date is on January 12, 1906, as it is indeed indicated in his French passport.

[2] The initiative that was taken by Paul Cobley, the editor in chief of the journal *Subject Matters*, to present the extensive essay of Ponzio to a number of Levinas scholars can be seen as an homage to one of the great philosophers of the twentieth century, who has given a strong ethical elan to dialogical thought.

[3] I have used shorthand references to Levinas' works in the text of this essay; see key at the end.

[4] Even though Levinas himself has never paid attention to the environmental problem, our dealings with nature and animals that have grown out of modernity with its subject-object mode of thought can quite simply be interpreted as an expression of the 'reduction of the other to the same' by the thinking and acting 'I'.

[5] In *Autrement qu'être* Levinas writes that he does not dare make use of the term 'ess*a*nce' because it is so uncommon (AE 3/3). In later studies, however, he does so. For instance, he thus writes in *De la déficience sans souci au sens nouveau* (1976): "*Nous écrivons ess<u>a</u>nce avec <u>a</u> pour désigner par ce mot le sens verbal du mot être: l'effectuation de l'être, le Sein distinct du Seiendes*". A similar explicit reference can also be found in his studies of 1977: *Herméneutique et au delà* en *La révélation dans la tradition juive*. Afterwards, the use of "ess*a*nce" becomes self-explanatory, as is apparent in his study *Philosophie et positivité*, wherein the term is used without any note or reference (PhP 196ss).

[6] Upon closer inspection, this also implies that the tradition of the Good that transcends being is older than the tradition of being, even though it would often seem

otherwise in Western thought. The paradox, however, is that that which is usually discovered later, namely the transcendence of the Good and the One, actually precedes that which one takes as a starting point, namely being or Essence.

[7] This peace is not the consequence of or the continuation after violence and war, to which humans – after an agreement or when under pressure – have put an end. The peace intended here is original, in the sense that it precedes all violence and all war, and is also the soul and inspiration of all actual peace. Ponzio rightly speaks of 'original peace' and 'primordial peace' (pp. 23, 27, 37).

[8] In his section 'Responsibility, justice, and state' Ponzio concretely refers to the familiar text from *Totalité et Infini* on the state as the realisation of the responsibility of the one for the other on the collective level (TI 300-301).

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Identity: logic vs. culture, some remarks on Québec

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Introduction Gemara: Makkoth[1]

"Rabbi Johannan said: The colleagues of Rabbi Hanania Ben Gamaliel do not share his way of seing. R. Ada Bar Ahva taught, they say, in the school: between Shabbat and Yom Kippur, there is no difference other than this: the willful fault of the one is punishable by man; for the other, punishable by ostracism. But if it is thus (as R. Hanania Ben Gamaliel would have it), then in the two cases, the sanction will be in the hands of humans.
...

R. Ashi says: You could even say that this teaching, according to the doctors, is: the intentional fault of the one lies in the hands of humans, in principle; the intentional fault of the other depends, in principle, on the heavens.
...

R. Yosef said: But who then has been above, has come back, and said this?

Abbai responded: did not R. Yehoshuah Ben Levi say: Three things decreed by the tribunal on Earth, to which the tribunal on high agreed. Who has been above, come back, and reported this (as you say)? But these are verses that we are interpreting. So let us then interpret these verses."

Emmanuel Levinas, 'Leçon talmudique sur la justice' (1991: 88)

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Augusto Ponzio: The 'I' questioned

It is the great merit of Augusto Ponzio to have moved through the work of Levinas as a whole, and given us an impressive overview of the high points of his work both confessional and philosophical. From a discussion that opens with the meaning of identity in Western thought, Ponzio proceeds through the question of politics as "realistic" and "appropriate to the reality of world communication," concluding with Levinas, in 1961, that politics "qualifies itself as a relation with the ontology of world communication-production." Thus, "realistic politics must correspond to ontology, to the point of accepting the *extrema ratio* of war…"(p. 4).

Certainly, war threatens no less today than it did when Levinas drew up *Totality and Infinity* in the post-war period. It is likely that, as these essays are published, Iraq's slide into civil war will show itself consummated. But we even stumble at this sentence: the passive voice is unacceptable here. The question of culpability, of direct and indirect causes, outweighs a facile choice of active or passive voices. Even for those who write for one another. Do we actually read one another? Perhaps. But knowing one another, students and historians of philosophy, we allow ourselves abbreviations which would seem uncanny to those who read lines like: "Levinas shows the connection between World, Reality, History, Identity, Truth, Force...Politics and War, that is inscribed in our experience…as Westerners…the world of global communication is the world of infinite war…" (p. 4). Ponzio's argument targets Identity as the core concept, and 'function', against which Levinas' philosophy arises, both as protest and as self-dissolution in a secular messianic sense:

> "The question we must ask is that to which Levinas dedicated the entire course of his research: …whether there be no other sense than that of being in the World and for the world? Whether the *properly human* may exceed the space and time of objects, the space-time of Identity?" (pp. 5-6).

It is crucial to have an anchoring concept in order to resume an entire trajectory of thought. This reminds us of something Rabbi Hillel once said: "The entire Talmud comes down to one teaching: never do unto the other what you could not accept having done to you". To this, Rab. Hillel added: "Now, let us go and study".

That there is no ethics without intelligence, critique, nuance is a commonplace. That religion might have as its core intuition something more than a community of likeminded persons may also be a commonplace, though this can degenerate into clashes of identities. But that political critique should not move with extreme care -

like judicial decisions - toward reaching a balance between for-us and for-the-other choices, is unacceptable. How then can we sum up Levinas' thought and avoid simplifications? How can we avoid making him the ethicist - even in the aesthetic moment of the beautiful ideal of the gratuitous gift to the other: responsibility? We know so much now about Levinas' thought. We know that it is not about making gifts to the other. We know that the interruption of the other takes place in a micro-temporality, like a gasp, whose residue or "trace" is remorse. Many of us who have read Levinas emerge convinced that some way to bring his thought into politics is necessary - as critique, as witness, or as the supererogatory veiled in pragmatics. And we have had two decades of questioning and criticism of the proposed political 'translation' of Levinas' intuition about intersubjectivity. The difficulties attaching to political and cultural translation of his thought are due to a number of factors. One important factor is that the polemic about identity and difference overflows conceptual binarities. For example, no matter how 'levinassian' Derrida may have become in his later writings, the critique he advances of the Same and the Other in 'Violence and metaphysics' (1967; 1978) remains unavoidable. There is, he argued, no absolute other so long as other is "*other than*".[2] No absolute other as long as the other has a face, mobile in its multiple expressions, mortal in its fragility, and always a temptation to murder. There is no politics that bears unequivocally a trace of the other, which is not wound up with violences both salutary and dangerous. Therefore, the categories of Same and Other, finite and infinite, demand that we criticize them and let them interpellate each other in a movement that looks like a dialectic without higher finality.

If we know this only too well, then how shall we go about communicating Levinas' teaching? For, in fact, it is as though we all know this teaching by now. Yet, this teaching eludes the very philosophical schematizations that those who propose it to larger audiences recreate. It seems to me that we are in a situation today in which the developments of super-power politics so vastly surpass us that we do best to propose more modest measures, in some way in our control, as the best way of carrying Levinas' thought further. I would like to suggest an example of this in a moment. For the time being, it is enough to recall that, by 1974, Levinas had effectively walked away from the notion of the other as radical, non-spatial, exteriority - following Derrida's demonstration that the philosophical distinction between inside and outside was irreducible - to embrace a thought of the other-in-the-same. In the later work, which lacks the emphasis on hospitality, and therefore, also lacks a metaphysics that Derrida contrasted sharply with the metaphysics of Kant in *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* (1997; 1999) - in his later work, Levinas emphasized the intensive "punctuality" of those repeating "experiences of responsibility", which had formed the core of *Totality and Infinity* (1969). While the two treatises, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than*

Being (1998), are not intended to say different things about ethics, the emphases they place upon space, time, self and other are different. *Otherwise than Being* is the book that works better because it frames subjectivity in its tension between the vulnerability of the skin and the incessant re-mastery of conscious life by itself. All of our conscious life moves through this tension. Whatever the spatial position of the other, by virtue of repetition, that other is 'in' us like a memory with a host of contents and like an emotional disturbance—even a kind of itch or throbbing. We could write the psychology of the development of 'hetero-affection'. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen (1993) has discussed this hetero-affection in decisive opposition to Michel Henry's auto-affection of life living itself and feeling itself. Certainly, human life contains both. But we should also pursue the implications of philosophy as recurring affection, being affected by, the other person.

This philosophy, as Ponzio understands, poses the question of dialogism "as a fundamental condition of human subjects…[and] a sort of *a priori*" (p.13). In his essay, Ponzio distinguishes substantial dialogue and formal dialogue, arguing that "substantial dialogue ... is also the structure of the I" (p. 12). Here arises the search for modes of "involvement, exposition, proximity of one-for-the-other" (p. 13). Here is where we can take up Levinas' thought and build those mediations whose absence the late Gillian Rose decried in light of Levinas but also as the conundrum of post-modern thought: against a philosophy of identity, post modernism establishes logics of diremption and uncaptable transcendence. Lost is the middle term leaving a hiatus that will be foreclosed or sacralized with little possibility of grounding political or cultural practices that could permanently contest the politics of identity.

Mediations and differends: the question of culture

Gillian Rose's critique (1996), like Derrida's, approached Levinas with a Hegelian perspective. This is probably the only perspective that allows us to question philosophies of radical difference; it may also be the only thought that would permit articulation with a Levinasian moment preserving the trace of responsibility within institutions devoted to law and justice. The great irony would be that Hegelian articulation. Do we already see it in Adorno when he adumbrates an ethics of responsibility and resoluteness, moving as if between Hermann Cohen and Nietzsche? Perhaps. It remains that Adorno was Rose's prime inspiration. It remains, too, that a Hegelian politics was the counterweight, the failure - factical failure - that gave rise to the "New Thinking." Rosenzweig would have been the left-Hegelian to dawn the mental of the master, had it not been for the trenches of Yugoslavia. Between the

failure that was his *Hegel und der Staat*(1920) and the totalization experience that was the first World War, not to mention the invented Jewish "*Dolchstoss*," Rosenzweig came to contest what he called philosophies of totalization or identity. For the irony would be indeed the necessity of an actualized dialectic prolonging, culturally and politically, the Levinasian intuition. Prolonging and threatening it - as it is always threatened in any event. Adorno understood this. Indeed, thinkers of secularized messianism also grasp the difficulty of stabilizing the messianic interruption and its temporality. It is all a question of finding a perspective from which to judge history without the pretence of a substantive escape from that history and from there, of suggesting means by which some dimension of the supra historical critique might be inserted into institutions. This overbid on philosophies of totalization and identity never escapes being integrated by them, and never ceases to reassert itself as critique and as question. It is as though we were possessed of two esthetic desires irreconcilable, yet irrecusable: first, that we might rationalize a real (that we have always suspected to be our birthright) such that it brings forth a just politics that combines contractualism, separation, and order. Second, that the possibility of reasserting a discourse oblique or exorbitant with regard to the slowly congealing dominant discourses be possible. These are both 'aesthetics' in the middle Nietzsche's sense of the term: a setting of chaos into limited order and with that the creation of a certain beauty. Levinas understood this dual obsession. He called it a culture committed to the values of the true and the good simultaneously. He feared, in this dual fixation, the unstoppable fixation of hypocrisy. We can also see in this the tension that moves our changing 'historicization'. The immense attraction of Levinas came at a time when disillusionment with the triumphalism of structuralism and its optimism about unearthing the mathematically precise matrices that spawn mythology, kinship structures, socioeconomic exchange had been eclipsed. Moving between the myth of reason and an expanded rationality, *and* the religiosity by which we assert the irreducibility of suffering and the particular (which somehow escapes the concepts) is the oscillation of Western history since ... ? The oscillation is not between identity and difference, it does not reduce to clusters of *Identités meurtrières*, as Amin Maalouf (2001) puts it. It shows that history unfolds as uncompletable local dialectics, undoes these, and re-begins with a shocking display of selective memory in which the hiatus are largely unconscious. Between mythology and a certain religion. To which of these 'clusters' does the notion of identity—in logic, in politics—belong? What can it mean to assert a philosophy that would outshoot the logic of identity, and also somehow ideologization?

A philosophy of irreducible differences reminds us of Levinas' plural ontology and his conception of sociability in 1961. He worked this out, we know, through a philosophy

of conversation and the history of a rather 'holy' family. Lyotard (1983) ventured an exercise in sociopolitical pluralism, for his part, from a philosophy of language in which different universes of discourses and phrase registers gave rise to the question of movement between *differends* and their passage into dominant registers - a passage in which they might not lose their irreducible specificity. We know that he was ultimately pessimistic about the possibility of our hearing, and reflecting on differends, because the acceleration of time in production and communication shrank the 'space' in which differends could unfold. We have, he argued, less and less time for the complexities of justice conceived as plural, incompatible discourses. Now, if the acceleration of production, communication, and socioeconomic activities implies the deceleration of bodies, group activities, and the blurring of effective clarity, as Teresa Brennan maintained, it is clear that nothing short of the massive disruption of world communications or its energy sources could slow this acceleration-deceleration. In that respect, there is no more time to move from the summary, the concentrate, illustrated above by the Rab. Hillel's reduction of the Talmud to one ethical lesson, to the imperative of painstaking study, critique, and questioning. We have to ask, perhaps tremulously, whether summaries of Levinas' thought - which certainly make him accessible to educated readers - do not move too quickly to set up new binaries of identity and difference or pass over difficulties that paralyze parts of his thought. One such difficulty lies in the necessity of recurring to the body as life and vulnerability, such as Levinas does in 1974, while avoiding the traps of body logics that turn on metaphors (and not quite metaphors) of force and will, such as Levinas denounced, in 1934, in Germany's new adventure with Nietzsche's philosophy.

Secularized Messianism

If Levinas' thought takes form, by 1974 especially, as a secularized Jewish messianism, what can that mean, now that we have left the atmosphere of Adorno's negative messianism[3] and while we still ponder, perplexed, Benjamin's "*geheime Verabredung*" with those whom we never knew but who may have breathed the air we now take in? Is it not in the process of turning around again, such that the messianic spirit of protest and denunciation is growing sclerotic in new dogmatisms? Would this be the ascendancy of our founding phantasm of identity? Is it an alibi that the West provides itself and whose disruption promises to increase in violence until real separations between civilizations are grudgingly respected? It seems to be the merit of Ponzio that, in a schematic philosophical language, he is evincing this conflict within the framework of Levinas' protest against the philosophy of Identity.

But indeed, when Levinas considers justice, he takes care to keep us in the midst of an unsublatable tension. For example, his 1961 'Messianic Texts' (1990) ask whether we are still capable of messianism. Arguing that Israel, since becoming a State, has entered world history, and that the Rabbis can no longer be forgetful of the meaning of world history, he nevertheless hopes that this State, somehow different from others, might stand between messianism and pragmatism. What would he say of this today?

When he comments on the passage cited above from the Gemara, he points out that the hinge of the text is R. Yosef's question: Who, then, has been up above, come back and told us about all this? Like the question he raises at the end of the messianic text, the Jewish messianic moment is a 'maybe', not a unilateral affirmation. The wager is that this 'maybe' has room for a secular ethics and a religious hope. And that would mean that the attempt to stand between a (holy) community, anchored in the transcendence of Law, and a horizontal universalism, obtained through the secularization and reapportionments of that Law, would already be in Judaism itself. So this tension would not be the upshot of something like the Jewish-Christian face off, nor the unambiguous confrontation of identity with difference. But this tension is itself inflected differently at divergent historical moments. If it is true that we are passing out of an age in which the myth of reason and progress held sway, into one in which questions of transcendence, sovereignty, faith, and the finite infinite binary are being revisited, then we need to complexify - and historicize, the sense of identity and all that positions itself as exorbitant in regard to it.

Given the unlikelihood of philosophers or journalists altering these "*grandes formations*" of civilizations, we are called to act even in the passivity of our spectatorship. Levinas' thought invites us to seek small answers, as natural and political systems slide toward an inhospitality to life itself. The skeptical moment voiced by R. Yosef is a moment necessary to messianism, much like the enigmatic aphorism that Benjamin called '*schwache Messianismus*': "*Die Vergangenheit führt einen heimlichen Index mit, durch den sie auf die Erlösung verwiesen wird"* (1980: 693).[4] Enigmas require study and critique - cultural and political critique. They require the recognition that conceptual reductions, and certainly the watchwords of ideology, call for complexification, listening, and even stammering. More weakness, which starts with me, "a relaxation of essence to the second degree…relaxation of virility without cowardice" (1998: 185). This too is necessary to messianism - to keep the messianic spirit complex, to keep it weak. And that is why, after Rab. Hillel reduces the Talmud to one ethical lesson, he added the essential qualifier: "let us go, then, and study."

Micro-Messianism: cultural measures with political implications

To which we could add political proposals whose outward appearance might well be a banal pragmaticism. But how can banal pragmaticism be anything better than the old bromides where the monolith of Western self-sufficiency - pouring out what Jean Baudrillard called its unidirectional 'aid' onto peoples who had no way of repaying its 'gifts', and thereby no way of laying claim to their political dignity - when this monolith confronts resistances large and small and a contestation that in all likelihood will end in expanded war? How can pragmaticism satisfy us when enormous forces have been unleashed? Is this not always the case, yet predictably inflected in unexpected ways? Always the case and invariably different. Who remembers those 'little' struggles - say, of peoples speaking languages not even listed in language maps of the world? Who in the United States, or Europe, cares much about those places where Europeans and Americans spend money, gamble, and dine, erstwhile pleasure places? We scoff at small resistances perhaps, vastly more concerned to find answers to those questions that trouble the threatened equilibrium of world politics. And we translate human events into multiple levels of world significance. How could we do otherwise? Yet events that translate a certain 'Levinasian' spirit can be found at the second and third significance-tiers as well - perhaps more clearly so.

If, in our political cynicism, or despair, we imagine that there is nothing to do against structural forces, then we relinquish the small measure of efficacity to which we might have some access. Thus, for example, after two centuries of second class status, after an aggregate of class and cultural *habitus* had taken shape, inscribing into bodies the subaltern position born of agricultural poverty or factory serfdom, a number of near inexplicable changes began to take place among a lost group of six million. Referred to by journalists as "*Nègres blancs d'Amérique*" (Vallières 1968, 1979; 1991) an identity movement grew up around the same time as the decolonization and beginning of the Civil Rights movements. The stories of Québécois abjection are like so many others: ghettoization, cultural ostracism, psychic abjection - coupled with a distasteful romanticization by those who savored their 'homestyle' hospitality or celebrated the guileless naïveté of the *habitants*. Not even an issue for most of us today, the clapboard housing and fetid water described by independentists like the notorious Pierre Vallières are *almost* a memory, if nonetheless a scar. My interest is not, here, to raise yet another case of a "*peuple-impensé*" in a vast current of unpredictable history. It is rather to suggest one small but interesting response in which messianism takes the kind of form that I think it *must* take today if it is to be simultaneously the 'perhaps', noted above, and the critique and the interruption by which essence might be

temporarily relaxed. That said, we also see illustrated here the paradoxes of the articulation of the messianic promise and the search for reparative identity.

To recapitulate, the mediations between "infinite responsibility" and "justice" must assume forms in which culture and politics intertwine. To the degree possible, cultural contestation can and should survive through legislative and juridical measures. To be sure. This does not so much mean cries for an abstract freedom of the press (including caricatures) as it means respect of hardly bridgeable cultural differences and history as a site of transcendence (recall that in 1968, Derrida saw identified history as the site of transcendence).

Between 1960 and 1977, then, debates unfolded about the question of saving a culture directly threatened with engulfment in two blocs of English speaking peoples: one some 230 million strong, the other some 20 million strong. Since, in politics, the other is rarely singular, and the defence of the few is rooted in the right of many to survival, traditions, and stories are the indispensable component—even the counterweight—of institutionalization and critique. No revolution survives without the support of traditions, whether ancillary or encompassing, the way Marxism belongs to Enlightenment thought, even as it carries with it a messianic promise that is not just a part of the Enlightenment. No commentary, no halting, no messianic 'perhaps' can survive without writing and transmission. Levinas understood this well. What this means in the age of electronic media and the fragile writing conveyed through pixels is another question. Resistance to cultural evanescence motivated a minor political gesture, unknown to people outside of Canada - perhaps indeed outside of Québec. To me this represents the kind of gesture that we need to consider at a time when the 'weakest messianism' may be the only option available to us. From the experience of a people considered and treated as "hopelessly inferior"[5], arose a law about a language. The law was deceptively simple. Legislative projects, employment contracts, and other legal contracts were to be published and circulated in French and English. An Office of the French Language was to be established to oversee the implementation of such a law. This was not a declaration of hegemony, not even an exhortation to abolishing communications with the dominant group. It concerned identity. Yet everything about it strikes us by its near self-effacing call for justice:

> All judgments rendered by a judicial tribunal and all decisions rendered by institutions exercising quasi-judiciary functions are translated into French or English according to the case, at the request of a party, by the administration responsible for assuming the cost necessary to the function of that tribunal or that institution" (Section 9, Chapter 3 of *la Charte de la langue française*).

Does this not illustrate the simplicity and efficacity of one conception of identity, enacted at the level of culture? This is not the totalizing identity link to the Western Idea, decried by Ponzio. But it is also not without its paradoxes. *La Charte* realized, hesitatingly, an unforeseen hope which had pasted below the wavelengths of the well-intentioned liberals and conservatives, whose logic of Canadian integration was one of cultural erasure.

On the 27th of August 1977, *La Charte de la langue française* was passed by the Provincial government of Québec under René Lévesque. Explicitly an exercise in reparative linguistic justice, it unfolded unexpectedly as a project of a new society and cultural construction. Contracts had hitherto been drawn up in English and submitted to people unable to acquaint themselves with their fundamental rights and duties, to be signed on the spot, in the factories and mines. This made unionization nearly impossible; it implied, too, that French speakers kept silence in the work place or stammered in English translating their demands into the "dominant language"[6] *La Charte* assured that teaching of French would be protected, thereby slowing the elimination of the francophone population. It entailed that new immigrants to Québec would learn French and English as they swelled the demographics of the Province. *La Charte*, also called 'Bill 101', was denounced as racist. English speakers protested; representatives from prestigious organizations like the Chamber of Commerce of Montréal predicted catastrophe. None of this ensued, although *La Charte* was not without its "counter finalities". I describe it briefly here to introduce complexity into the criticized notion of identity. Oppressed difference cannot bypass identity as it reconstructs the bases on which it is to exist. These bases are simultaneously civic, cultural, and economic; in their multiple interactions arises the complexity and levels of the notion of identity itself.

If the Québécois should not be compared to groups whose oppression evolved through wave after wave of bloody repression, like the Haitian people, it remains the case that the Québécois found themselves in the unenviable position of engineered cultural disappearance, economic abjection, and frequently as the brunt of the kind of condescending hilarity one finds in sophisticated discussion of the 'colonially' underdeveloped. I propose *La Charte* as a modest measure - which proves complex because its enactment could not escape social and political dialectics of force (remember that English and French are given equality of place in a gesture of cultural and political equity that for its optimal aim, opens to new conflicts) - by which the 'perhaps' of messianic hope, coupled with the ambiguity that summons reflection, can take cultural and political form. Other forms may be possible. Numerous philosophers have explored these. The criterion, to my eyes, that must be determinant today is the

promise of change coupled with the 'go and study' interruptive mechanism that slows down the impulses to reduction, simplificatio, and ideologization by which a logic of identity seizes hold of the heterological. Here is where we can build mediations out of Levinas' thought. But this task is almost outside philosophy. It redounds to historians, chroniclers, legislators, activists. As also does the work of remembrance and mourning. Perhaps they shall read Ponzio's work and understand this.

Notes

[1] Heartfelt thanks to Gabriel Malenfant for discussions of history and criticism, and the recommendation of Vallières.

[2] "L'infiniment autre…ne peut être ce qu'il est que s'il est autre, c'est-à-dire *autre que* doit être *autre que* moi " (1967 : 186; "The infinitely other…can only be what it is if it is other, that is to say, *other than* must be *other than* I"). Beyond this, Derrida proposes a number of "Parmenidean exercises," all of which end in a contradiction. Impossible to hold together an embodied face that looks at me and speaks with an Other whose infinity is ab-solute. Because this absolute is mortal.

[3] Messianism which took the form of an exhortation to think history, almost impossibly, under the sign of redemption - where redemption fueled critique and an implausible hope.

[4] "The past carries with it a familiar index, through which it is referred to redemption".

[5] "I know of no national distinction marking and continuing a more hopeless inferiority," wrote Lord Durham of the "French Canadians" whom he saw as "doomed…to be dependant" by virtue of their "spirit of jealous and resentful nationality." He fancied that the best thing for such a race was absorption or disappearance—according to a logic which cannot but be familiar to us today (cf. Milner and Milner1973: ix).

[6] Nevertheless, unionization came early to Québec, followed by violent reprisals. On February 13th 1949, two thousand Asbestos minors employed by the Canadian Johns-Manville Company halted work in the Thetford Mines (in the Chaudières-Appalaches region), complaining of hazardous conditions. A week later, some three thousand additional workers joined their ranks. The hoary regime of P.M. Maurice Duplessis declared the strike illegal and sent police to protect strike breakers called in by Johns-Manville. The strike lasted through February to July. Wages were improved, but working conditions were not. In 1977, the same year that the *La Charte* was passed, René Lévesque signed *la Loi syndicale* forbidding the use of scabs for strike breaking purposes.

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Concrete abstractions and the 'Rights of Man'

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Ponzio's extended essay successfully weaves together Levinas' disparate writings on Zionism, ethics, phenomenology, and more into a coherent whole that makes clear how Levinas' philosophy calls into question 'occidental' formulations of reason and identity. For Ponzio, and Levinas, a phenomenology of the Other introduces an exteriority that cannot be captured, co-opted, or comprehended by the outgrowths of occidental reason and identity that Ponzio labels concrete abstractions, "These concrete abstractions which are 'internal' to today's overall system of social reproduction include the World, History, Subject, Individual, Community, Difference, Truth, Reason, Freedom, Force, Power, Politics, Labour, Productivity, and the Market" (p. 1). In Levinas' analysis even human rights can become concrete abstractions when they are founded on identity. So, while Levinas ends up embracing almost wholeheartedly a fundamental foundation of liberalism, namely the '*a-priority*' of rights, he calls for rights that prioritize the Other and thus he thinks rights 'otherwise'. In this essay I will interrogate Levinas' writings on rights in the context of recent critiques of Levinasian thought and human rights by Alain Badiou. I will conclude that though Levinasian rights interrupt the concrete abstractions of the global capitalist system, they are unable to sustain an emancipatory politics as called for by Badiou and others.

Between theology and multiculturalism

Badiou in his short book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* poses two possibilities for heteronomic philosophies such as Levinas'; either they are ultimately theologies or they are reducible to servile multiculturalisms that disguise their foundations in identity. First, Badiou argues that by seeking a radical rupture of identity and concrete abstractions, in his attempt to "push thought over to a different origin, a non-Greek origin, one that proposes a radical, primary opening to the Other conceived as ontologically anterior to the construction of identity" (Badiou 2001: 19), Levinas must ultimately resort to some type of theology. This theology is a necessary

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extension of Levinas' demand for a radical alterity as opposed to relative alterity. Ponzio distinguishes the two as follows:

> Alterity in the face-to-face exposition is not relative alterity of roles, positions, functions, power. It is absolute alterity. The exposedness of an alterity to another alterity in the face-to-face relation is before identity, subjectivity, freedom, language, being and it is their condition (p. 20).

For Badiou, this radical alterity "which transcends mere finite experiences" (Badiou 2001: 22) necessarily refers to God. As he writes "there can be no finite devotion to the non-identical if it is not sustained by the infinite devotion of the principle to that which subsists outside it. There can be no ethics without God the ineffable" (Badiou 2001: 22). Badiou is well aware that Levinas' ethical thought does not begin from proofs of God's existence, but God appears through the ethical relationship with the human Other. Thus, to philosophize otherwise in a Levinasian sense requires the development of a theology thought otherwise. This step must be taken. God cannot be removed from the equation. As Badiou writes "to believe that that we can separate what Levinas' thought unites is to betray the intimate movement of this thought, its subjective rigour" (Badiou 2001: 22). Or, as Levinas writes "the problem of transcendence and of God and the problem of subjectivity irreducible to essence-irreducible to essential immance - go together" (Levinas 1981: 17).

For Badiou the alternative to this theological reading is some type of "ideology of a 'right to difference" (Badiou 2001: 24). Those who embrace this servile multiculturalism are indebted, mostly unwittingly, to Levinas' theoretical breakthroughs about the Other but Badiou claims their thought is "strikingly different from Levinas' actual conception of things" (Badiou 2001: 20). Instead of grounding their thought in absolute alterity, they embrace relative alterity that ultimately must be grounded upon identity. "The respect for differences applies only to those differences that are reasonably consistent with this identity (which, after all, is nothing other than the identity of a wealthy - albeit visibly declining - 'West')" (Badiou 2001: 24). A watered-down Levinasian thought, without emphasis on transcendence, without radical alterity, cannot get us to a radical rupture that can disrupt the world-wide system and break down its concomitant concrete abstractions.

Ponzio's essay can be read as an attempt to navigate between Badiou's two alternatives. He develops Levinas' thought and its implications in various sectors of modern thought and in each, he shows how Levinas' thought, through an emphasis on dialogue that transcends mere exchange, breaks down the prevailing thought built upon

a closed system of identity. Ponzio appears to be pushing Levinas' oeuvre as far as it can be pushed without theologizing. To show what is at stake in this fine line between theologizing and non-theologizing, I will compare two apparent hendiades (plural of hendiadys; a coupling "in which the first term is actually always already contained in the second" (Agamben 1996: 161)); the "rights of man and citizen" in the French Declaration and Levinas' "rights of man and the Other".

Arendt (and Agamben) and the critique of the Rights of Man

Hannah Arendt takes seriously the hendiadys, perhaps forgotten since the early Marx, in the title of the French Declaration. She argues that by grounding the rights of man in sovereignty in the first three articles of the Declaration, citizenship became the *sine qua non* of human rights. So in the wake of World War I, as the nation-state began to dissolve so did the rights of man. The inalienable rights of man were shown to be illusory when the nation-state was faced with millions of stateless and or denationalized people. The nation-state could only comprehend the non-citizen in terms of citizenship; i.e., through asylum or assimilation, but the sheer numbers of refugees precluded such co-optation; and without the guarantees of the state, millions became rightless and human rights discourse became folly:

> The incredible plight of an ever-growing group of innocent people was like a practical demonstration of the totalitarian movements' cynical claims that no such things as inalienable rights existed and that the affirmations of the democracies to the contrary were mere prejudice, hypocrisy, and cowardice in the face of the cruel majesty of the new world. The very phrase 'human rights' became for all concerned - victims, persecutors, and onlookers alike-the evidence of hopeless idealism or fumbling feeble-minded hypocrisy (Arendt 1973: 269).

Human rights were shown to be "hopeless idealism or fumbling feeble-minded hypocrisy" by the very fact of millions of stateless who had lost all political agency and who had no institution to protect their rights. The title of the Declaration would suggest that those who have lost their rights as citizens could, at minimum, claim their rights as men, but instead, "the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human". Indeed, "the abstract nakedness of being nothing but human was their greatest danger" (Arendt 1973: 299-300). Without a political community, without law, their freedom was "illusory because they have no place to go, and their freedom of opinion is a fool's freedom, for nothing they think matters anyhow ... They are deprived, not of the right to freedom, but of the right to action; not of the right to

think whatever they please, but of the right to opinion" (Arendt 1973: 296). In short, they have no agency, they are pure naked humanity, and they merely exist in "a peculiar state of nature" (Arendt 1973: 300).

Thus, for Arendt,

> human dignity needs a new guarantee which can be found only in a new political principle, in a new law on earth, whose validity this time must comprehend the whole of humanity while its power must remain strictly limited, rooted in and controlled by newly defined territorial entities (Arendt 1973: ix, cf. Isaac 1996).

Instead of elaborating on the "new guarantee" that Arendt locates in a classical conception of citizenship and politics, here I will mention Giorigio Agamben's recent extension of Arendt's analysis, because his guarantee nicely complements Levinas' rights of the Other. Agamben urges a central place for the refugee in a new politics at the beginning of the end of the nation-state:

> Given the by-now unstoppable decline of the nation-state and the general corrosion of traditional political-juridical categories, the refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which may see today … the forms and limits of a coming political community (1996: 159).

The refugee, who, in Arendt's analysis signals the end of the liberal nation-state, for Agamben "clears the way for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed" (Agamben 1996: 162). These categories include the citizen, who is now revealed to be always a potential refugee. Agamben concludes,

> only in a world in which the spaces of State have been thus perforated and topologically deformed and in which the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is – only in such a world is the political survival of humankind today thinkable (1996: 164).

What will it take to perforate the state and call into question the privileged place of the citizen? Levinas addresses this question through an analysis of another apparent hendiadys; the rights of man and the Other.

Levinas and the rights of the Other

Ponzio writes, "the title of Levinas' essay 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other' (1993), is symptomatic of the possibility of contradiction between claiming the rights of Identity as the rights of man and the rights of alterity, as the rights of the other man" (p. 37). Ponzio begins his analysis with the *a priori* nature of Levinasian rights. "They are prior to all permit, concession, authority, entitlement, prior to all tradition, all jurisprudence, all privilege, award or title, prior to all will and reason, *but also prior to all theology***"** (Ponzio 2006: 37, emphasis added). It is this "prior to all theology" that I would like to question. For Levinas' essay calls for two '*a prioris*', one that founds the rights of man and one that founds, in a way, the rights of the Other. The latter would be prior to all positive or negative theology, but not prior to the theology that disconcerts Badiou. Levinas quotes a Talmudic apologue, which, in part, reads "behold the King of kings, the Holy-Blessed-Be-he, who strikes all men with the dies of Adam and not one is the same as another" (Levinas 1993: 118). For Levinas, this multiplicity, as radical alterity, testifies to God:

> The fact that the identity of species can include the absolutely dissimilar, a multiplicity of non-additive unique beings ... surely this is the trace of God in man, or, more precisely, the point in reality at which the idea of God comes only to man. This is a possible meaning of that apologue which is not the equivalent of some deduction of the rights of man on the basis of a prior Revelation, but means, on the contrary, the coming of the idea of God on the basis of the patency of the rights of man (Levinas 1993: 118).

That the rights of man must be secured by a second *a priori* testifies, in a way, to the precarious nature of the rights of man. The rights of man aided and abetted by the development of technology have succeeded in transcending necessity and have broadened out to reach most of humanity. Rights have extended into spheres never before imagined. But, for Levinas, their foundations are at risk. Though technology remains a vital component of rights of man, especially in the developing world, technology and its way of thought can undermine rights. More pertinently, the kingdom of ends is based upon the scales of justice grounded in a formal universality. For Levinas this weighing of each individual on the scales of justice already perpetrates violence to radical alterity by objectifying the Other, by reducing the Other to something that can be compared. The rights of man as they have advanced are now based upon an "intellectual *a priori*" that, it could be argued, would offer little resistance to the rights of the citizen. Liberalism and human rights, without "another guarantee" only creates a "precarious peace": Even more apocalyptically, Levinas

envisions the rights of man permanently stripped away in the inevitable states of exception: "in the eventuality of a totalitarian state, man is repressed and a mockery made of the rights of man, and the promise of an ultimate return to the rights of man is postponed indefinitely" (Levinas 1993: 123).

To shore up this precarious peace, Levinas finds a new guarantee for rights "on the basis of a prior peace that is not purely and simply non-agression, but has, so to speak, its own positivity" (Levinas 1993: 123-4). This positivity will be found in dis-interest-edness, in the loving response that testifies to God, of the ego exposed to the face of the Other. By responding concretely and infinitely to the face of the other, the ego testifies to to God. Levinas appears to responds directly to Arendt's call for a new guarantee for human rights:

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

Ponzio more than most commentators emphasizes that for Levinas the an-archical ethics is always already within the realm of concrete abstractions. Levinas is not advocating a new supplement that could be inserted into politics. Since the subject is founded upon the an-archical relationship with the Other, an-archical ethics is always already contained within, and thus co-opted by, liberalism and its rights of man. This always already presence of an-archical ethics, therefore, provides a vivid demonstration of the co-opting powers of liberalism. Derrida's description of Levinas' method then also aptly conveys the inexorable characteristic of the foundations, institutions, and concrete abstractions of liberalism: "the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself" (quoted on p. 2).

Conclusion: Levinas and singular universals

We now have the meaning of the two apparent hendiades. Without the rights of the citizen, the rights of man are endangered and vice versa. And, without the rights of the concrete Other *and* the testimony to God, the rights of man are endangered. The title of the Declaration reveals itself to be a hendiadys when the second term envelopes and

suppresses the first. But, to the extent that the rights of man do not subsume the rights of the Other, the rights of man will not be subsumed into the rights of the citizen and the state and other concrete abstractions can be perforated by an extraterritoriality. Ponzio writes,

> at the least tendentially, the rights of man and the rights of the other man should coincide. But liberalism and democracy are powerless in the face of fascism if the rights of man defended by their justice are not also, at least tendentially, the rights of the other man (p. 38).

Though this exteriority disrupts the concrete abstractions, we must recall that Levinas ultimately embraces a self-critical liberal state and its human rights. His is not the emancipatory politics that Badiou desires nor is it the radical critique of political liberalism that many Levinasians desire. We are left with concrete moments that call into question identity and concrete abstractions, moments that will, most likely, quickly succumb to the concrete abstractions. As Levinas writes: "anarchy cannot be sovereign like an arche. It can only disturb the State - but in a radical way, making possible *moments of negation* without any affirmation. The State then cannot set itself up as a Whole" (Levinas 1981: 194, emphasis added). Are these "moments of negation" enough to serve as the new guarantee for human dignity that Arendt seeks? To answer that question we should question whether the exposure to the face of the Other can qualify as an event in Badiou's sense of the term. An event refers to a moment when previously uncounted elements "come to appear as needing to be counted in the situation" (Badiou 2001: 133-4). If a subject is faithful to the truth of an event, the event can cause a rupture in the ideological milieu of its time. For Badiou, a new truth "diagonal" to global capitalism must be proclaimed and therefore he calls for a figure like St. Paul, who is able to universalize a singular event to overturn the prevailing universalizing discourse (Badiou 2003).

To conclude, perhaps Badiou is correct, we need a certain type of religiosity to maintain Levinas' thought, but perhaps, *contra* Badiou, any event would require such a religiosity. In a globalized world built upon identity is it possible to posit a new truth that is not theological in some way? If Badiou is correct that only a universal can defeat another universal, then it appears that an emancipatory politics would require a radical rupture that can be universalized. An emancipatory politics that breaks down the concrete abstractions of the global order would require singular universals, or, if the term can be used after Hegel, concrete universals.

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Levinas and politics

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The central question in Augusto Ponzio's 'The I questioned', as I see it, is how Levinas' work relates to our current political conditions, which, for him, are an exacerbated expression of the Western tendency to obliterate otherness. While the question is clear, I am not sure of the answer he proposes. At times, especially in the first part of the essay, it seems as if Levinas' thought offers a corrective that would permanently change our way of conducting politics, if taken seriously. Such is the impression one takes away from paragraphs such as the following:

> Only by a recourse to the category of Otherness will it be possible to imagine a development in history that is other with respect to past history: the category of Otherness reveals the extent to which the History of reality and Politics, of War and Peace is constantly repeated. The other's point of view, comprising recognition itself of the other which makes such a view point of view possible, interrupts the monotony of repetition (p. 6).

In this passage, Ponzio suggests that the category of otherness, Levinas' contribution to philosophy, makes possible an interruption of history as it has developed hitherto. It allows us to imagine a different course for human affairs.

In the latter half of the essay, however, Ponzio's understanding of Levinas' philosophy pushes us in a much less revolutionary direction. In a passage such as the following, the most we can do is mitigate some of the severity of the political system, try to redirect it:

> Only the responsibility of the I as unicity and his relation to the face constitute the reference to which justice and the work of the state must be reconducted, and which they must take as their model. It is in the name of responsibility for the other, in the name of mercy that the rigors of the *dura lex* may be mitigated and that justice may be perfected, may become juster (p. 26).

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The same point is made a bit later:

> The action of the State is added to the work of interpersonal responsibility, responsibility as expected from the individual in its singularity - and in a sense denying it. The work of interpersonal responsibility is the work of the individual in its singularity, the person absolutely responsible: responsible in the sense of a hostage who must answer for something he did not do, for a past which was never his, which was never present to him (p. 29).

In both of these quotations, something less than a definitive change in the pattern of history is at stake. The individual assumes his responsibility for the other, working alongside the State, and in a way at cross-purposes with it. But since, as Ponzio makes clear, the State remains necessary in Levinas' thought, the violence that is attendant upon it, can never really be permanently eliminated. It is the latter of these readings, the much less radical one, which seems to me much closer to Levinas' own thought. I will in what follows attempt to substantiate this.

In *Totalite et Infini* (1971; 1969), in a by now well-known passage, Levinas says that the twentieth century has shown us that there are forces which can reduce the human being to his animal needs. Of this there is no doubt. The only recourse we have against such dehumanization is in knowing that is so, for it allows that fragile distance in which we can try to stave off the disaster; "it is the perpetual postponement of the hour of betrayal - infinitesmal difference between the human and the non-human - that presupposes the disinterestedness of goodness, the desire of the absolutely Other or nobility, the dimension of metaphysics" (Levinas 1971: 5). In this passage Levinas at once signals that dehumanization is a constant threat and that the effort to keep it at bay is perpetual as well. Metaphysical desire expresses itself as a permanent vigilance, as an attempt to prevent the conditions that lead to dehumanization - hunger, torture, homelessness, for example - from occurring.

In many of Levinas' talmudic commentaries, the works with which I am the most familiar, we have a similar emphasis, not on a revolutionary transformation of our political reality, based as it is on war, but on a burning concern to protect the vulnerable from utter dehumanization, despite this. In a commentary like 'Damages due to fire', for instance, a meditation on the nature of war, one of the recurring questions is whether every war is not already in its essence on a continuum with 'Auschwitz'. In other words, does not every war run the risk of overstepping whatever rational motives might originally have led to it - defence, the need for resources, balance of power - to become an irrational pursuit of power for its own sake,

obliterating everything weak in its path? In the latter case, the dehumanization that Auschwitz symbolizes is not the radical exception to conventional warfare but the exposed inner core of all war, where all of them are heading. Once violence is unleashed, it runs the danger of following its own logic.

We might think, given this, that Levinas adopts a pacifist stand. But he does not. It is clear that for him the State of Israel is a necessity in a world in which war always threatens to become the total obliteration of the powerless, i.e., the stateless (Levinas 1990:190-191). This state just as clearly needs to use military force to secure its existence. One can even interpret Levinas' last sentence as signaling that the destructive power of fire has turned into a protective fire, a kind of repentance by God himself for the all-consuming destruction previously wrought on the Jewish people. "But where is the glory of His presence among us, if not in the transfiguration of consuming and avenging fire into a protective wall, into a defensive barrier?" (Levinas 1990:196) The essay suggests that the most that can be done to counter the dehumanization latent in all war is to be aware of this tendency, stave off the moment when necessary defence turns into its opposite, and to be vigilant about the compensation owed to victims of abuse.

A similar recognition of the inevitability of violence occurs at the very end of 'Toward the Other'. There, Levinas describes the biblical figure of Ritzpah bat Aiah, a concubine of King Saul, mentioned in 2 Samuel. Two of her children are executed in the most brutal way by King David, who also chooses for the same fate five sons of his former wife Michal. For six months, Ritzpah watches over the corpses of her sons as well as over those of the others to keep the birds of the air and the beasts of the field away from them. Levinas concludes:

> What remains after so much bloodshed and tears shed in the name of immortal principles is individual sacrifice, which, amidst the dialectical rebounds of justice and all its contradictory aboutfaces, without any hesitation finds a straight and sure way (1990: 29).

Once again, we have a very violent reality, "the cruelty inherent in rational order (and perhaps simply in Order)" says Levinas (1990: 29). Countering this is the act of protection and mercy extended from one to the other.

This is not to suggest that Levinas' solution to the problem of violence lies simply in the individual's act of responsibility. It is neither that simple nor that simplistic. In 'Judaism and revolution', a very complex commentary dealing with the relationship of

the Jewish tradition and the State, Levinas makes clear that the State itself is responsible for guaranteeing conditions that permit for the fulfillment of the human (Levinas 1990: 99). Yet the State claims a universalism that is deceptive, for while it attempts to protect the individual person, it limits that protection to its own and thus divides the world into an 'us and them', quelling the responsibility of one to the other, beyond any distinctions whatsoever. The Jewish tradition's universalism, on the other hand, does not recognize limits to responsibility for the other person. It thus introduces a wedge between the Jewish people and the State, for the latter cannot limit the responsibility of the former. As such, the Jewish tradition always signals a loyalty beyond the State, and propels political activity in two directions. The first is in the direction of care for the most vulnerable members within it, setting the standard by which the State offers guarantees against dehumanization (Levinas 1990: 99-100). The second is in refusing to identify the good with a particular State, thus preventing the State from turning into an object of idolatry. Levinas warns, however, that even a revolutionary movement whose aim is to overthrow a hopelessly corrupt government can turn into a mirror image of the violence it contests, dividing the world into us and them just as much. A revolution always risks the very thing it is opposing. This does not mean that revolution is never justified but once again, we are left, as our only recourse, vigilance against abuses, rather than a once and for all transformation:

> Revolutionary action is first of all the action of the isolated man who plans revolution not only in danger but also in the agony of conscience. In the agony of conscience that risks making revolution impossible: for it is not only a question of seizing the evil-doer but also of not making the innocent suffer (Levinas 1990: 110).

Admittedly, my interpretation of these commentaries goes very fast over very complex materials that do not allow such breezy summarizations. Nonetheless, I would maintain that Levinas never meant his philosophy of the other as a solution to the problem of violence, as if, if properly understood and enacted, it would institute another course in history. History is what it is. Within these strictures, one needs to respond constantly against that violence, pushed into it not so much by principle as by that unavoidable responsibility in the face of the nakedness of the other person. Perhaps this is what Ponzio's essay actually attempts to say. If so, it could have been made clearer for at times it sounds as though Levinas' thought was opposed in principle to capitalism and to war. It is not that Levinas' thought is for either. Rather, his writings assume that whatever the system running the State or the world, it will always involve violence to the other. This does not mean resignation. It means

unending involvement to stave off the moment of betrayal. In this respect, it is a very non-utopian approach to politics.

I also find another of Ponzio's formulations in need of clarification. It is related to the political question, although it might at first not appear to be so. At several points, he claims that for Levinas the other is contained inside identity, as in the following passages:

> Identity contains more than it is possible to contain, because it is founded on otherness: there is in the finite the idea of the infinite, as Descartes calls it. According to Levinas, who refers to Descartes, 'infinite' means both non-finite, beyond the finite, and infinite, inside the finite (p. 9).

I understand that this is very close to Levinas' formulation and yet by itself it is misleading, for the infinite is not really *in* the finite. The subtitle of *Totalite et Infini* is, after all, 'An Essay on Exteriority'. The idea of the infinite signals a container for something it cannot contain The finite receives it but it comes from the outside and that reception involves a violence to the self, an unmooring from identity, a break in the container itself. All of Levinas' vocabulary of persecution, being held hostage, even being commanded by the other indicate a wound to the self, a violence done to the self that is not well served by placing the other within identity, as when Ponzio says even more strongly later: "Otherness is located inside the subject, identity, the I, which is itself dialogue, a relation between the same and the other" (p. 11). The self is indeed founded by the other but this is done precisely because identity is interrupted. In any case, otherness is a strange word in this context, since what the self encounters and what founds it is not an abstract quality but the meeting with a very concrete human being.

Related to this is Ponzio's discussion of the self as enjoyment. He seems to indicate a seamless weave between the self's appropriation and assimilation of the otherness of the world, turning it all into 'mine', and the self's response to the other person, because both the act of assimilating and the relation of responsibility occur before a conscious choice has been made (p. 9). This blurs the radical difference between the two, for the encounter with the other person puts into question the 'mineness' of the world, the act of assimilating it to myself and the making of a home in which one can be secure. It accuses the self, who in the process of turning everything into its own, had ignored the vulnerability and the radical unassimilability of the face. The self as identity is nonetheless necessary, for otherwise, there would be nothing for the other to interrupt and nothing with which the self could receive, be hospitable to the other. But

identity, and the work of assimilation of the world on which it depends, does not found the true uniqueness of the self, which can only come into being in the encounter with the face of the other person, making me and only me uniquely responsible for it. Ponzio himself says some of these things at various points in his exposition but he also blurs them in the passages I have cited.

In an indirect way, I think this relation of the self as the enjoyment of the world and the self as responsible for the other bears on the political discussion. For if the self as enjoyment, as the making of a home, is necessary if the other person is to be received as other, it means that part of the political struggle of necessity involves making sure that people have a home, literally. That is, human beings must have a place in which they can retreat, in which they are not continually subject to someone else's will, in which they can restore themselves. Without that, prey to constant insecurity, they are lacking the conditions necessary for a response to the other. They are dehumanized. Levinas makes this point in several of his Talmudic essays. In 'Judaism and revolution', for instance, in commenting upon Rav Zera's statements in Baba Metzia, 83a-b, he says:

> We are told that each of the just shall have his home. Isn't the proletarian condition, the alienation of man, primarily the fact of having no home? Not to have a place of one's own, not to have an interior, is not truly to communicate with another, and thus to be a stranger to oneself and to the other. After the world of night, after existence as a political threat, after existence as wild beasts, not only threatening but also threatened, after fear and anxiety, what is announced here as the triumph of the just is the possibility of a society in which everyone has his home, returns home and to himself, and sees the face of the other (Levinas 1990: 107).

He makes a very similar point in 'Damages due to fire'. In talking about the rabbis' injunction to stay inside one's home in a time of epidemic, he responds:

> You will see the entire problem of present-day Israel appear, with all the difficulties of the return. One must withdraw into one's home. 'Go home until the storm passes'. There is no other salvation except in the reentry into oneself. One must have an interiority where one can seek refuge, in which one is able to stop participating in the world (Levinas 1990: 190).

The two passages are clearly different in that the first is talking about a home in the concrete sense of a separate dwelling and the second is talking about a State. In both

passages, though, there is a dialectic between home, understood as an interiority, and home as an external space in which one is sovereign. It would seem that the external space is required for the internal condition, and that internal condition, is, in turn, required, in order, as the first passage says, for one to recognize the other, to welcome him or her. Thus, while the self is founded by the other, it requires becoming an identity, that is, having a home, before it can recognize what truly founds it in the first place. I am sure that there are more precise ways of articulating the relation between the self as enjoyment and the self as responsibility but whatever the formulations, the two do not blur into each other but are contrasting modes. There are some important political repercussions here.

Finally, I would like to say that in Levinas we have not only a guide for our thinking, political or otherwise, but also an example of someone whose thought is caught in the very conditions he is criticizing. For all his critique of European philosophy and the European return to the Same, Levinas, who came to France in 1923, and lived there almost without interruption (not counting the year in Freiburg, and the war years) until his death in 1995, was resolutely Euro-centric. Non-European traditions held little interest for him because they had not risen to the expression of the universal (Levinas 1984: 368). While for him the European expression of the universal is dangerous in its homogenizing tendencies, it remains the recognition of the unity of all mankind that other traditions have not achieved, the Jewish tradition excepted, of course. He was also caught in the enormous trauma provoked by the Holocaust. Yes, he is the philosopher who responded in an inimitable way by seeing revealed in the nakedness of the human face the very fundament of our reality. Without the protection of that nakedness the world is no longer a world. But he is also the person whose defense of the State of Israel does not include a critique of "the petitioning nationalism" Ponzio refers to (p. 34). Israel is always an ideal to be achieved, never a reality that needs to be confronted with its failures. I do not say this because I want to belittle Levinas' contribution. It remains great and I, for one, remain very grateful for it. I say this because the discomfort with the latest manifestation of capitalism, with free-market globalization, expressed in Ponzio's essay does not sufficiently take into account our own being mired in it. The reproach cannot be addressed to a system as if outside us. The great value of Levinas' thought, it seems to me, is to make us cautious of generalizations that put us on the right side of things. We are never on the right side of things.

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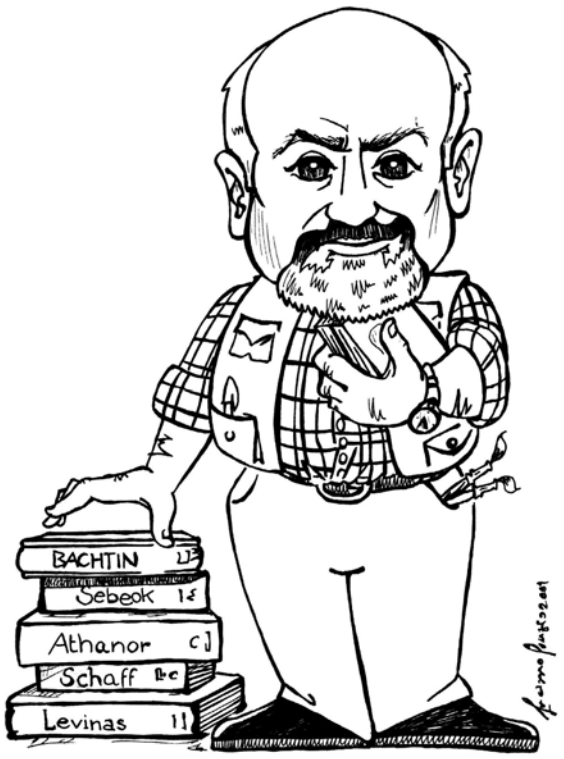
Augusto Ponzio: selected further reading



Augusto Ponzio's vast bibliography, across a number of languages, is only minimally represented here. Included are his works on Levinas in French, Italian and English, as well as those works which most explicitly treat dialogue and alterity.

For a comprehensive bibliography, see Ponzio's own website
http://www.augustoponzio.com
as well as one dedicated to his work
http://www.semioticon.com/people/ponzio.htm

See, also, references to the work of his collaborators, principally Susan Petrilli
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