

In Levinas' Trace

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FOREWORD

MARIA DIMITROVA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER ONE

ETHICS IN AN EXTRA-MORAL SENSE

JERARD BENSUSSAN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Consequently, the other is nothing but his face.

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

¹ *L’écriture et la différence*, Seuil, 1967, p. 164.

² *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*, Livre de Poche, p. 16.

For Levinas, this retracting accompaniment of philosophy consists of “*passing from an idea to its superlative.*”³

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

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

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

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

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

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

To say that the other is the face of the other thus overtaxes the superlativization of every definition, its exasperation in an indefinable, an infinite. This means precisely that the face is not a plastic form, a sensible appearance, a phenomenon; it does not consist of what I see of it, of what I can touch of it. The face is that which remains out of reach of these figures of meaning (of immediate sensibility and intentional signification⁷). Being the face of the other – necessarily of the other, as we shall see – it decides the entire appearance of the world, it deforms its own form, it invisibilizes its own visibility, it “*takes us beyond*.”⁸ The other thus announces itself as a face among the phenomena of the world; and even, more precisely, as that which undoes all phenomenality: a “*hole in the world*” as Sartre put it in a text dating from before the First World War, entitled *Visages*. Somehow, the face is not in the world. The relationship between form and deformation, between a phenomenon and its absence, between visibility and elusiveness, this “relation” between unrelatable terms which the face presents, is the trace of the infinite – but of an infinite which is properly in the finite while yet never being present in it. It is exactly this register of full presence and representation that the face invalidates. One could say that the face runs through the trace of that which never appears – the Infinite – while at the same time appearing somehow in-the-finite, infinite. Maybe literature is more able to capture the face than philosophy. While watching Albertine sleep, Proust’s narrator engages in a meditation on this “in-finite”:

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

⁷ The original French text ties up “meaning,” “sensibility,” and “signification” with a play on words relying on the homonymy of the French *sens*.

⁸ *Ethique et infini*, Livre de Poche, p. 81.

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

We could thus say that the face as the face of the other is, properly speaking, the only expression of alterity. There is no other. There is no alterity, in the strong sense of the word, of an object, or of a subject objectively grasped and understood, or of an other which would be another me, because such an alterity is always reduced to the sameness of the consciousness measuring or considering it. Consequently, there is no way for me to experience the face. In the “science of the experience of consciousness” of the phenomenology of spirit, the subject alien to itself – alienated in and through the other – asserts itself in the other’s recognition of its free subjectivity. If it loses itself in this assertion, if it loses itself as subjectivity, as freedom, in the pure eternity of its objective being, it nevertheless recovers from this loss which is the condition of its self-reconstruction. None of this, however, is present in the submission in which the face immerses me; nothing of the order of a Hegelian *Erfahrung*. The face comes before all possible arrival; it precedes all experience I might have of it when appropriating it, all “enrichment” of my experience of the world and others. We are speaking of an ordeal. “Infinition” is an ordeal; it is the ordeal of the other man, the Other as the absolute other, every other and any other (Derrida), the first to arrive¹⁰ (Levinas). That is, insofar as the infinite can be understood, as we have pointed out, as in-finite, in the finite. An other in the same, such is the “structure of subjectivity” according to Levinas, the most intimate mark of the subject’s subjectivity, the inscription of the finitude of a trace which will come to disturb it, do violence to it, desubjectivize it. In this descriptive category of subjectivity, in this structure of the Other-in-the-Same, we can discern a few structural traits as far as the subject is concerned. Thus, we can portray what a subject is, as well as the nature of its relation to the other who faces it. I will discuss at least one of these structural traits: a decisive one since it encompasses all of the others and

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

¹⁰ French original: *le premier venu*.

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

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

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

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

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

¹¹ *De l’existence à l’existant*, Vrin, 1990, p. 69.

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

a class in a general ontology or a region of being. To be a subject, for the desituated self (dismissed and deposed) thus implies not having a place in being, not having a place there where being-with-oneself¹³ means to nomadize being in its entirety.

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

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

¹³ French original: *être-chez-soi*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Translated from French by Sofie Verraest

¹⁷ *AE*, p. 180.

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

MARIA DIMITROVA

Dear Professor Bensussan,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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