Chapter 6
After Levinas:
The risk of irresponsible responsibility

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that for Levinas the dossier on humanism could be reopened only on the condition that humanism is radically re-conceived. But how radical, how new and, above all, how desirable is Levinas' post-anti-humanist humanism? The present Chapter seeks to submit Levinas' thought on the alterity of the other – the corner stone of his humanism – to critical examination. In accordance with the line of interrogation demarcated for this book, the focus will be on how the political implications of Levinas' philosophy are to be assessed. In the light of the critique that will be developed here, the question of thinking responsibility in its political dimension "after" Levinas, will ensue from this examination.

As a first orientation to the problems of gauging the political implications of Levinas' ethics, two insightful essays by two eminent Levinas readers will be presented. By juxtaposing the divergent reading of Marion and Bernasconi, the perilous nature of this undertaking will be signalled.

1 Universalism and particularism: Marion and Bernasconi

Humanism, according to the conviction articulated in *Humanism of the other*, is the defence of the idea that all meaning is orientated by the appeal of the other, of the other that bears the alterity of not being reducible to the subject's ontologico-hermeutic existence.

That is why the

"best way of encountering the other, is not even to notice the colour of his/her eyes! When one observes the colour of the eyes, one is not in social relationship with the other. The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that."[1]

It is the face of the other – metonymy for the alterity of the other – that interferes with the sweeping flow of Being. The alterity of the other would also be what invests me with primal or originary meaning, founding my subjectivity, my identity, my self and individuality – primarily as called to respond to the other. But who exactly is the other that invests me with singular identity in this way? Since it is the face without characteristics, this means that the alterity of the other is stripped of all individualising qualities. The other that makes the ethical appeal is nobody, or at least nobody in particular. This is the insight of Jean-Luc Marion: in Levinas' philosophy the other is nothing but universal, non-particular, humanity behind the particularities of the individual person.[2] The other, after having torn the self from the anonymous flux of Being, is swallowed by the anonymity of a humanity[3] without qualities. The face of the other cannot say of whom it is the face, since it speaks only in the name of a trans-individual humanity. Consequently, when confronted with the question of just responsibility towards the plurality of others, Marion is convinced that the ethical anonymity of the other inevitably translates into neutralising the other (as one is neutralised in front of the law), and that the identity of the ethical subject is in the same movement compromised and neutralised, since the subject has to respond to the other in the same way as anybody else.[4] In my view Marion's decision not to use the minor, but significant, theory of justice of the later Levinas[5] weakens his argument since it obscures the possibility, foreseen by Levinas, of making singularising exceptions in order to call the neutrality of the law to greater justice. This will be discussed later. Let it for now be granted that from the anonymity of the face of the other, taken absolutely, one has to arrive with Marion at *universality* and *neutrality* as the essential outcome of Levinas' ethics on the plane of the political.

1 E&I 85–86 / EI 79–80, translation modified.
2 Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, "D'autrui à l'individu", in: Emmanuel Lévinas. *Positivité et transcendance*. Paris: PUF (Epiméthée), 2000, pp. 287–308, in particular pp. 296–300.
3 E&I 86 / EI 81.
4 Cf. "D'autrui à l'individu", *op. cit.* p. 300.
5 And of which the only trace in *Humanism of the other* is to be found in HO 76n11 / HH 123n11.

Robert Bernasconi,[6] to the contrary, demonstrated that in a number of places Levinas' alleged non-specificity of the face of the other actually manifested as a "continuity with abstract humanism and its complicity with homogenization",[7] i. e., instead of the other's alterity being devoid of any content, Levinas sometimes universalised a Western or Jewish cultural identity in such a way as to make either of them the measure for the humanity of the other or of the self. In *Humanism of the other*, this is blatant when Levinas, whilst insisting on the relativity of particular cultures, still maintains a specific "generosity of the Western civilisation" that not only exposed this relativity, but in so doing helped other cultures to understand themselves, which, according to Levinas, they couldn't do before the Western intervention.[8] This process is claimed by Levinas to be one of generosity and is apparently dissociated from the colonising violence that he denounces.[9] This perspective echoes Husserl's 1935 Vienna lectures (of which the influence on Levinas is demonstrated by Bernasconi) in which an even clearer historical teleology is developed by which cultures are hierarchically ordered according to their fidelity to the (Western) idea of the human being as rational animal.[10] This complacency that Levinas exhibits regarding the notion of Western (or Jewish) superiority comes to the fore again, and more clearly, in scattered remarks in his interviews and Judaic writings.

The commentator arrives at the following conclusion:

"If at times Levinas still seems to judge other cultures simply by their proximity to his own, this should not be considered sufficient reason to dismiss his thought, before the resources of that thought have been explored. Foremost among these resources is Levinas's acknowledgement that the self-questioning that originates from the gaze of the Other always takes place as an interruption of my complacency. What disturbs the self-evidence that supports my unquestioned attachment to my own cultural values is not just the Other as such. It is the Other in his or her

6 "Who is my neighbor? Who is the other? Questioning 'the generosity of Western thought'", in *Ethics and responsibility in the phenomenological tradition. The ninth annual symposium of the Simon Silverman Phenomenological Center*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1992, pp. 1–31.

7 "Who is my neighbor?…", *op. cit.* p. 5.

8 HO 37 / HH 59–60.

9 "But it [Platonism] is overcome in the name of the generosity of Western thought itself, which, catching sight of the *abstract* man in men, proclaimed the absolute value of the person, and then encompassed in the respect it bears it the cultures in which these persons stand or in which they express themselves. Platonism is overcome with the very means which the universal thought issued from Plato supplied. It is overcome by this so much disparaged Western civilization, which was able to understand the particular cultures, which never understood themselves [*lesquelles n'ont jamais rien compris à elles-mêmes*]." (CPP 101 / HH 59–60).

10 According to Bernasconi, "Who is my neighbor?…", *op. cit.* p. 11.

specific cultural difference from me that presents a direct challenge to my own cultural adherences and calls me to respond without any certainty of the appropriate way in which to respond or the idiom in which to do so."[11]

It is this very last sentence which is the core of Bernasconi's reading of Levinas: the alterity of the other has a content, determined amongst others by that person's cultural or ethnic specificity – it is Levinas' erring on the side of implicitly claiming a cultural superiority that leads to this conclusion. Although I am not sure if this amounts to allowing the introduction of an "alterity-content" in the face of the other,[12] it does show that (at least) in the movement of responding to the other, the same Levinas allows one to conclude that the cultural *particularity* of the other and of the self matters in ethical consideration, and therefore this particularity surely does matter in the interaction with the plurality of others, in politics.

It is not my intention to arbitrate between these conclusions regarding Levinas' implications for politics as neutral universality or interested particularity. In fact, in what follows, it will become evident that I think that Levinas' theory of justice (which had not been sufficiently called to aid in Marion's or in Bernasconi's essay) probably opens up the matter to the entire spectrum of possibilities between these two extremes. In Levinas' own presentation of justice, he willingly concedes that even when the context-independent alterity of the *singular* other is maintained, the identity and specificity of the other do come into play once the subject is obliged to compare the *plurality* of others: as soon as there is a plurality of others, the subject's eyes are opened, as it were, to the particularity of the others and thus the cultural and ethnic, religious and economic, gender and age identity of the other becomes important. The subject's eyes are opened to the particularity of the suffering of the other. But the ethical responsibility of the subject to the other has not been made dependent on the particular qualities. This is of enormous importance, since it means that at any stage in my execution of my responsibilities to the others, any single other, whatever that person's identity or condition might be, could and does make an appeal to my responsibility, i.e., puts into question the manner in which I respond

11 Bernasconi, "Who is my neighbor?…", *op. cit.* pp. 26–27.

12 One cannot from Levinas' personal, cultural or religious convictions and the disparate abusive expressions thereof conclude that his philosophy should be changed on this matter. That is why I consider it important to let the resources of the text itself override the (conceded, important) mistakes of the author (which would harmonise with the preface of HO that insists on crossing out, or questioning, any expression of the alterity of the other). At the very least, it should be recognised that conceding to an alterity-content would amount to changing the very heart of Levinas' philosophy.

to the multiplicity of others and thus calls me either to greater attention to the particularity of some or to the greater equality of everybody. For this reason Levinas' subject could be an imperialist or anarchist, a liberal or a revolutionary – provided that such a conviction is justified with reference to the efficiency of serving the others.

The juxtaposition of these two strong readings of Levinas should suffice to point out the problem of the indeterminate status of justice as it is engendered from the plurality of responsibilities of the subject in the philosophy of Levinas. In stead of solving this problem, I shall attempt to measure its depth.

2 RESPONSIBILITY AND IRRESPONSIBILITY

A major uncertainty seems to arise in Levinas' humanism of the other human being on the level of justice, i.e., in the face of the plurality of others (and that has been introduced in this book already in Chapter 1). Central to this situation is the investment (or election) of the self by the other: the most intimate identity of the self is its *infinite responsibility* to the other in which *nobody could replace* that subject. But we have insisted in the first Chapter on the fact that there are always at least three – the ethical subject, the other and another other – I cite again:

"There are always at least three people. […] As soon as there are three people, the ethical relationship to the other becomes political and enters into the totalizing discourse of ontology."[13]

Now, when the *plurality* of the others comes into play, the other is drawn out of this universal anonymity (if one follows Marion) and his/her identity, singularity and particular circumstances enter into the *multitude of contemporaneous and equally valid claims* from all of the others on the subject, who then has to ask the question of how to distribute his/her loyalty, efforts and means; in the same movement in which the particularity of the multitude of others becomes ethically relevant, the scope of the question concerning justice extends from the restricted relation between the self and the other, to that between the self and (in principle) anybody else on the planet (see Chapter 3). This question of distribution or allocation is the question of justice, which situates the apparent context-independent appeal of the other in the context of other legitimate appeals of all the other others. This raises in my

13 "Ethics of the infinite", *op. cit. pp.* 57–58 / "De la phénoménologie à l'éthique", *op. cit.* p. 129 (translation modified).

mind one of the most important difficulties in Levinas' philosophy: once the subject's ontological existence has been directed ethically "for-the-other", or in fact, once it has been directed by the plurality of others, how should this ontological and political existence be formed to the advantage of the others? Levinas, however, probably in an effort to take contemporary anti-humanism into consideration, has so embraced its moving away from ideas of human essence and foundational ethics, that his humanism of the other has been stripped of whatever means could *accompany reflectingly* the question concerning *that which should practically be done*. Accordingly, the question of the *competence* of Levinas' subject to establish what justice entails in a particular context and to realise it seems to be to him of no concern – he wants the subject to be sent on his/her way of responsibility towards the others, but without even posing the question of the *means*. Thereby Levinas implicitly claims that considerations concerning the competence of ethical subjects and the means they develop to serve what they consider justice to be, are of negligible relevance to the meaning of the ethical.

The conviction that I defend is quite opposite: it should be considered of utmost importance to reflect on the secondary position accorded by Levinas to the competence of the ethical agent and the means deployed by the ethical agent in his/her efforts to obey the imperative to unlimited responsibility. It is when this is done that the implications of the difficult translation of ethics into justice (see Chapter 1, § 2.2) enters into our field of vision – perhaps in an unexpected and disquieting way. In order to test this issue, let us take as a theme of reflection the example of killing other people. At first glance, nothing seems further away from Levinas' thought than a legitimisation of killing. He is, after all, a philosopher of peace and of the "thou shalt not kill!" in the face of the other.

2.1 Can a Levinasian kill? From the original contradiction to the participation of practice in the meaning of the ethical

Does the radical ethics of Levinas, of which he sometimes captures the essence in the imperative "thou shalt not kill!", make provision for the killing of people? In order to answer this question properly, it seems appropriate to transpose the terms in which it is posed to that of the key Levinasian terms of the Saying and the Said.

It should be called to mind that this ethical imperative that emanates from the other and by which one's subjectivity is decisively constituted, is

the Saying by which the Said of one's ontological existence is given sense. However, we also know that the prohibition against murder that, according to Levinas, is the meaning of the face of the other, is just a formal imperative and for this reason every translation of this Saying into the Said, every realisation of the imperative in acts of obedience to it, every effort to make the Saying said, is only a provisional translation, or as Levinas says, a translation that is a partial treason or betrayal[14] and that for this reason needs to be unsaid. Since the Saying is ultimately unsayable or unutterable (*indicible*) or purely formal, it cannot be fixed in a Said and each attempt at fixing it in a Said has to be un-said (*dédire*). If I transpose the question concerning the possible use of killing as a legitimate ethical action to the level of discourse on the Saying and the Said, it is because very often, if not always, Levinas' commentators fail to reflect on the whole series of terms that are associated: next to Saying, unsayable, Said and unsaying (*dire, indicible, dit, dédire*) one has to consider contradiction (*contradiction*). This is what Levinas teaches:

"The third introduces a contradiction in the Saying of which the meaning before the other until then went in one direction. This is, in itself, the limit of responsibility, the birth of the question: What do I have to do in justice?"[15]

This is a major point. One can weigh its importance by connecting this remark with the similar one on the "entry" of the third, cited above and already commented on in Chapter 1:

"There are always at least three people. […] As soon as there are three people, the ethical relation to the other becomes political and enters into the totalizing discourse of ontology."

If there are always at least three people, then the third always introduces a contradiction in the Saying, and there is in the life of the subject no time before the question of justice, namely "who of the others comes before whom?". If there are always at least three people and the interrelation between the second and the third, with respect to the first person, is that of contradiction, *then the original relation between the self and the others is one of contradiction*.[16] Contradiction of what? It is a con-

14 OB 6 / AE 17–18.

15 OB 157, translation modified. "Le tiers introduit une contradiction dans le Dire dont la signification devant l'autre allait, jusqu'alors, dans un sens unique. C'est, de soi, limite de la responsabilité naissance de la question: Qu'ai-je à faire avec justice?" (AE 245).

16 See *De l'éthique à la justice* 346–349, where I have exposed the methodological incongruity that allows Levinas to bracket out the alterity of the third, while discussing the alterity of the other.

tradiction between the imperatives, the appeals to the responsibility of the subject, made with equal legitimacy by the second and the third. It is exactly because of this contradiction that one appeal infringes on another, without however, taking anything away from the validity of either. And thus the question of justice, is the question of contradiction and the question of "who comes before whom?", is the question of "who comes after whom?", in other words "whose demanding and valid appeal to my responsibility should be considered less urgent than that of another, and should therefore be sacrificed in the name of justice?".

Returning now to the dilemma of killing, it should be concluded that the prohibition to kill one person stands in a relation of "contradiction" with the same prohibition emitted by all the others. And under such a regime of contradiction, immediate and obvious obedience to any single other is not possible – all responsibility is already taken up in a complex procedure of weighing, that is, sacrificing, in search of justice, since all responsibility is political.

That is why Levinas doesn't hesitate, when he speaks of the actualisation of justice, to introduce the idea of a struggle with evil and he explicitly distances himself from "the idea of nonresistance to evil [*l'idée de la non-résistence au mal*]".[17] Levinas is not Gandhi.

> "If self-defence is a problem, the 'executioner' is the one who threatens my neighbour and, in this sense, calls for violence and doesn't have a Face."[18]

This declaration, which in my judgement is completely in agreement with Levinas' understanding of ethics and justice, should be considered very carefully. All people have faces; to all people infinite responsibility is due. But under the complicated circumstances under which the question of justice is born, that is, when faced with the contradiction of different equally valid appeals, which in practice excludes contemporaneous obedience, the other might lose his or her face. That means, through the difficult calculation of justice, someone might be sacrificed, that is, someone might be treated as not emitting an imperative prohibiting murder. Such a person might be killed. Under certain circumstances resisting evil, even killing evildoers, might thus be a valid way of obeying the originary imperative: "thou shalt not kill!".

17 ENT 105 / EN 115

18 ENT 105. "Si l'autodéfence fait problème, le 'boureau' est celui qui menace le prochain et, dans ce sens, appelle la violence et n'a plus de Visage." (EN 115).

If it is considered that this original imperative is the very meaning or sense of all meaning, it should be evident that we are dealing with an extremely important finding about ethics. If killing someone cannot be excluded as a means by which to obey the original sense or significance of one's being that is captured in the prohibition of murder, if killing someone could be under given circumstances the most appropriate way of translating the Saying into the Said, *then the means of ethical conduct interferes with the original ethical meaning and as such is part of it*.[19] Levinas is thus mistaken when he claims that the question of the application of ethics is secondary.[20] If killing someone could be shown to be a valid response to the imperative "thou shalt not kill", how can the fact of responding – practical ethics – not be part of the meaning of the ethical? Rather, the question of the means by which one obeys the contradictory appeals of the others should be considered an essential part of the very meaning of the ethical.

If these conclusions are correct, then surely the *competence* of the ethical agent for ethical conduct and the *means* to be deployed in ethical conduct cannot be considered trivial, marginal or of secondary importance in reflection on the ethical. On the one hand it is consenting to an invalid assumption to say that Levinas restricted himself to the ethical origin of meaning, since the practice of ethics interferes, and therefore contributes to what the sense of the ethical is;[21] on the other hand it is a too facile rejection of the question of practical ethics to pretend that it can simply be reduced to an ethical programme, or a casuistic or a domain-specific deontology – as if these would be the only forms that reflection on the practice of ethics can take.

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19 Although arguing his case somewhat differently from what I do here, or did in *De l'éthique à la justice*, and developing the consequences thereof in a somewhat different manner, Michel Vanni arrived at very similar conclusions concerning the insertion of Levinas' ethics in practice ("En guerre pour autrui", in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 1, 2004, pp. 78–93). Vanni's essay was published independently from my argument, as I formulated it for the first time in my doctoral dissertation of 2004 (and I discovered the article too late to use in *De l'éthique à la justice*). This independence of his conclusions, and of course the strength of his argument, should be considered a significant support for my present line of reasoning.

20 This idea will be developed further in Chapter 7, § 2.2.

21 Or as Vanni correctly concludes: "Actually one cannot simply say any more that acts of aggression, withdrawal or contemptuous indifference constitute a covering or a treason of the 'pre-originary' appeal (according to the formula of Levinas). If we don't want to maintain a completely abstract and a-praxical view of this appeal, we should rather say that it leads straightaway to conflict and friction, that it is straightaway situated in the middle of conflict, without being able to claim, by using one or other treason as excuse, that it can be detached from this conflict." "En guerre pour autrui", *op. cit.* p. 84.

Perhaps this doesn't mean that Levinas was obliged to work out a philosophy of the practice of ethics, but a restriction to reflection on ethicity (in abstraction from the fact that it cannot exclude reflection on the practice of ethics) could be justified only strategically and not ultimately by the responsibility that the author had for the others – the exclusion of reflection on the practise of ethics would entail a performative contradiction in that the philosophy of ethicity would be practised as if it is not a response to the appeal of the other, of whom some might be threatened by legitimated killing. Furthermore, if it is unacceptable to confront a thinker of the meaning of ethicity with the implications of the practice of ethics, if such considerations need not be of any concern for those working on the meaning of ethicity, then Levinas misunderstood himself when he wrote with indignation about historical events of the era in which he lived and presented his philosophy as a response to it and, besides, his claim to the *urgency* of ethics as first philosophy[22] would be simply unintelligible. On the contrary, I take the expression of indignation in Levinas' work to be a clear indication that he assumed, at the very least, that fidelity to the originary meaning of the proximity of the other would fare better in helping the fate of other people (than did whatever was responsible for the catastrophes), in other words, that it had practical relevance and that such relevance was significant for the meaning of the philosophy that he was writing. What I want to claim for the practical realisation of responsibility, or for doing justice to responsibility, is similar to what Levinas claimed for the Rabbinic tradition of commentary on the Biblical verse:

"The expression of signification belongs to its very significance [*L'expression de la signification appartient à sa signifiance même*]."[23]

22 LR 78 / EPP 77.

23 NLT 33. With recourse to Levinas' phenomenology of writing in the Judaic writings, Rodolphe Calin has made a subtle attempt to indicate an instance of concrete expression of shared responsibility and thus of the movement of the single responsible subject to a collective of responsible subjects (in *Levinas et l'exception du soi*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2005, especially Chapter IX – La communauté inspirée, pp. 331–359). The point of departure of his proposition for such a conception of ethical agents as an "inspired community" is Levinas' coordination between revelation and writing: "*if Scripture/Writing [*l'Écriture*] is revelation, it is in the sense that the speech that reveals and that reveals itself cannot do so without being written [*s'écrire*]*, in other words without being inscribed [*s'inscrire*] in the very texture of the text and in the materiality of the letter, of which the corporeity is nevertheless not that of a signifier that refers to a meaning, but […] that of the trace: the paradoxical and precarious presence of the one that has radically escaped being and presence." (p. 336). This inscription of the ethical trace gradually exposes itself to the diversity of interpretations in the community of ethical agents; the ethical community being bound together by the incessant reinterpretation of shared re-

That is to say, just as the repeated commentary on a verse forms part of the meaning of that verse, so the ways in which to obey the originary imperative belong to its very significance.[24]

In the following paragraph, I shall illustrate how far the complications of this negligence of Levinas' can stretch, by reconsidering what the difficult translation of the Saying into the Said may entail.

2.2 Infinite responsibility and the polysemy of transgression

In Chapter 1, the presentation of Levinas' political thought culminated in a discussion of a passage in which the radical demandingness of Levinas' ethics for politics has been expressed. I cite this passage again here, with

sponsibility (p. 356). I have three reservations about the possibility of exploiting the insights derived from his study for my question concerning justice in Levinas' work. First, although Calin's use of Levinas' Judaic writings is instructive, it has to be asked why such an attempt is absent from Levinas' philosophy – the reflection on the inspired community still has to be developed into a theory of society searching for justice. Second, whereas the formal phenomenology of writing could suffice to hold together an inspired community, even in isolation from the content of the writing, it is not clear if this formal aspect of writing could be developed for multicultural societies. Furthermore, the content question of distinguishing properly between true and false prophecy or inspiration seems to haunt this formal consideration of writing (see *De l'éthique à la justice* 320–324, 344–346). Three, it is not certain that the "fragmentation of the infinite" in the plurality of readers or interpreters can do justice to the conflict of interpretations and, by analogy, to the quests for justice and the tragic nature of political action. Underlying all three of these issues is the question concerning the relation between Levinas' philosophy and Talmudic writings – a question that I cannot address here.

24 Whatever else one might think of Husserl's ideas about self-responsibility, in two points at least they seem to be more sophisticated than those of Levinas on responsibility. (1) Husserl considers the fact that the responsible agent is part of a community of responsible agents an indispensable part of reflection on responsibility – the agent is socially constituted and responsibility is always co-responsibility ("Meditation über die Idee eines individuellen und Gemeinschaftslebens in absoluter Selbstverantwortung", in *Erste Philosophie (1923/1924), Zweiter Teil: Theorie der phänomenologischen Reduktion,* Husserl Gesammelte Werke Band VIII Rudolf Boehm (ed.). Haag: Martinus Nijhof, 1959, pp. 193–202, here pp. 197–198), whereas for Levinas, as argued above, the agent of responsibility is an isolated bearer of an infinite obligation (even though, of course, constituted pre-originally by a plurality of others). (2) For Husserl, vagueness, uncertainty, and the possibility of mistakes and misdeeds remain essential constitutive aspects of responsibility (p. 202), whereas for Levinas the question of the capacity of the agent of responsibility to execute that obligation is never submitted to scrutiny.
This comparison clearly needs to be worked out more carefully in another study.

a change of accent, because it captures quite correctly the political implications of Levinas' ethics:

"*Usually* the State is preferable to anarchy – *but not always*. In certain cases, in fascism or totalitarianism *for instance*, the political order of the State may well have to be challenged according to the criterion of our ethical responsibility to the other."[25]

If you exert yourself to find the greatest realisation of justice "according to the criterion of our ethical responsibility to the other", it might happen that anarchy,[26] is preferable to the State, that is, to whatever institutionalised legal or normative system that might be in force in a specific context. It would not be too difficult to find examples of such a preferability of undermining the law, of anarchy: one could think of people conspiring to overthrow the Nazi-State or, closer to my home, the armed struggle against Apartheid. Such examples often do not bother us, in fact, they inspire many people as instances of moral excellence, despite the fact that they involve transgression of institutionalised laws, and even when they may involve killing people – hence the relevance of our reflection on killing in the context of Levinas' ethics. Opposing evil, even by violent means, is not excluded by Levinas' ethics, as we have seen above.

If this is the case, it would be of the greatest importance to know *when* it would be in accordance with "the criterion of our ethical responsibility to the other" to consider anarchy as more preferable to the State. What does Levinas say? According to the citation above, this is in cases of "fascism or totalitarianism, for instance". For instance! My question to Levinas would be: who is to decide how to fill in the blank of his "for instance".

The answer is I. We shall know when and how this blank is to be filled when we understand who is the I that decides when anarchy is preferable to the State. I am the subject subjected in absolute heteronomy to the ethical appeal of the other. This appeal is characterised, as we have seen in Chapter 1, by its *infinity* and by the fact that it elects me as uniquely, *irreplaceably* responsible.

Yet, someone might object that my infinite responsibility is limited when the third enters. This is indeed what Levinas believes, and with him a great number of his commentators. But his reasoning on the matter is incorrect. Faced with the infinite appeal of not just one other but with that of numerous others that contradict one another, my responsibility to this particular other

25 "De la phénoménologie à l'éthique", *op. cit.* 137 (my italics and translation) / "Ethics of the infinite", *op. cit.* p.66. The argument that follows has been developed in detail in *De l'éthique à la justice*, Chapter 9, §§ 5–7.

26 "Anarchy" is used here in the usual sense, not as Levinas' an-archy.

here or that particular other there might be limited, but the sum of my responsibility remains infinite. The State does not limit my responsibility as such and, therefore, in the face of the thirds I have an infinite responsibility to actualise or achieve justice. And nobody can decide in my place what this means. At every moment I am constituted as subject by the question of justice: "who comes before whom?", weighing the demands of these others with those others, and with those efforts of other people to answer the same question and that have been institutionalised in legal and normative systems, including States. In this sense the Levinasian ethical subject is constituted by the plurality of contradicting heteronomous ethical relations as the sovereign power of all politics and justice.

Having arrived at this point, we should ask ourselves about the possible scenarios that could arise from such a political condition of the subject. Of course it could lead me to unsay (*dédire*) my being by acts of saintly self-sacrifice. Levinas gives an example thereof: people helping others in the event of a natural catastrophe, to a far greater degree than institutionally expected of them.[27] He also describes Edmond Jabès' life as being one of "unsaying": ceding or losing his place in the world, rather than persevering in holding his place in it.[28] But equally congruous with what we have seen thus far in Levinas would be whatever fanatical effort to actualise what I would consider the best justice for a particular society. Nobody protects society against my ideas about justice. Nothing in Levinas' philosophy protects the State against my ideas of how best to answer my infinite responsibility to actualise justice to the point of unsaying myself in saintliness. If politics left to itself contains the possibility of totalitarianism, then saintliness left to itself carries in it the possibility of all sorts of fanaticism. That is why the term "saint" is such an ambiguous one, as are its equivalents: fanatic, kamikaze, terrorist, revolutionary, martyr – all terms that are used to designate people who, rightly or wrongly, consider their own idea of justice to overrule that of one or other State, who consider ethics to be more demanding than the form of justice institutionalised in their particular context.[29] It should not surprise us to find in Levinas' writings very ambiguous expressions in which the letter of the text expresses equally well a

27 IH 143.

28 PN 63 / NP 93.

29 And while considering the possible turning of the letter against the spirit of the text, one should add to this list the Messiah, if this is nobody other than every person, as Levinas explains, and especially if the Messiah is defined as the "just that suffers for others" (DF 89 / DL 129).
See also my argument in *De l'éthique à la justice* 397-399.

possibility of his thought than the spirit of the text: non-resistance to evil, the just war waged against war, or permanent revolt or revolution in the name of the other.[30] Ethics, because of its limitlessness and because of the irreplaceable position of the ethical subject, could be open towards interpretations of it that would be executed in serious attempts to act in accordance with the ethical appeal, but that would nonetheless be undesirable, or at least, highly ambiguous.[31]

And this does not apply only to me, but to every human being. In Levinas' society man is not a wolf for man, but a prophet and a saint for the other; Levinas' society is the eternal struggle of ideas about how to actualise justice and efforts to do so by everyone – of course never in anybody's own name, but always justified by the reference to the other, the other who justifies one's response to the question of who comes before whom.

Yet, one would not find much in Levinas to support reflection on this dilemma. His project is to reflect on the meaning of the appeal made by the others on me – the meaning of ethics – and not to consider where the contradicting inspirations, that constitute the political subjects, could take them. The real situation in which the ethical subject finds him/herself – "there are always at least three persons…" – seems to be of very limited interest to Levinas.[32] In any case, any contribution whatsoever from whomever to influence my understanding of the justice to be actualised, will only make up one more element in the big calculation of "who comes before whom?" to which I alone may give the answer.

I shall consider these remarks sufficient to contest an observation made by Jacques Roland:

"I have always thought that the harsh pages 200 to 205 of *Autrement qu'être*, in the chapter 'From the Saying to the Said or the wisdom of desire', offer (also) the outlines for a philosophical discourse on the political, that hasn't been developed,

30 ENT 105 / EN 115, OB 185 / AE 283, GCM 9–10 / DVI 26–27, respectively.

31 In this way the letter of Levinas' Platonism turns against the spirit thereof and the Platonic supremacy arrogantly claimed by Western culture (in Levinas' criticism thereof – see Chapter 3, §2), becomes telling of the force of an ethical meaning "beyond Being" (according to Levinas' appropriation of the Platonist term): "for Plato, the world of significations [and thus, likewise, the ethical beyond Being – EW] precedes the language and culture that express it; it is *indifferent* to the system of signs that can be invented to make this world present to thought. Consequently, it *dominates* historical cultures. […] there would exists a culture that consists of *depreciating* the purely historical cultures and in a certain way *colonizing* the world […]" (HO 18f / HH 31, my italics). What is surprising is that Levinas saw with much more clarity the danger lurking in the Western Platonism that he denounces (HO 37 / HH 59), than that of his own re-appropriation of Plato.

32 E&I 90 / EI 85.

but that could have been in a justified and well articulated manner. Today I understand better that if this has not been the case, it is because *the development* [of such a philosophical discourse on the political – EW] *meets no need from the perspective of the internal balance of* [Levinas' – EW] *thought*."[33]

In fact, I defend exactly the opposite thesis. It is not my present objective to question the constitution of the political by the ethical, as Levinas does, but to question the coherence with which he does it and to point out significant concerns about the implications of this perspective. Levinas wrote in the 1990 "Post-scriptum" to his 1934 essay "Some reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism" that this article

"proceeds from a conviction that the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism is not in one or other contingent anomaly of human reasoning, neither is it in one or other accidental ideological misunderstanding. There is in this article the conviction that this source is due to an essential possibility of *elemental Evil* [*Mal élémental*] whereto good logics could lead and against which Western philosophy has not secured itself enough. This possibility is inscribed in the ontology of Being, concerned to be […]".[34]

The task of finding the meaning of ethicity to safeguard Western philosophy against the tyrannical meaning of Being, is Levinas' life work. The aim of my criticism of Levinas is not to question his good will and seriousness, and certainly not the radicalism with which he tackled this problem. What I do believe though, as I have argued here, is that Levinas, in his project of exploring the origin of ethical meaning, did not nearly enough take into consideration the seriousness of the meaning of ethicity as it impregnates practice, that means, politics. This is not a secondary aspect of his research that could be completed afterwards by a willing assistant; it is not a question of tidying up the last remote corners of his thought. It is the very meaning of the ethical that is at stake. I come to the uncomfortable conclusion that the meaning of ethics is originally ambiguous. Ethics left to its own devices carries in it all that is ambiguous about saintliness.

33 Jacques Rolland, "Pas de conseils pour le tyran. Lévinas et la question politique", in *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 100, Feb–May 2002, pp. 32–64, citation p. 42 (my emphasis).

34 "Post-scriptum", in *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme*. Suivi d'un essai de Miguel Abensour. Rivages poche. Petit Bibliothèque: Paris, 1997, citation, p. 25.

2.3 Mediation: the irreducible political condition of responsibility

But the struggle of fanatics of different natures is evidently not where Levinas sees his first philosophy leading us in politics. In rare instances he even indicates a sensitivity for the possibility that the opposition against evil could itself engender evil and therefore cautions that the

"hand that grasps the weapon must suffer in the very violence of that gesture. To anaesthetize this pain brings the revolutionary to the frontiers of fascism."[35]

But generally speaking one could consider the possibility indicated of a fanatical slide in the assumption of responsibility for the plurality of others, as a symptom for the lack of attention that Levinas gave to the question (1) of the inevitable recourse to the means (institutional and other) by which the ethical is to be translated into the political and (2) of the mediation of the contradictory ethical appeals in view of the interference of the ethical in the political. It is possible to demonstrate how Levinas sidesteps this task by considering (1) an example of how he neglects reflection on the context-embeddedness of ethical action and (2) an example of how he fails to compare even-handedly the political recourse to means and the prophetic criticism of the side effects of the recourse to certain means, which betrays a weakness in reflecting on the conjunction of the political and the ethical.

(1) Let us, then, first consider the manner in which he often illustrated the dramatic intensity of the ethical constitution of the subject face-to-face with the other by citing a well-know passage from Dostoyevsky:

"Each of us is guilty before all, for all and for everything, and I more than the others."[36]

When Levinas at least once in an interview cites the passage incorrectly as

"[w]e are all *responsible* for everything and for everybody and before everybody, and I more than all the others",[37]

the slide from the novelist's "guilty" to the philosopher's "responsible" is significant in that it reveals the essence of Levinas' conviction concerning the demanding nature of ethics.

35 DF 155 / DL 219. I shall leave out of consideration the question of whether this suffering due to the inevitable violence to be committed is not also the suffering of someone that sacrifices himself/herself for what they consider indisputably just.

36 GCM 84 / DVI 134–135. Levinas' citation corresponds with the translation in the French Pléiades edition of *Les frères Karamazov* of 1952, p. 310.

37 E&I 101 / EI 98, translation corrected, my emphasis. We know, of course, that Levinas read Russian, but three pages earlier in the same text he explicitly cites the Pléiades translation.

"We are all responsible for everything and for everybody and before everybody, and I more than all the others",

according to Levinas. What strikes me as astounding about Levinas' repeated use of these words from the pen of Dostoyevsky – in its correct or adapted version – is that the *context* in which the novelist places these words is never evoked by the philosopher, even when citing explicitly from the novel. This is despite the fact that the context could help reveal something of the status that the ethical has in the political for Levinas. According to Alexei Karamazov's narration,[38] the idea was discovered by a dying young man, Marcel, (was it the ultimate meaning of life revealed to him, or was it an idea produced in a state of delirium?) and was taken up some years later by his younger brother, Zenob, as exegesis of the catharsis that he underwent when realising the unacceptability of the violence that he had committed against his servant and the futility of violence in general. So powerful is the realisation of the validity of this idea for Zenob that he decides to give up his military career to become a monk. It is as the starets Zosima that he is encountered from the beginning of *The brothers Karamazov*. In Book IV, Chapter i, Dostoyevsky describes the scene in which the aged and dying starets gives his last teaching and it is also here that we encounter the cited idea for the first time in the novel. The place of teaching is not the monastery of the city in which the Karamazovs lived, but the hermitage next to it and the people to whom these teachings are addressed are not citizens (in the first place), but monks and priests. All of them, in other words, have sworn oaths of fidelity to a religious hierarchy and some of them are linked by a special tie of absolute obedience to the starets himself (like Alexei, the author of the starets' biography). It is a community constituted by absolute religious obedience and, as such, should be considered an a-political, or at least a private, setting. In this context, the teaching about one's guilt for everything and everybody is a teaching of saintliness for people that, although they live in the world, do so as not belonging to the world and not obeying the logic that governs the world. It is a teaching that has its application in the domain of the privation of the political.

From these two episodes of the novel it seems then that when the idea of universal guilt (or responsibility) as presented by Dostoyevsky is taken as valid, it would lead one to taking up the frock, or at the very least to convert to a kind of saintliness lived out in this world. Returning from *The brothers Karamazov* to Levinas, Dostoyevsky helps us to identify the bias

38 Book VI, chapter ii.a of *The brothers Karamazov*. This is the section to which Levinas refers explicitly when making the citation in OB 146 / AE 228 and he refers to the specific page number in E&I 98 / EI 95.

with which Levinas wrote his philosophy. Levinas' ethicity seems to find its origin in a space opened up in the "privation" from the political; ethics is, first and foremost, *entre nous*, between ourselves, a matter of intimate privacy – yet, he claims that it is this intimate ethical privacy that constitutes the essence of the political, of politics and of the State.[39]

(2) One can measure the unworldliness of Levinas' idea of responsibility for the others (or the neglect in reflecting about the mediation and means of ethics as it signifies in the political), by pointing out the unfairness with which he allows himself to compare State politics and prophecy. In "Human rights and the rights of the other" ("Les droits de l'homme et les droits d'autrui" – 1985) Levinas questions the profundity by which human rights[40] can install true peace, since these rights have to be defended by the State and the means of the State necessarily complicates the fate of the bearers of rights, since the State and its political order of justice can act only according to the "necessities peculiar to the State":

"Necessities constituting a determinism as rigorous as that of nature indifferent to man, even though justice […] may have, at the start, served as an end or pretext for the political necessities. An end soon unrecognised in the deviations imposed by the practicalities of the state [*la pratique de l'État*], soon lost in the deployment of means brought to bear [*le déploiement des moyens mis en oeuvre*]."[41]

And this is when things go well, since the State can also slide into totalitarianism… For this reason, according to Levinas, the defence of human rights has to be assumed also by an instance outside of the State:

"disposing, in a political society, of a kind of extra-territoriality [*extra-territorialité*], like that of prophecy in the face of the political powers of the Old Testament, a vigilance totally different from political intelligence, a lucidity not limited to yielding before the formalism of universality, but upholding justice itself in its limitations. The capacity to guarantee that extra-territoriality and that independence defines the liberal state and describes the modality according to which the conjunction of politics and ethics is intrinsically possible."[42]

To summarise: *politics* is characterised by proper practice and the means of this practice, which it necessarily uses under the conditions of a rigorous

39 T&I 300 / TI 334.

40 I have elsewhere elaborated on the problems that emerge from the reinterpretation given to human rights in Levinas' later philosophy in terms similar to those deployed in the present Chapter – see "The quest for justice versus the rights of the other?" in *In Levinas' trace*, Maria Dimitrova (ed.). Sofia: Avangard Prima Publishers, 2010, pp. 101–111.

41 OS 123 / HS 167.

42 OS 123 / HS 167.

determinism, inevitably obscure the original finality of justice; *prophecy* is characterised by an unformalisable vigilance and lucidity concerning justice and the liberal State itself depends on guaranteeing the conditions for the practice of prophecy. What should strike us in this reflection of Levinas' is the perspicacity with which he identifies the risks of the use of the means of politics on the one hand, and on the other hand, when proposing prophecy in response, the question of means simply becomes either immaterial, or is again referred back to the State. What bothers me here is thus not the fact that Levinas draws his inspiration for reflecting on human rights from religious texts,[43] but that he is not even-handed in his considerations concerning mediation and means when speaking about politics and when speaking about prophecy.

One can identify the same weakness in one of the best know strategies by which Levinas reflects on the "conjunction of politics and ethics". Levinas believes in the to and fro, the balance, between two archetypal ways of conceiving justice: Jerusalem and Athens.[44] But this is not, as many readers have been tempted to think (and as is perhaps suggested by the passage from *Outside the subject*, above), a balance between ethics and politics where ethics interrupts or questions politics. Jerusalem is not ethics, and cannot be ethics, because nowhere has ethics a direct influence on politics, nowhere could it impact on or interrupt politics without the mediation of the question of justice. At every stage in the historical development of the Levinasian State every subject – including the prophets – should calculate how best to actualise justice. Acting according to the logics of Jerusalem or those of Athens are just two expressions of this same calculation. The balance between Jerusalem and Athens that Levinas hopes to see, is thus a balance of two ideal types of responses to the question of justice, two interpretations of what the plurality of ethical appeals means in a certain context. If that then is the case, why would this balance hold? What is there in Levinas' philosophy that guarantees this?

Since the originary imperative from the other is purely formal and since its meaning is presented by Levinas as an-archic, one has to come to

43 However, I have shown elsewhere (*De l'éthique à la justice* 345–346) that if Levinas had given more attention to the evolution of the practice of prophecy in Ancient Israel, he would perhaps have been more careful in his use of this term in his own thought. Yet, given his conviction that nothing of spiritual value can be learned from a historico-critical reading of religious texts, he would not have been predisposed to receive this instruction.

44 BPW 24 / LC 99–100, and see Chapter 1, § 2.2. See also *De l'éthique à la justice*, Chapter 9, §7, for the point that follows.

the conclusion that there is nothing in his philosophy that obliges ethical agents to keep this balance, at least, nothing explicit. Implicit in Levinas' philosophy is a categorical imperative that would always curb saintly fanatics' initiative to achieve justice. This imperative is: always act in such a way that your search for justice holds in balance calculating, institutionalising politics (Athens) and subversive prophetic and saintly interventions (Jerusalem). But the an-archy of the Saying makes it impossible to justify this categorical imperative. The balance of Athens and Jerusalem is only one amongst many possible betraying translations of the plurality of Sayings into a just Said and therefore this balance also cannot be proposed as a counter to possible fanatical slides.

If this is not what we read in Levinas, it is because he persists in thinking about what is essentially a political or mediated relation in terms that are private (as illustrated by the text of Dostoyevsky) and unmediated (as indicated in the chosen passage on prophecy). The meaning and sense of all human interaction is ultimately shown to be dependent on this asymmetric relation between the self and the other, but the way in which this disruptive meaning is itself troubled by original contradiction is not what draws Levinas' attention. This seems to me the main problem with thinking responsibility for the plurality of others and therefore political responsibility, with Levinas. The possibility of fanatical slides seem to me a marginal (but real) possibility of a broader problem, namely the *lack of accompanying reflection on the inevitable mediation* of the plurality of responsibilities and thus the *lack of reflection on the competence and means of the agent of responsibility that has to act in a particular context*.

3 AFTER LEVINAS

The time has come to take stock of what has been explored and argued, not only in the preceding paragraphs of this Chapter, but also in the preceding chapters of this Part on Levinas' post-anti-humanist humanism. The subtitle of the present book is "After Levinas' humanism" and it has been indicated since the preface that the word "after" is meant here in a positive and a negative sense: positive, by continuing to pursue a philosophical objective in a way that follows significant aspects of Levinas' work and, negative by attempting to find a way out of what is considered an undesirable heritage. In both the positive and the negative aspects of this reception of Levinas, I have attempted to remain true to his text, but

without any desire to embrace a Levinasian orthodoxy, since I treat his work – as he once said of that of Husserl – as that of a living philosopher. Both of these sides of my reception of Levinas prepare the exploration in Part 3 of the present book in view of a political responsibility for a globalised world. This is the agenda with which I have undertaken the reading of Levinas since Chapter 1.

While the criticisms I have levelled against the political implications of Levinas' philosophy are still fresh after the previous paragraphs of this Chapter, it would probably be prudent to offer a summary of the positive aspects of Levinas' philosophy that I follow through on here. From Levinas' project of philosophising the ethical, I retain (1) the importance of remaining vigilant against all forms of totalitarian tendencies in politics and in social life, (2) to do so from a position that should ultimately be called ethical and that drives the reflection of a non-indifferent philosophising about politics and social life. (3) In this context, ethics refers not to a set of fixed principles for human conduct or for an attempt to program harmless human interaction, but as the significance of human interaction. (4) Thus is taken into consideration the importance that a notion of ethics necessarily has for justice, both in its institutionalised form and in the exercise of power that institutes justice. (5) In all of this, as important as reflection might be, the pre-reflexive level of signification that is inscribed in human praxis plays a decisive role.

These positive elements seem to me to be sufficiently present in the core of Levinas' concern (and sufficiently commented on in Chapters 1, 4 and 5) to justify calling the work done here "after Levinas", in the positive sense of following him. These elements do not form the framework of a theory of political responsibility and need to be developed by other means after they have been confronted with the criticism of Levinas' thought.

The most significant elements of such a criticism that have been pointed out are: (1) even if one concedes to the ethical meaning of the alterity of the other, the infinity of the asymmetry between the self and the other hurtles towards a measureless self-sacrifice of the political subject. (2) Levinas' own attempt at limiting this ethical responsibility in justice, through the confrontation with the plurality of others, not only misses the first point, but is furthermore invalid. (3) On the contrary, nothing is said that could help reflect on the limitation of the initiative that someone could be justified (or someone could justify himself/herself) to take in confrontation with instituted justice and in the name of the responsibility for the others, in view of the transformation or overthrow of such institutions. (4) Such fanatical de-

viations in politics are the symptom of the absence of reflection of the mediation between ethics and politics and the means by which ethics intervenes in politics; the competence required for assuming the considerable load of responsibility in politics is not submitted to reflection. (5) Although each political agent takes responsibility for all of the others, he/she remains not only the ultimate instance of decision-making concerning the requirements of justice and the means by which to pursue it in a particular context, but also the ultimate instance of the realisation of that justice – in this sense, Levinas' ethical responsibility could be said to be politically irresponsible.

To these points of criticism should be added two more that fall outside of the scope of examination of the present book, but that nonetheless call for some explanation. Without entering into the justification thereof, I state[45] (i) that Levinas' entire philosophy is subtended by an unjustifiable affirmation that Being is ethically evil and (ii) that the analyses made by Levinas of the alterity of the other do not succeed in supporting sufficiently the ethical nature of that alterity. The reader will immediately notice that especially the last point seriously places the core of Levinas' philosophy in question and it might therefore seem to some readers more coherent to reject Levinas' philosophy *en bloc*, than to claim that in what I am doing here, I am still in an important way in agreement with Levinas. Thus, even though a "phenomenology" of the alterity of the other is not part of the present project, something needs to be said to justify the continued reflection with Levinas on responsibility.

The conclusion arrived at in *De l'éthique à la justice* (Chapter 8, § 3.4) is that even if one were to accept all of Levinas' phenomenologically styled analyses of the other, and concede to an alterity of the other, to an alterity that would make of it something non-ontological and even concede to that alterity having a linguistic or sign structure, that tampers with the constitution of the self, then there is still no forceful reason why this alterity should be ethical. The only way in which Levinas succeeds in identifying the alterity of the other as ethical, of calling it an imperative or a questioning of the self, is by secretly introducing a hermeneutics of the alterity of the other where he explicitly claims there could be none. If one then refuses this illegitimate introduction of a hermeneutics of alterity, one will have to accept that the linguistically structured, non-ontological alterity of the other is what I call a *hieroglyph*: something of which one could be quite sure that it carries a significance, but of which it is impossible to say what that meaning is. This

45 They have been worked out in detail in *De l'éthique à la justice*, see particularly Chapters 8 and 9.

doesn't exclude the possibility of it being ethical, but there is no way to affirm this and the philosopher is bound to remain agnostic on this issue.

It should be quite evident that if this is the case, that it touches at the heart of any attempt to take up Levinas' philosophy. What seems to me equally clear is that the ground lost in insight about the passive constitution of the self (by questioning the claim to its ethical constitution) cannot be simply reclaimed by attributing that alterity to the processes of deciphering of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.[46] The reason for this is that there is no way to show that the cumulative effect of their theories of suspicious hermeneutics of the subject is an *exhaustive* account of the passive constitution of the subject. In other words, next to the masters of suspicion, it seems that, at the very least, Levinas exposes the irreducibly hieroglyphic aspect of passive constitution. The implication of this is that there always remains a significant aspect of one's being affected and constituted by the other, of which the meaning might be significant, but which doesn't give itself for a hermeneutics. In this sense there is no foundation to be uncovered about the meaning of the other for the self; the proximity of the other is, as Levinas correctly claims, anarchical.

If this is the case, then the place in which to situate the ethical significance of the other, is not the other, but Levinas' text. When Levinas defines prophetism or inspiration as

> "this intrigue of infinity in which I make myself the author of what I hear [*cette intrigue de l'infini où je me fais l'auteur de ce que j'entends*]",[47]

I suspect that Levinas really hears nothing, or at least nothing decipherable, and that *he* is the proper author of the ethical meaning of the other. Or to be more precise, it might be that the other has this ethical meaning, but there is no way to affirm this with certainty and any claim to be able to make such an affirmation says more about the claim than about the hieroglyph that is the other. *The place of the affirmation of the ethical meaning of the alterity of the other, the place where the uncertainty or agnosticism is solved, is in the text of Levinas*.

While this conclusion certainly relativises the force of Levinas' claim, it doesn't have to follow that the texts in which he makes this claim are therefore of no value. In what follows I shall elaborate on what is meant by this statement. However, it needs to be stressed that this is not Levinas' claim –

46 Cf. *De l'éthique à la justice* 328–331.

47 GCM 76 / DVI 124. See also my discussion of this phrase in *De l'éthique à la justice* 325–327.

his philosophy is an exploration of a "strong" alterity in the face of the other, or in the proximity of the other, and of which the philosophical text can only witness;[48] I argue that such a "strong" alterity is a hieroglyph, of which the indeterminacy of its meaning allows for the creation of a "weak" alterity, a suggestion of ethical alterity, through what is written (realising well that, for Levinas, this will mean not much more than a sophisticated rearrangement in the flux of Being). By means of an analogy, I would like to argue that there is something legitimate and even of decisive significance in such an undertaking of creating a "weak" alterity in writing.

Let's consider the central Nietzschean notion of the will to power. Although Nietzsche's anti-Platonism involves denying that there would be a true reality beyond the phenomenal one, he still affirms that the world is – despite appearances or not – the will to power. It is equally true that Nietzsche often presents the notion of the will to power in a dogmatic manner. How is the strong affirmation of the will to power as the intelligibility of the world to be harmonised with Nietzsche's explicit anti-metaphysical stance?

This question could be answered with reference to aphorism 36 of *Beyond good and evil,* of which the point is encapsulated in the phrase:

"The world viewed from the inside, the world defined and determined according to its 'intelligible character' – it would be 'will to power' and nothing else."[49]

In his interpretation of this aphorism, Paul van Tongeren[50] insists on the importance of the hypothetical form of the statement ("it would be", *"sie wäre…"*), and of others from the same aphorism: what seems at first glance to be a metaphysical principle, is a hypothetical conclusion to a series of hypotheses and thought experiments. This hypothetical conclusion is formulated in opposition to metaphysical claims of access to an ultimate

48 I have demonstrated that there is in Levinas no claim that texts can "produce" or "carry" alterity. This has been argued separately for *Totality and infinity* (*De l'éthique à la justice* 228–233), for *Otherwise than Being* (*De l'éthique à la justice* 287–292), and also for Levinas' presentation of texts of literature in *Proper names* (*De l'éthique à la justice* 292–299).

49 *Basic writings of Nietzsche.* Walther Kaufmann (transl.). New York: The modern library, 1968, p. 238 / "Die Welt von innen gesehen, die Welt auf ihren 'intelligiblen Character' hin bestimmt und bezeichnet – sie wäre eben 'Wille zur Macht' und nichts ausserdem." Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. In G. Colli and M. Montinari (eds.), Kritische Studienausgabe 5. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, [1885] 1999, p. 55.

50 In my presentation of the notion of the will to power I am guided by Van Tongeren's remarkable book *Reinterpreting modern culture. An introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy*. Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1999, in particular pp. 154–170.

reality and thus the hypothetical form is the very performance of the anti-metaphysical nature of the notion of the will to power. Seen in this manner, the will to power is not a necessary discovery of the ultimate meaning of the world, but rather a possible name for the world, a possible perspective on the world that opposes other interpretations of the world. It is an interpretation amongst other interpretations of the world, where none can rightfully claim to be anything more than just an interpretation of the world, none can rightfully claim to be the final, authoritative perspective on the world. And since will is a unity only in concept,[51] the claim that the intelligibility of the world is the will to power is not a claim to the ultimate perspective on reality, but rather an affirmation of the plurality of interpretations. Yet, the weak, hypothetical "epistemological status" of the affirmation of the will to power is sufficient for it to act as a disruptive force of suspicion on the claims of objectivity and truth of other perspectives.

What is of relevance for my recuperation of Levinas is not the theory of the will to power itself, but the *form of argument by which it is affirmed*. What is required for the philosopher Nietzsche to be able to disrupt contemporary discourse on reality is not a better access to ultimate reality, but a suggestive discursive practice that puts other claims under a perspective of suspicion. It is the philosopher (in this case) that has this anarchical potential. I call it "anarchical" since it doesn't lay claim to having access to an *arché* or metaphysical principle, yet in the absence of the capacity to gain such a principle, it has the power to disrupt, by shedding doubt through its hypothetical performance.

If I consider it worthwhile to continue reflecting with Levinas in the direction opened up by his philosophy of the ethical alterity of the other – even while remaining agnostic about the ethicity of the other – then it is because I think that that ethicity is situated (at least in its strong affirmative sense) in the text of Levinas and that this is not necessarily a disqualification of his philosophy. When he says that "I make myself the author of what I heard", I say, Levinas could not have been sure of what he heard or learned from the hieroglyph of the other, but made himself nonetheless the author of that undecipherable message. In the absence of the capacity to determine the meaning of the alterity of the other, the strength of Levinas' philosophy seems to me to reside in the doubt that it sheds on the supposition that there is no such ethical alterity or, positively formulated, that his hypothetical idea that the other signifies ethically has sufficient suggestive strength to unsettle any discourse that would simply take the negation of this idea for granted. Without a doubt *this is*

51 Cf. *Basic writings of Nietzsche. op. cit. p.* 215 / *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, *op. cit.* p. 32 (aphorism 19).

not Levinas' own vision about his philosophical achievement or ambition.[52] However, I would claim that such a reading of his work has at least sufficient performative force to act in an anarchical manner. Levinas' philosophy is then not an anarcheology,[53] a testimony to an an-archical alterity (in the strong sense), as he would like it to be, but as a discourse suggestive of an an-archical alterity it produces an anarchical event itself (albeit in a weaker sense). By this I certainly do not mean a romanticising of a mysterious ethical force in texts – it is not the text that has this disruptive and suggestive quality, but that which is expressed by Levinas in the text. With his hypothesis of the ethical imperative of the alterity of the other, he opens a perspective on reality. Again, even though I claim that the affirmation of the ethicity of the other is created by Levinas' philosophy, it is not exclusively on the basis of his intellectual power or performative brilliance, but also due to the very enigmatic nature of the other, due to the alterity of the other as impenetrable hieroglyph, that this suggestion could gain force. In this sense – and by the purposeful choice of the word "enigma" – the idea of the suggestive force of Levinas' argument is at least not completely foreign to the spirit of Levinas' philosophy.

Levinas' philosophy is of such a nature that it unsettles accepted manners of seeing and thinking and can be considered an un-saying (*dédire*) thereof. In this, it is appropriate to recall that in more than one instance, Levinas made reference to Nietzsche's discursive practice in order to present his own view of unsaying. Through unsaying – the repeated effort to reduce or re-conduct the Said to the Saying – the philosopher finds a certain lightness with regard to the apparent seriousness of philosophising. In fact, all human expression loses some of its seriousness under the repeated reconduction to what is supremely urgent and serious: the Saying, the imperative to take responsibility for the other. In this it corresponds with the Nietzschean "reduction":

"'reducing' being not by putting in brackets, but by the violence of an unheard-of verb [*verbe*], undoing by the non-saying [*non-dire*] of dance[54] and laughter."[55]

52 As argued in *De l'éthique à la justice* 228–233, 287–292.

53 OB 7 / AE 19.

54 It should be mentioned at least in passing that this phenomenologising appropriation of Nietzsche by Levinas interferes quite remarkably with his much commented and rightfully criticised statement that what is essential about humanity would be the Greeks and the Bible and that all the rest would be merely exotic dance, i.e., frivolous or insignificant. In this Nietzschean reduction, *dancing* is assigned the lofty task of suspension of the care for Being, and of leading one back to the Saying! In a Levinasian mindset, the excellence of any cultural expression (including Hellenistic and Talmudic studies) would be measured by the degree to which it conforms to dancing, defined in this way.

55 HO 65 / HH 106, translation modified.

And likewise,

"One should have to go all the way to the nihilism of Nietzsche's poetic writing, reversing irreversible time in vortices – up to the laughter which refuses language [*jusqu'au rire qui refuse le langage*]."[56]

True enough, for Levinas this unsaying is first of all due to the unsayability, unutterability or unspeakability (*indicibilité*) of the Saying;[57] in the absence of belief in the meaning imposed by the Saying, I place more emphasis on the philosophical (or other) work of unsaying and its suggestive power. Just as no philosophical argument or presentation of the world can remain untouched by the Nietzschean laugh, so it seems to me, no argument or truth, no gnoseology can remain untouched by the suggestion of the decentring imposed by the possible ethical imperative of the face of the other as it is found in Levinas' texts.

It goes without saying that this suggestion of the primordial ethicity could in turn be made suspect, could be submitted to doubt and its weak "epistemological status" be criticised. But such is the nature of debate about ethics. Probably my proposal on the suggestive power of Levinas' texts, by analogy to that of Nietzsche's texts, will not satisfy many of Levinas' readers – if any – since, I concede, something important is lost with respect to what Levinas wanted to offer. However, I think it would be reasonable to accept this explanation as justification for continuing to engage with his work and to hold the place of alterity while my reflection on this issue is still "under construction".

It is in the field of tension created between, on the one hand, the completely admirable and justifiable aspects of Levinas (concentrated in the identification of certain elements of a philosophical project of reflection on the ethical and the political) and, on the other hand, the questionable aspects (the failure to recognise the hermeneutical limits to the presentation of alterity and the failure to formulate a plausible and desirable transition from the ethical to the political), that I aspire to make a contribution. The most suitable general term to unite my reflections "after Levinas" is that of *responsibility*. This notion will have to be explored with its political dimension in mind and with the global world not only as the largest horizon of its desired relevance, but also the practical situation that will condition its realisation. While a fully developed presentation of such a theory of responsibility will not be given in this book, I shall attempt, in Part 3, to elucidate, still in dialogue with Levinas, the requirements for such a project.

56 OB 8 / AE 22, translation modified.
57 HO 65 / HH 106.