PART 1
Ethics after the colonies:

The global scope of Levinas' political thought

The title chosen for the first Part of the book may seem like a misnomer: Levinas the post-colonial and international political theorist! I do recognise that the terms chosen for the current exploration give a greater indication of the aim of the present study than of the texts of Levinas that will be commented on in pursuing that aim. Yet, the point of departure and central concern is a study of what Levinas wrote. The aim is not to make something of Levinas that he wasn't but to exploit what is allowed for and even suggested by his work. In order to justify this title and to anchor, as it were, this Part, I propose the following passage from the book to which I shall devote a careful study in Chapter 5 and which the title shows should be situated very near to the core concern of my study: *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Humanism of the other or of the other human being. This *guiding citation* gives us a keyhole view, not only of this particular book of Levinas, but also of the largest part of his philosophy:

"The most recent, most audacious and most influential ethnography, maintains the plurality of cultures on the same level. The political work of decolonisation is in this way linked to an ontology – thought on Being, thought that is interpreted from multiple and multivocal cultural signification. And this multiple-interpretability of the meaning of Being, this essential disorientation – is, perhaps, the modern expression of atheism."[1]

1 "L'ethnographie la plus récente, la plus audacieuse et la plus influente, maintient sur le même plan les cultures multiples. L'œuvre politique de la décolonisation se trouve ainsi rattachée à une ontologie – à une pensée de l'être, interprétée à partir de la signification culturelle, multiple et multivoque. Et cette multivocité du sens

Whereas the questions concerning ontology and the multiple meanings of Being will be examined in detail in Chapter 5, three interrelated terms from this passage deserve detailed examination at this stage in order to appreciate the suggestion that Levinas makes: ethnography, decolonisation, atheism. What is the most recent *ethnography* and what did it, according to Levinas, bring about that is significant? What does the apparent category of personal or private conviction, namely *atheism*, have to do with politics? What does Levinas exactly claim concerning *decolonisation* as a symptom of a regrettable situation of (ontological) disorientation? In Chapter 2 the coordination of these three terms will be examined; Chapter 3 is devoted to a further exploration of colonisation and decolonisation in Levinas, with a view on the global range of responsible action.

de l'être, cette essentielle désorientation – est, peut-être, l'expression moderne de l'athéisme." (HO 20 / HH 33–34, my translation).

Chapter 2
Ethnography, atheism, decolonisation[1]

It hardly needs to be recalled that when ethnography is evoked, we speak immediately about much more than merely one of the human sciences, since the practice of this discipline is one of the privileged windows on the unfolding of the relationship between Europe and its others.[2] Since Levinas concurs with this opinion, albeit in a self-styled Heideggerian way, rather than in the often strongly Foucauldian inspired way seen especially in post-colonial studies, we need to examine his statement further.

Levinas' point in the guiding citation is to refer to a state of consensus in (at least "the most audacious") ethnography, namely that it maintains the

1 This Chapter is a considerably extended version of §§ 2 and 3 of my article "The State and politics in a post-colonial, global order. Reconstruction and criticism of a Levinasian perspective", in *SA Publiekreg / SA Public Law* 24/2, 2009, pp. 352–369. Part of the introduction to this Part has also been drawn from it; likewise the discussion of Levinas' Dostoyevsky citation (used in Chapter 5, §2.3) was used as §1 of that article.

2 To cite but one perspective on the historical situation in which ethnography tended to be organically linked with colonialism: "These anthropological productions, often commissioned after military invasion of an African territory or after a rebellion against occupying European powers, were intended to provide the European administrations and missionary-cultural workers with information about the 'primitive' both to guarantee efficient administration and to provide knowledge of the 'African mentality', so that, while demonizing and repressing African practices, the 'superior' European values and attitudes could be effectively inculcated into the African conscience. From the transformations in the African economies and politics to religion and the educational institutions, the goal was to maximize European profit, secure the total domination and subjection of the colonial territory to the metropole, and reproduce Europe and European values not only in the material lives, but also in the cultural and spiritual lives and expressions of the Africans." Emmanuel Eze, "Introduction: Philosophy and the (post)colonial", in *Postcolonial African philosophy. A critical reader*. Emmanuel Eze (ed.). Oxford and Cambridge (Mass.): Blackwell, 1997, pp. 1–21, citation p. 10.

equal value of different cultures. Who the ethnographers of this ethnography could be, and what Levinas really got from them, is of no slight importance. In fact, an exploration of two ethnographers to whom Levinas could possibly refer is of crucial importance to understanding some of the most intense concerns of his work. In other words, my aim is not a mere philological hypothesis on the name(s) to be filled into the general box of "ethnography" in the guiding citation; rather, by considering two likely candidates that Levinas could have had in mind, one could learn a lot about his philosophical project, but starting this time not from the face of the other, but from the relationships between people from different cultural settings. The two ethnographers that I shall consider in turn are Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Claude Lévi-Strauss. In each case, I shall ask what could have been the decisive ideas that struck Levinas in the work of these authors.

1 LUCIEN LÉVY-BRUHL, OR THE USE OF ETHNOGRAPHY FOR ONTOLOGY AND POLITICS

Although I do not think that Levinas had Lévy-Bruhl in mind when he wrote the cited passage, there are three reasons why it would be useful for us to consider him in this regard. First, he is by far the ethnographer to whom Levinas refers most and he is the only ethnographer to whom Levinas has dedicated an entire study.[3] Second, the link that is made in the citation between ethnography and atheism recalls Levinas' reading of Lévy-Bruhl since, as will be pointed out, the question of atheism is often referred to when Levinas writes about Lévy-Bruhl. Third, one sees illustrated very clearly from Levinas' first appropriation of the work of the ethnographer, that ethnography and ontology are used to interpret each other mutually.

What did Levinas retain from Lévy-Bruhl?

1.1 "To be is to participate"

From his earliest references to Lévy-Bruhl, it is the notion of "participation" that draws Levinas' attention. Being is incommunicable for a human being, in other words, human beings are characterised by an ontological solitude. Lévy-Bruhl's presentation of participation in so-called "primitive" cultures seems, however, to suggest an alternative possibility of existence, namely transitive[4] –

3 "Lévy-Bruhl and contemporary philosophy" (ENT 39–51 / EN 49–63).
4 TO 43 / TA 22.

an existence in which a human being is not merely directed at the other, but *is* the other. This is for Levinas more important than what Lévy-Bruhl has to contribute on the apparent pre-logicial or mystical character of the "primitive mentality" (*mentalité primitive*).[5] If such a transitive form of existence is possible, this would entail an existence by which one is fused, through participation, into a general, ecstatic, ontological monism.[6] Ontological solitude and participation would be two divergent historically conditioned forms of existence.

By the time Levinas wrote down this discovery (1946/47), calling "existing" (*exister*) a transitive verb, is long since philosophically innocent. In an essay on Heidegger in 1932 (that is, before Levinas began to distance himself from Heidegger), it is explained that

> "[o]ne could perhaps say that Heidegger's entire philosophy consists in considering the verb 'to exist' as a transitive verb"[7]

and accordingly the existentials (*Existentialien*) of *Dasein* could be considered as adverbs of this transitive verb.[8] This fact should be pointed out so that we can from the outset pay attention to the Heideggerian and ontological overtones that Lévy-Bruhl's notion of participation has in Levinas' reading thereof. When we examine participation, we reflect on the modes of being of the human being or rather, of *Dasein*.

This first qualification of participation as an existence in a fused ontological monism with other people can be developed by considering the subsequent description of participation as "impersonal vigilance" (*vigilance impersonnelle*).[9] Participating in Being as the "primitives" do, according to Lévy-Bruhl, is like when one suffers insomnia: I remain awake despite being exhausted: this vigilance, the failure to fall asleep, is not an action of the subject, rather, *it* remains awake in the subject (*ça veille*).[10] Similarly, participation is the mode of existence in which one has no private existence (or no "ontological solitude" as in *Time and the other*), but existence "returns to an undifferentiated background".[11] This "fond indistinct" is what Levinas calls the *il y a*, the "there is". The *il y a* is pure Being or existence, or in the grammatical metaphors that Levinas uses, it is in-finite "to be", it is anony-

5 TO 42 / TA 22.
6 TO 43 / TA 22.
7 DEHH 80. Levinas' use of "exister" instead of "être" is not an existentialist misreading of Heidegger, but is chosen to avoid the strangeness that the translated Heideggerian terminology had. Cf. ENT 48 / EN 59.
8 GDT 58 / DMT 68.
9 E&E 60 / EE 98.
10 E&E 66 / EE 111.
11 E&E 61 / EE 99.

mous or impersonal, since no being has taken hold of it, there is no being that has "conjugated" it yet, as it were.

The impersonal vigilance of participation that characterises, according to Lévy-Bruhl, the "primitive mentality" is haunted by or subject to a horror before the sacred, since the sacred is exactly this impersonal Being (*être*) without beings, this capricious impersonal flux of events (*il y a*) in which people defencelessly participate:

> "The impersonality of the sacred in primitive religions […] describes a world where nothing prepares for the apparition of a God. Rather than to God, the notion of the *there is* [*il y a*] leads us to the absence of God, to the absence of every being. Primitive people are absolutely before Revelation, before the light."[12]

In this sense the effective mood of horror provoked in the "primitives" by the sacred, testifies to the possibility of an existence in which one is absolutely fused with or diluted into the flux of being to the point of Being depersonalised,[13] that is to say, in which one participates in pure being to such an extent that there is no exit from this identity with Being. Any intervention from outside or interruption of this flux of Being is precluded. In this sense participation is an atheistic existence. We shall see in Chapter 5 (§1) that this is for the younger Levinas typical of human existence in general: human existence is fatally diluted into Being and in need of an escape; but it is also a form of existence that can be celebrated in disdain for this need of an escape or interruption – with disastrous political consequences (see also §1 of Chapter 5).

Ten years after *Time and the other* and *Existence and existents*, Levinas comes back to Lévy-Bruhl in two texts that are again very instructive. In his essay "Lévy-Bruhl and contemporary philosophy" (1957), Levinas' perspective on the ethnographer's work is taken from a shift in the latter's own conviction concerning the relationship between "primitive" culture and modern culture. Following the development of Lévy-Bruhl's thought in the *Carnets*,[14] Levinas argues that the ethnographer gradually abandoned his famous distinction between pre-logical, "primitive" thought and modern scientifically formed thinking for a vision of the unity, in other words for the universal similarity, of the human spirit.[15] But what becomes then of the studies of the "primitive mentality"? They serve to uncover structures of the human

12 E&E 61 / EE 99, translation modified.
13 E&E 61 / 100.
14 Published as *Les carnets de Lucien Lévy-Bruhl* (with a preface by Maurice Leenhardt). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1949.
15 ENT 40 / EN 50.

mind in general.[16] This is then Levinas' objective with his essay on Lévy-Bruhl: to point out how Lévy-Bruhl's ethnography teaches us something that is universally valid about human existence, to show where some of the fundamental concepts of human existence come from[17] and how these prepare or enforce developments in contemporary philosophy. The essential point of similarity is to be found in the insistence, by both Lévy-Bruhl and contemporary philosophy, on the originary, non-representational mode of existence of human beings, which Lévy-Bruhl refers to as "participation".

What does this pre-representational participation entail? "To be is to participate [*Être, c'est participer*]", cites Levinas from the *Carnets*, and comments:

> "The participation that comes into play in the affective category of the supernatural in no way leads from an imprecise physical phenomenon toward metaphysical being, but from the given thing toward a power that no longer has the solid framework of being, toward the diffuse presence of an occult influence."[18]

In other words, "participation" describes the primordial mode of existence in which the human being is situated not yet among things, but in a flux of powers. This would be the primordial access to the world: not as an individual separated from the things, but as a participator in an atmosphere or a climate, in which that which will later on become substance is still "desubstantialised"[19] and to the power of which one is exposed.[20] In this, Lévy-Bruhl is very close to "contemporary philosophy" – meaning, first and foremost Heidegger's – for whom, according to the rendering of Levinas, existence replaces the subject[21] in the sense that as (a) being (*étant*) existence is first and originally a present participle of Being (*être*): first

16 Such is also the more recent conviction expressed by the historian of anthropology, Frédéric Keck, when opening his essay "Causalité mentale et perception de l'invisible. Le concept de participation chez Lucien Lévy-Bruhl" (in *Revue philosophique* 3/2005, pp. 303–322) by stating categorically: "The oeuvre of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl can be reread today, no longer in the framework of an analysis of the thought of 'primitive societies', since all contemporary anthropology has deconstructed the belief in the existence of such societies, but with a view to questioning the nature of the mind [*la nature du mental*]." (p. 303). This essay places the work of Lévy-Bruhl, and in particular the notions of mentality and participation, within the historical development of epistemology in anthropology and provides a more detached (and superbly historically informed) perspective on Lévy-Bruhl's position, than the engaged perspective of Levinas of which I trace the contours here.

17 ENT 41 / EN 51.

18 ENT 45–46 / EN 56.

19 ENT 47 / EN 57.

20 ENT 48 / EN 57.

21 ENT 48f / EN 59.

verbal, with adverbial traits, before being substantive with qualities. In this ontological description,

"the *I*, thus delivered up to Being, it is thrown out of its abode into an eternal exile, losing its mastery over itself, overwhelmed by its own being. Henceforth, it is a prey to events that have already determined it. […] being-in-the-world is the exemplary *fait accompli*. Being that is about to be is already Being that has traversed you through and through. […] the I that is in their grasp decides, is engaged, takes hold of itself."[22]

Such would be, then, the conclusion of an existential, ontological (in the Heideggerian sense) rendering of the central findings of Lévy-Bruhl's ethnography.

The importance of pre-representational participation as the essential mode of being of human beings allows for the use and understanding of the word *mentality*. Now, the word does not serve to distinguish the cognitive events of "primitive" peoples over against the rationality of "the healthy adult white male [*l'homme blanc, adulte et bien portant*]".[23] Rather, a description of the "primitives" helps us to see something that is at work in *all human beings*. This something is the "mentality" behind, and thus the pre-representational *situatedness*, of the representational mind. It is the *mentality* behind the *mens* (mind).

"The notion of mentality consists in affirming that the human mind does not depend solely on an exterior situation – climate, race, institution, or even contracted mental habits that would pervert the natural illumination. Mentality is *in itself* dependence; it emerges from an ambivalent possibility of turning toward conceptual relations or of remaining in relationships of participation. *Prior* to representation it is strikingly engaged in Being; it *orients* itself in Being."[24]

That the subject is pre-representationally or pre-reflectively engaged is exactly what is ascribed by Heidegger to human existence: human existence, or more correctly *Dasein*, is engaged in existence in the sense that its own being is lived as a transitive verb, that means (as Levinas would paraphrase) that by conjugating the verb "to be", human existence is inseparably linked or attached to *Being*.[25] Furthermore, this transitiveness by which *Dasein* is its own being, is engaged in that its own being is to it as a task: *Dasein* has to be.[26] Master of its

22 ENT 47 / EN 58, translation modified.
23 ENT 39 / EN 49.
24 ENT 50 / EN 61, translation modified.
25 ENT 50 / EN 62
26 See Martin Heidegger, *Being and time*. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (transl.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [1962] 1988, pp. 173, 321, 346 / *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag [1927] 1993, pp. 134, 276, 300.

existence by conjugating Being, *Dasein* is at the same time played by Being, as in the citation above:

"As for the *I*, thus delivered up to Being, it is thrown out of its abode into an eternal exile, losing its mastery over itself, overwhelmed by its own being. Henceforth, it is a prey to events that have already determined it."[27]

That this phenomenological and ontological appropriation of Lévy-Bruhl's notion of participation also has consequences for the co-existence of people is underlined by Levinas at the end of his essay. He suspects that the idea that separate individuals merge into one social entity (the "social body [*corps social*]")[28] could explain and even partially justify "the modern feeling of existence".[29] Levinas speculates on the possibility that the era in which he wrote this essay is one of philosophy in which the first intuition concerning being is derived from such a fusional experience of society.[30] Not only could it be possible that contemporary experience of social existence is justified by such a fusional feeling of society, but it is possible that work such as that of Lévy-Bruhl has contributed to flatter or encourage "a nostalgia for outdated and retrograde forms".[31] Instead of merely enlarging our understanding of reason by extending it to the modes of thinking of people that would otherwise or formerly be suspected of lacking in rationality – as Levinas appraises the positive contribution of Lévy-Bruhl – the new appreciation for the mode of thinking of the "primitive mentality", justified as it may be in the face of the shortcomings and catastrophes provoked by technical reasoning, risks entailing "a reversion to primitive mentality pure and simple".[32] This situation of a return to the primitive mentality – of which the essence seems to be for Levinas the fusional or participational experience of social existence – as well as the failure of technical rationality, is described by Levinas as a crisis. But if we enquire as to what constitutes this crisis, we obtain only the last question of the essay:

"But is monotheistic civilization incapable of responding to this crisis by an orientation liberated from the horrors of myths, the confusion of thought they produce, and the acts of cruelty they perpetuate in social customs?"[33]

27 ENT 47 / EN 58.
28 ENT 51 / EN 62.
29 ENT 51 / EN 62. Here, Levinas uses the word "modern" for "contemporary" or "fairly recent".
30 ENT 51 / EN 62–63.
31 ENT 51 / EN 63.
32 ENT 51 / EN 63.
33 ENT 51 / EN 63.

This socio-cultural diagnosis with which the essay on "Lévy-Bruhl and contemporary philosophy" concludes, draws up two opposing visions of what contemporary "European" culture or civilisation is supposed to be: one is dominated by its monotheistic roots, the other by the horror of myths and participation; the latter would be characterised by a nostalgia that leads to cruelty, the former is questioned about its capability to resist or subvert the latter.[34]

1.2 Heidegger, nostalgia, cruelty and the eclipse of monotheism

The terms of this diagnosis – nostalgia, cruelty, and the eclipse of monotheism – would remain vague, if it was not for the fact that one finds them in the other text of 1957 in which Levinas refers to Lévy-Bruhl.[35] In a thematic overview of the two dominant truth strategies of Western philosophy,[36] Levinas explains that most often philosophers have opted *against* truth as an encounter with the transcendent other, that maintains the philosopher in a heteronomous relation to the other and leads ultimately to a metaphysics enquiring about the divine, and *for* an approach by which the other has to be incorporated into the self/same (*même*) – knowledge consists in the autonomous action of the self that identifies the diversity of the others in itself.[37] Affirming strongly the freedom and autonomy of the knowing subject (the same/self) seemed the best manner to overcome the disturbing fusion and confusion of opinion as is described for the mythical stage of sociality by Lévy-Bruhl's notion of par-

34 Levinas may well have been influenced by Franz Rosenzweig in this opposition, considering what Rosenzweig calls the "world historical opposition (*Welthistorischer Gegensatz*) of mythology and revelation" – see "Atheistische Theologie" in *Der Mensch und sein Werk*. Gesammelte Schriften 3, *Zweistromland. Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*. Reinhold and Annemarie Mayer (eds.). Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984, pp. 687–697, especially p. 693. In this essay, Rosenzweig objects to the mythological interpretation of both Christianity and Judaism as a reduction of the faith content of these religions to what is explicable in purely human terms. It is probably not irrelevant to recall that the essay on Lévy-Bruhl was published only two years before Levinas' important paper on Rosenzweig: "'Between two worlds'. The way of Franz Rosenzweig" (1959) (DF 181–201 / DL 252–281).

35 Apart from Rosenzweig's thoughts alluded to above as an external aid to illuminate Levinas' thought here, another form of clarification, in particular the link between monotheism and the benefits of its secularisation of society, can be obtained from the 1956 essay "For a Hebraic humanism", which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, §1.

36 CPP 47–48 / DEHH 165–166.

37 CPP 48 / DEHH 166.

ticipation.[38] Whatever one might think of this all too hasty typology of truth strategies and the all too cryptic reference to Lévy-Bruhl, Levinas seems to consider this opposition of a philosophical strategy of the affirmation of the freedom of the self over and against the tyranny of the other a positive development, in as far as it overcomes the blind and harmful influence of the others over the self under a regime of tyranny or of the mythical stage of human existence. However, in the rest of the same essay, the full élan of his critical energy is directed at the "narcissism" inherent in the "primacy of the self/same",[39] especially since, in its most eminent form – that of the philosophy of Heidegger – it reverts to all that is violent in the primitive participation:[40] it conquers, dominates and possesses[41] whatever it encounters, it is fundamentally atheistic, since it cannot tolerate the thought of ideas coming into its domain that it had not placed there by reason itself,[42] it draws its strength from capturing the particular individuality by means of neutral, general notions, and implicitly it considers itself naturally justified in confrontation with the other.[43] Rarely in Levinas' entire oeuvre is his judgement formulated as severely as in this text, when he explains his conviction that this strategic supremacy of the self over the other is fully maintained in the philosophy of Heidegger.[44] It is in his judgement that one sees not only a criticism of another philosopher, but a development of a social strategy for which the name of Heidegger is often in Levinas a synecdoche.

In Heidegger one encounters *Dasein* as possessed by freedom rather than *Dasein* disposing of freedom. In this way the freedom is not questioned,[45] since

"[b]eing is inseparable from the comprehension of Being; Being already invokes subjectivity. But Being *is not* a being. It is a Neuter [as in the critique of the strategy of the same – EW] which orders thought and beings, but which hardens the will instead of

38 CPP 48 / DEHH 166.
39 CPP 49 / DEHH 167.
40 In fact, the reference of Levinas to Lévy-Bruhl is not clear and my interpretation of it, apart from being guided by my previous reading of Levinas' longer essay on the ethnographer, is based on what Levinas says of Heidegger: "Heidegger does not only sum up a whole evolution of Western philosophy. He exalts it by showing in the most pathetic way its anti-religious essence become a religion in reverse" (CPP 53 / DEHH 171). It seems to be implied here that Western philosophy entails an escape from and eventual reverting to something similar to the "primitive mentality".
41 CPP 48 / DEHH 167.
42 CPP 49 / DEHH 167.
43 CPP 49–51 / DEHH 167–169.
44 CPP 51ff / DEHH 169ff.
45 CPP 51, 52 / DEHH 169, 170.

making it ashamed. The consciousness of his finitude does not come to man from the idea of infinity [this is the form of the excluded other – EW] that is, its not revealed as an imperfection, does not refer to the Good, does not know itself wicked."[46]

By so doing, Heidegger's philosophy

"continues to exalt the will to power, whose legitimacy the other alone can unsettle, troubling good conscience",[47]

he "maintains a regime of power more inhuman"[48] than that of the technical power issued from Greek thought. This "regime of power", speculates Levinas, finds its historical expression in Nazism, that could well be based on

"peasant enrootedness and a feudal adoration of subjugated men for the masters and lords who command them".[49]

Whereas the Nietzschean colouring of this criticism of a nostalgia for a life of plenty in the motherland[50] is clear, it should be pointed out that the "enrootedness" (in the citation above[51]) is the Heideggerian equivalent of Lévy-Bruhl's participation. Once this has been noticed, it becomes easier to see what Levinas has in mind when he calls this "peasant enrootedness" "a pagan *existing*"[52] and explains that

"[a]nonymous, neuter, [Being] directs [building and cultivating], ethically indifferent, as a heroic freedom, foreign to all guilt with regard to the other".[53]

One finds in these words a parallel exclusion to that found earlier in the "primitive mentality":

"The impersonality of the sacred in primitive religions […] describes a world where nothing prepares for the apparition of a God. Rather than to God, the notion of the *there is* [*il y a*] leads us to the absence of God, to the absence of every being. Primitive people are absolutely before Revelation, before the light."[54]

Desubstantialisation, whether it is in the "primitives" or in Heidegger, leads to people being overpowered by an impersonal, anonymous power that excludes them from being affected by anything that would transcend it.

46 CPP 52 / DEHH 170.
47 CPP 52 / DEHH 170.
48 CPP 52 / DEHH 170.
49 CPP 52 / DEHH 170.
50 Later in the same text, Levinas describes the inverse attitude, namely the desire for the other in the following terms: "It does not refer to a lost fatherland or plenitude; it is not homesickness, not nostalgia" (CPP 57 / DEHH 175).
51 And again CPP 53 / DEHH 171.
52 And see CPP 52f / DEHH 171: "atheism and paganism".
53 CPP 53 / DEHH 170.
54 E&E 61 / EE 99, cited above.

But again, the point is not to criticise the political engagement of one individual. The "peasant enrootedness", this

"earth-maternity determines the whole Western civilization of property, exploitation, political tyranny, and war."[55]

And Heidegger is not only the summary and summit of Western philosophy, but in the manner that he is presented by Levinas, represents the "outcome of a long tradition of pride, heroism, domination, and cruelty".[56] Thus, the terms of the social criticism at the end of Levinas' essay on Lévy-Bruhl[57] – nostalgia, cruelty, and the eclipse of monotheism – have all found their historical referents. They have also been elaborated on by the traits of a specific form of contemporary "participation" that is not only responsible for an unfortunate period of German history, but characteristic of the entirety of Western civilisation: possession, exploitation, tyranny in politics, and war.

1.3 Ethnography, ontology and socio-political criticism

This is incidentally also the high point of Levinas' use of Lévy-Bruhl; since the remaining references[58] to the ethnographer entail no significant interpretation of his work, one could say that Levinas' use of Lévy-Bruhl comes to an end in 1957. We therefore have to take stock of what has been gained by this overview of Levinas' use of Lévy-Bruhl's work.

It should be clear that Lévy-Bruhl could not be the author of the ethnography to which Levinas refers in our guiding citation (page 33, above): not only was Lévy-Bruhl not considered contemporary any more in 1964, he could not be considered as an ethnographer that "maintains the plurality of cultures on the same level" (in most of his work). Also, where there are indications of a levelling of Lévy-Bruhl's regard for different cultures (according to Levinas' reading of the ethnographer's *Carnets*) the question of cultural plurality is of no importance to Levinas, rather it is the matter of participation and what it implies that is the focus of his attention. It should also be remarked that in the commentaries that Levinas wrote on Lévy-Bruhl, the question of decolonisation, and indeed of colonisation, is absent. However through the exploration of Levinas' readings of Lévy-Bruhl a number of valuable insights have been gained.

55 CPP 53 / DEHH 171.
56 CPP 52 / DEHH 170.
57 ENT 51 / EN 63.
58 T&I 234, 276 / TI 260, 309, A&T 129 / AT 136.

(1) Levinas' take on Lévy-Bruhl means that his texts on the ethnographer read like an introduction to (especially Heideggerian) phenomenology.[59] In these texts one finds a good number of the basic elements of Heidegger's *Daseinsanalyse*. These basic elements are the following: At the centre of all philosophical questions is the difference between Being as the verb "to be" and being as beings that are. Understanding of the verb "to be" happens only in that being (*Dasein*) that is the place where the differentiation between "to be" and the beings take place. This understanding of "to be" is a matter of pre-predicative or pre-representational existence, rather than a series of episodes of conscious cognition. Existing means for *Dasein* to understand "to be" or Being. In fact, existing is a continuous understanding or interpreting event. Hence the importance of analyses of the different modes by which *Dasein* factically exists.[60] All of these elements of Heidegger's philosophy have been taken over and appropriated by Levinas. This should be stated emphatically because, for all his criticism of Heidegger, Levinas is a profoundly Heideggerian philosopher and it is only *after* this has been recognised, that his criticism of Heidegger, as well as his modifying appropriation of parts of Heidegger's philosophy, can be appreciated. But what does this contribute to our understanding of the guiding citation in the introduction to this Part?

(2) The implicit claim of our guiding citation (page 33) is that ethnography is ontologically significant and instructive. Through the overview of Levinas' readings of Lévy-Bruhl we have seen how Levinas as a scholar in phenomenology knows how to identify noteworthy aspects of the ethnographical descriptions for considerations, not merely about the "primitives", but about people in general. This is not an obviously correct procedure, since the analyses of *Dasein* do not constitute an anthropology. I would even claim that one of the purposes of Levinas' phenomenological hermeneutics of ethnography is to use the ethnography in order to provide a more anthropologising reading of phenomenology, and in particular of Heideggerian ontology. Thus, the characteristics of the life of "primiti-

59 This is also the justification for pointing out, from the beginning, the Heideggerian resonances of Levinas' reading of Lévy-Bruhl. However, the relation between Levinas' reading of Lévy-Bruhl and phenomenology is much more complex than could be given account of here, since at the time that Levinas was developing this reading, Lévy-Bruhl had already received a favourable reception by Husserl and Sartre; Merleau-Ponty would do so round about the same time as Levinas (cf. Frédéric Keck, "Causalité mentale et perception de l'invisible", *op. cit.* p. 320f). Comparing Levinas to such other phenomenological readers of Lévy-Bruhl would reveal more of the intricacy of this matter.

60 Cf. *De l'éthique à la justice* 5–7.

ves", interpreted with the aid of Heidegger, helps us to return to Heidegger in order to find the anthropological import of his claims about *Dasein*'s ontological existence. This doesn't mean that the ontology of Heidegger is simply collapsed, but that it is accompanied by a parallel discourse, by a path that is indicated from *Dasein*, through anthropology, to political or social criticism. This is the strategy by which Levinas develops a discourse that always has *political overtones when it is explicitly ontological*, and has an ontological tenor, when it is explicitly political. This is how he could assert that in the ethnographic claim to the equality of cultures, the connection between a political event (decolonisation) and an ontology (one of plurality) becomes visible.

(3) The climax of this coupling of the ontological with the political is situated in the political implications of an ontology that would reduce the other to the same, that fuses or constrains the other to participate in the flow of the same. Although we have seen how Levinas exposes this violence of ontology,[61] especially in connection with his reading of Lévy-Bruhl in 1957, it should be noted here already that this has been a part of his work from very early on. In *De l'évasion* (*On escape* – 1935) for instance, Levinas proposes his own project explicitly in terms of a renewal of the question of "Being as 'to be' [*l'être en tant qu'être*]",[62] i.e., in the terms of Heideggerian ontology, and inquires if Being or "to be", understood in this manner, is not perhaps "the sign of a certain civilisation that is installed in the *fait accompli* of Being[63] and incapable to get out of it"[64] and he warns (or already diagnoses?) that

> "every civilization that accepts Being, the tragic despair that it entails and the crimes that it justifies, deserves the name of barbaric."[65]

61 I shall not enter here into the legitimate question as to the validity of Levinas' criticism of Heidegger. My concern is only with Levinas' interpretation and the implications thereof.

62 EV 99.

63 Above, we found the idea of being as "fait accompli" too, namely where Levinas referred to "being-in-the-world is the exemplary *fait accompli*." (ENT 47 / EN 58).

64 EV 99.

65 EV 127. But here too, the reference to the question of paganism/atheism and monotheism is not impossible to indicate. In a (confessional and philosophical) text from the same year Levinas writes: "Paganism is neither the negation of spirit, nor ignorance of a unique God. The mission of Judaism would be only very modest if it brought monotheism to all the peoples on earth. It would be to instruct those that know. *Paganism is a radical inability to exit the world*. It does not consist of negating spirits and gods, but of situating them in the world." (cited after Roland in EV 153–154). Monotheism is thus opposed to a form of incapacity to be affected by something from outside of this world and that carries in religious terminology the

In Chapter 5 (§1), the early formulation of the coupling of ontological and political violence will be examined in more detail.

(4) When the matter of the violence of Western civilisation is placed on the agenda, and especially in connection with the work of Lévy-Bruhl, the issue of decolonisation is spontaneously evoked. In fact, in contemporary African philosophy, Lévy-Bruhl is often named as the colonial ideologue par excellence.[66] The categorical formulation of Kebede is telling in this regard:

> "No need to go into fussy research to lay hands the method used to invent the 'white man'. All the ingredients are found in the thinker who is universally believed to have codified the colonial discourse, namely Lucien Lévy-Bruhl."[67]

Now, it is clear that the political fate of the "primitives" as well as that of their colonised and decolonised descendants is not the matter of concern for Levinas as a reader of Lévy-Bruhl. What he appreciates most is the ethnographer's ideas in which the distinction between Western rationality and the "primitive mentality" has already withered away and the notion of the pre-logical has been abandoned to make place for an equivalence of two manners of thinking in minds that are in essence the same[68] – Levinas' ethnographer is neither one of a hierarchy of differences (as the earlier Lévy-Bruhl would be), nor of an indifference to differences (as the ethnography in our guiding citation). Rather, Levinas relates cultural differences in a phenomenological manner by arguing that what is constitutive of the "primitive mentality" is equally constitutive of the mentality of (at least some of) his contemporaries. It is the participatory aspect of the constitution of human beings' mentality that is criticised by Levinas, not the alleged inferiority of either of the two as such. What will be decisive in his work are the arguments that allow for the denunciation of violence in *both* of these "mentalities". And let it immediately be added that, the instance of authority for the judging of cultural expressions is not a factor of

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name of paganism. But this corresponds not only with what Levinas saw in Lévy-Bruhl's notion of participation, but also to his philosophical project in *On escape* of finding an escape or "excendance" from Being and the violence that it implies.

66 I say "contemporary", since the *négritude* philosophers, influential around the time of decolonisation, made a positive appropriation of some of Lévy-Bruhl's analyses (cf. for instance Abiola Irele on Senghor in "African philosophy, Francophone", in E. Craig (ed.). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 1998).

67 Messay Kebede, *Africa's quest for a philosophy of decolonization*. Amsterdam and New York: Editions Radopi, 2004, p. 1.

68 ENT 40, 49 / EN 50, 61.

rationality (nor of irrationality) and is itself worthy of being called "pre-logical"[69] in what is to Levinas an eminently *positive* sense. It is in the name of the ethicity that Levinas will support by means of his philosophy that he is capable of denouncing the crimes, the possession, the violence and the cruelty that he considers prevalent in Western civilization. And it is on the basis of this ethical judgement, and not on the basis of the superiority of Western culture, that Levinas would also criticise whatever he deemed worthy of criticism in other cultures.[70] There is no reason why the violence in colonialism would not be included in Levinas' criticism of Western civilisation's crimes, possession, violence, and cruelty and therefore this subject will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3.

(5) In all of this, the religious terms "atheism", "paganism" and "monotheism" play a considerable role. For the moment I only state that the intention with which Levinas uses them in his philosophical texts is not simply (or perhaps, not at all) to introduce confessional categories into his philosophical discourse. If one wants to understand Levinas' stance on the matter of ethics, ontology, plurality and politics, it is of utmost importance to see that these terms are capable of carrying meanings other than confessional ones. This seems to me the appropriate interpretational approach to Levinas, independent of the question of whether one accepts what Levinas says by using these terms, or not.

(6) The thought strategy that links ethnography, ontology and atheism, accompanied by a social criticism and the question of its solution had thus been present in Levinas' work for a long time when the words of the guiding citation were formulated. Far more than a mere philological curiosity, this fact helps us to understand how a number of different strands of thought in his early work fit together, and to understand the indissoluble link between what is written on the level of ontology and its implications for a socio-political criticism. Two further advantages are to be derived from this. First, it will give us a frame of reference with which to explore the meagre references of Levinas to Lévi-Strauss. This in turn will help us to see the shift in Levinas' diagnosis of the essential socio-political problem from his earlier work to his later work and subsequently it will allow us to discern what is at stake in Levinas' concern with matters of cultural and political plurality and unity. Second, such a view

69 HO 53f / HH 86.

70 That he didn't hold strictly to this principle and succumbed in some places to either an idea of cultural superiority or moral superiority, will be recalled in Chapter 6 (§1).

on the changes of Levinas' political concerns will make it possible to give a more correct philosophical interpretation of the question of atheism and monotheism, alluded to above.

We therefore have to move on to the consideration of our second ethnographer, Claude Lévi-Strauss.

2 CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, DECOLONISATION AND INDIFFERENCE

Considering Lévi-Strauss as the ethnographer that Levinas could have had in mind in the guiding citation (page 33) might at first sight seem somewhat doubtful. In Levinas' entire work, Lévi-Strauss is referred to by name only twice.[71] In fact, one of these two references seems to exclude Lévi-Strauss from any serious place in Levinas' thought, since the latter confesses in a context where he speaks explicitly about Lévi-Strauss: "even today, I don't understand structuralism"[72] and "probably I haven't read [Lévi-Strauss or structuralism – EW] as one should"[73] and of Lévi-Strauss he admits that "I don't at all see where is the point of his view".[74] However, in what follows, the correspondence with our citation is easily detectable: the "vision" of Lévi-Strauss "corresponds, certainly, from a moral point of view, to what is called decolonisation and the end of dominant Europe […]".[75] Nothing more of value is said in this passage, but the connection between Lévi-Strauss and decolonisation is decisive.

The other of the two explicit references to Lévi-Strauss in Levinas' work is at the end of his 1959 essay on Rosenzweig. This is an important place for two reasons. First, this is the essay with which Levinas has practically single-handedly opened French studies of the author that he considered to be "the

71 I limit myself here only to the issues evoked by the guiding citation and these explicit references to Lévi-Strauss. The question concerning the relation between Levinas' idea of humanism and that of Lévi-Strauss – both of which could be said to aspire to a post-colonial and post-subjectivist notion of humanism, albeit in quite different ways – will not be dealt with here.

72 EL 161.

73 EL 162.

74 EL 161.

75 EL 161. I do not take it too seriously when Levinas says that Lévi-Strauss is "Certainly the most distinguished mind of the century" (EL 161), since on the very next page Ricoeur is called "the best [of the distinguished minds] of our era." (EL 162). Besides, it is hard to see on what basis one could sing such praise to an author that one avows one doesn't understand.

only modern philosopher of Judaism that would be worthy of this name"[76] and of whom he would later recognise that in *Totality and infinity*,[77] his influence is too prevalent to be cited.[78] Second, it indicates that Levinas had made a significant appropriation of the work of Lévi-Strauss, at the very latest around the time when his interest in Lévy-Bruhl waned.[79] I cite this passage at length, since it says a lot about Levinas' own manner of thinking and it will immediately fill in the image of our guiding citation (of page 33).

"There is yet another way in which history could put in question the existence of the Jewish people […] there is an interpretation according to which [this existence] goes nowhere: all civilizations would be equal. Modern atheism is not the negation of God. It is the absolute indifferentism of *Tristes Tropiques* [of Lévi-Strauss]. I think that this is the most atheist book that has been written in our day, the absolutely disoriented and most disorientating book […]. Rosenzweig […] allows us, in the very name of philosophy, to resist the supposed necessities of history."[80]

These cryptic remarks of Levinas on Lévi-Strauss resonate with the guiding citation by (1) the issue of a non-hierarchical relationship between different cultures or civilisations, (2) the disorientation that it entails, (3) the atheism that it expresses and (4) the politics of decolonisation with which it fits. On the basis of this accord, it could be allowed to interpret "history" in the citation about *Tristes tropiques*, with "Being" in the guiding citation – an equivalence that is commonly used by Levinas since his earliest texts. Hence, the suspicion about Lévi-Strauss as the ethnographer of disorientation is affirmed. The fact that the guiding paragraph could accommodate other ethnographers too could be considered of no consequence, since in what is said about Lévi-Strauss Levinas' essential point is clarified.[81]

76 "Recension. Léon Chestov: 'Kierkegaard'", in Emmanuel Levinas, *L'intrigue de l'infini*. Marie-Anne Lescouret (ed.). Paris: Flammarion, 1994, pp. 87–90, citation p. 87.

77 T&I 28 / TI 14.

78 Cf. *De l'éthique à la justice* 14–22 on Levinas' reading of Rosenzweig.

79 I say "at the latest" since it cannot be excluded that it is to someone like Lévi-Strauss that Levinas refers at the end of his essay on Lévy-Bruhl, when he speaks of the "renewal of mythology, the elevation of myth to the rank of superior thought by secular thinkers" (ENT 51 / EN 63). Also, the claim I make here covers only what can be supported by textual references.

80 DF 201 / DL 279–280, translation modified.

81 Bernasconi's demonstration that Levinas is constantly in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty on the issues of culture, decolonisation and a phenomenology of meaning, and their interrelation, in the first chapter of HO should be considered perfectly plausible (see Robert Bernasconi, "One-way traffic: the ontology of decolonization and its ethics", in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (eds.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990, pp. 67–80). My point is not to exclude such a role of Merleau-Ponty in this chap-

But the importance of identifying the culprit exceeds the joy of playing philological sleuth. It enables us to identify what Levinas considers the ontological and political implications of Lévi-Strauss' ethnography to be.

(1) There would be, in Levinas' mind, ontological implications in maintaining the equivalence of the value of different cultures, as Lévi-Strauss does. If Levinas were to make a reading of Lévi-Strauss, in the same manner as he did of Lévy-Bruhl, he would have indicated what the "ontology – thought on being, thought that is interpreted from multiple and multivocal signification" entails (see the guiding citation, page 33, above). In fact, (and this is perhaps because Levinas was not sure of his reading of Lévi-Strauss) he did so, but only obliquely – we find this analysis, without reference to Lévi-Strauss in the first chapter of *Humanism of the other*, from which our guiding citation comes.

(2) We can elucidate the political consequences of the implied ontology by considering the two ways in which Levinas (in the citation from the essay on Rosenzweig, page 51, above) believes the Jewish people – *and with them all ethical agents* – to be threatened. (1) The first consists of being simply drawn along by history and history being its own exclusive judge. History (or Being) is for Levinas a *totalising and identity-creating force* that allows for no true judgement about the manner in which particularities disappear in the universal history (here one recognises again Levinas' criticism of Heidegger's notion of being). This is the problem of participation again, this time formulated as a historical concept rather than an ethnographic one. In this perspective, what Levinas said of the individual in a Heideggerian perspective, holds also for other peoples: "it is a prey to events that have already determined it."[82] (2) The implicit ontology of Lévi-Strauss' ethnographic convictions poses a somewhat different problem to ethical agency: it doesn't destroy the agency by integrating it into a whole, into the flow of an identity-creating force, but by collapsing all judgement or valuation between agents, in other words, by *indifference*. Levinas refers to this indifference as a disorientation (in the guiding citation of page 33) – "disorientation" being synonymous here with "atheistic" and, especially when the time at which Levinas wrote it is taken into account (1964), it is not surprising to see that the political

ter of HO – in fact, Levinas explicitly orients his discussion of meaning on Merleau-Ponty – but to expose and exploit what is present in Levinas' relation to the ethnographer.

82 ENT 47 / EN 58.

manifestation of this dis-orientation is seen in the dis-occidentalisation of the world, i.e., in the process of decolonisation.[83] Strangely enough, when, in the finishing paragraphs of the essay, Rosenzweig is presented as the solution for the problem posed by Lévi-Strauss, the parameters of the problem change in such a manner that it again becomes a question of undermining the necessity of history and the issue of indifferent plurality seems to slip away.[84] It is as if Levinas here finds a problem for which, at this stage, he has no solution, and can find none, not even in Rosenzweig. I shall comment on this shift below, for time being let it then be noted that there are two distinguishable threats to the continued existence of the Jewish people.

(3) Thus far, in my commentary on the essay from *Difficult freedom*, I have referred, without problem, to the Jewish people. This is of course imposed by reference to a text that was initially prepared for a Jewish audience (namely the Colloque d'Intellectuels Juifs de Langue Française). However, Levinas leaves ample room for the appropriation of his argument by and for non-Jews, or to put it differently, the essence of what he says applies to all people and not only to Jews. This becomes clear when one takes seriously that Levinas presents Rosenzweig's intellectual opposition to the necessity of history as allowed for in the name of philosophy, which in this case should be taken to stand for universal validity (as opposed to validity only for those that adhere to the authority of the same religion).[85] One finds more explicit support for such a claim, if one accepts Levinas' conviction that

> "[t]o wish to be a Jew today is therefore, before believing in Moses and the prophets, to have the right to think that the significance of a work is truer in terms of the will that wished it into being than the totality into which it is inserted".[86]

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83 "The world created by this saraband of countless equivalent cultures, each one justifying itself in its own context, is certainly dis-Occidentalized; however, it is also disoriented [*dés-occidentalisé, mais aussi un monde désorienté*]." (HO 37 / HH 60).
It should be noted here that the double analysis of the most important figures of political catastrophes, as I have reconstructed them here with the help of Levinas' reading of Lévy-Bruhl and Lévi-Strauss, is also to be found elsewhere in his work. The essay "On the deficiency without care, in a new sense" [*De la déficience sans souci au sens nouveau*]" (GCM 43–51 / DVI 77–89, my translation) is an excellent example thereof.

84 DF 201 / DL 280.

85 That the universal validity of Rosenzweig's practice of philosophy could be questioned is not excluded here. The point, however, is to see if Levinas speaks in principle only about Jews or if his ideas apply in principle also to other people.

86 DF 200 / DL 279.

In other words, what is essential in Judaism is not in the first instance the fidelity to the faith tradition but the conviction that one could – also independently from the Jewish confession – act in a manner as to infringe on the identitary and totalising power of history of Being, for it is only in this way that judgement and evaluation of action is possible.[87]

(4) It should at least be noted that, as far as the political tenor of Levinas' reading of Lévi-Strauss is concerned, (and apart from the question of the continued existence of the Jewish people that I have just reinterpreted as the continued existence of ethical agency) that in the 1959 passage there was no reference to decolonisation, whereas in 1964 (the guiding citation) it takes an important position as the political manifestation of ontological indifference and of atheism. Given the terseness of the references to Lévi-Strauss this could of course be mere coincidence. Let it at least be suggested that since the passage on Lévi-Strauss and the guiding citation are so similar in tenor and content, and since in both cases the reference to Lévi-Strauss is placed in a strategically important position[88] for the indication of the problem, that it might perhaps be considered possible that this change in wording reflects Levinas' appropriation of the events of decolonisation that have unfolded in the meantime.[89] What decolonisation meant for Levinas' thought on politics will be examined below.

(5) We have seen, in the conclusions drawn from Levinas' use of Lévy-Bruhl, that the use of terms like "atheism" or "monotheism" in this kind of context does not have much to do with personal convictions in matters of religion. Similarly, in reflecting on the implications of Lévi-Strauss's ethnography, Levinas is concerned with an implicit ontology to which the ethnographic text testifies, and its political implications. The term "atheism", in the guiding citation and in the short remarks about *Tristes tropiques*, thus refers to a stance of indiffe-

87 The issue of the coordination between philosophy and reflection that is embedded in a Jewish community, as Levinas understands it, will be explored further – namely in Chapter 4 (§4) and Chapter 5 (§4).

88 In the case of the guiding citation, its importance for *Humanism of the other* will be shown in Chapter 5.

89 To recall just the major markers of French decolonisation: Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, as well as Tunisia and Morocco became independent before or in 1956 and the big number of Sub-Saharan African colonies and Madagascar in 1960. The Algerian war came to an end and Algeria gained independence in 1962 when Levinas was probably already working on the essay from which the guiding citation comes (*Humanism of the other*, chapter 1). Djibouti and the Comoros had to wait until the second half of the 1970s for their independence.

rence with regard to the Being-disclosing capacity of distinct cultural phenomena. An "atheistic" ethnography (or for that matter any other form of "atheistic" discourse on the same subject) is one that is in favour of a non-hierarchical relation between different cultures and even engaged in promoting an attitude by which any such hierarchisation is rejected as a political act – of this, decolonisation would be a supreme example in the time Levinas wrote – and it is in this attitude and its corresponding political practice that Levinas sees an incapacity to distinguish, to judge, to differentiate in a normative manner, or in other words, he sees in such an attitude an indifference that, if pursued consistently, would entail political disorientation. In short, here again atheism doesn't refer in the first place to a personal conviction concerning the non-reality of a transcendent person; as it referred in the discussion of Lévy-Bruhl to the impenetrability of a fused, identity-creating flux of history, here it refers to the practice (the "political work" from the guiding citation) issued from a deep acceptance of an irresolvable indifference – hence Levinas' term "indifferentism" – to which he will also refer as the "crisis of monotheism" in *Humanism of the other*. Whereas one could perhaps still consider the use of the word "atheism" in the citation from the essay on Rosenzweig on *Tristes tropiques* as made from and for a religious context, its repetition in the guiding citation from *Humanism of the other* is undeniably philosophical.

Having presented the detailed exegesis of Levinas' remarks on Lévy-Bruhl and Lévi-Strauss, it is now necessary to draw a few conclusions from the two sets of remarks, considered together.

3 CONCLUSION: THE POLITICS OF LEVINAS' PHILOSOPHY OF ALTERITY

In Levinas' engagement with Lévy-Bruhl and Lévi-Strauss, his primary concern is never with how the "primitives" or their descendants should be understood. The question of understanding the cultural other is approached only indirectly in both cases: ethnography informs ontology, it helps to uncover the anthropological overtones of an ontology and only in this way

gives access to considerations concerning the relation between people(s).[90] And here, the objective is not to understand the other or to give guidelines for living together, but to develop a diagnosis of the violence in the confrontation between different people. The two ethnographers each help to identify a different problem in the co-existence of people. And it is of utmost importance to see this, since Levinas' profound reflections on ontology and ethics are strongly formed by these diagnoses. I do not mean to claim that it is the reading of the ethnographers that structures Levinas work in an earlier and a later period, but that the different cultural-political diagnoses of the two main periods of his post-war work are accessible by a reading of his use of the two ethnographers.

For the sake of clarity, the main political concern reflected in each of the two major phases of Levinas' work should be schematised.[91] The overwhelming political concern of Levinas' earlier philosophy is the rise of Nazism and the effects of its totalitarian violence.[92] If the fact of the existence of the colonies was a concern for Levinas, then it would be only in a secondary way and in so far as their existence reflected totalitarian violence. A specific ontological strategy is called for to address this problem from a philosophical point of view: this consists of affirming a non-totalisable alterity, despite the totalising and identity-creating force of Being, in other words, *affirming the other, despite the same*. From the political point of view, the fact that there is a discernible later philosophy of Levinas doesn't mean that his earlier philosophy is invalid or even that it had been insufficiently treated, but that the political concern of the earlier philosophy is not the only really disturbing one faced by Levinas and his contemporaries. The political concern of Levinas' later philosophy is that of a world in which competing, contradictory claims to excellence or recognition exist directly next to each other, without any possibility of settling or resolving such claims in a non-contingent manner. The appropriate ontological strategy for countering

90 A fairly similar interpretational strategy could be indicated to be at work in (at least some of) Levinas' efforts to make insights from literature useful for ontological considerations. I have explored one such example – that of Levinas' reading of Céline's famous novel – in "Le mal, le destin et l'éthique. Lévinas et le *Voyage au bout de la nuit*", in *Études littéraires* 41/2 2010, pp. 133-145.

91 This schematisation is justified only by the objective of developing my particular point of view. It should not be taken as a presentation of the intricacy and complexity of Levinas' thought on politics and its relation to his philosophy in general. An overview of this theme can be found in Howard Caygill's *Levinas and the Political*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

92 More will be said on this in Chapter 5.

this problem would consist in *identifying an orientation or sense of the presumably indifferent multiplicity of cultural meanings*. As much as the change from the earlier to the later Levinas could be ascribed to changes in his philosophical reflection in the sense of his strategy of justifying ethicity, it seems nonetheless valid to claim that the two phases correspond also to two distinguishable political needs.

Levinas' entire philosophy is motivated by his concern about these two political risks, or even tendencies, that are both clearly present in the post-colonial world, but also elsewhere: the tendency of identity-enforcing totalitarian violence and that of indifferent plurality. Consequently his philosophical project is aimed at finding the source of a non totalisable alterity, that he also calls infinity, and to find something that is otherwise than the indifferent, multiple cultural renderings of Being. These two evidently *political* concerns could be summarised in the ontological terms "Totality and infinity" and "Otherwise than Being". These two formulas are of course the titles of Levinas' two most important books. The ontological register of the titles and even of the biggest part of the content should not mislead the reader to think that Levinas' ultimate concern is about the verb "to be", *Sein*, *être*, its meaning and its limits. The enormous challenge of Levinas' philosophy is to provide one satisfactory solution that could hold for both of these problems – and this, as explained in Chapter 1, confronted at the most profound level of reflection for Levinas: that of meaning. The concern with "to be", ontology, is in the service of a most radical confrontation with the problem. Levinas' philosophy will have succeeded if he could affirm convincingly at the same time that the apparent indifferent plurality of cultural manifestations has a unitary orientation and that this unitary orientation is the interruption of the totalising unitary movement of history. The continued existence of Jewish people against anti-Semitic totalitarianism and the possibility of judging interaction between people despite decolonisation would be the political figures that capture this task. However, it is the survival of *any* oppressed other in the face of totalitarianism and the possibility of evaluation of *all* action in interaction that are at stake in these figures.

Having thus strengthened our initial claim concerning the political nature of Levinas' philosophical enterprise (see Chapter 1) and having explored two major figures by which the stakes of the political as philosophical problem are presented and confronted (Chapter 2), we have arrived at the conclusion that Levinas claims general validity for the philosophical dis-

course in which he addresses these problems. It is the largest practical dimension of this general claim, which will be explored in the next Chapter.