Chapter 4
Humanism and anti-humanism in Levinas' reflection on Jewish education

Humanism is explicitly thematised and advocated in the last two essays of *Difficult freedom*, and this in two quite different ways: the first as a plea "For a Hebraic humanism" (1956), the second as a meditation on "Anti-humanism and education" (1973). The two texts, one concerned with a particular form of humanism and the other only with humanism after or through anti-humanism, share a number of important concerns. First, both are concerned with education and, in particular, the education of young Jews in the Jewish heritage or from a Jewish orientation. Second, this issue is responded to, at least formally, by an appeal to "humanism" (but the different articulations of the two essays will be pointed out later) and this in the face of the phenomenon of Jews integrating into the ambient Western cultures, especially by equating their Jewish morality with humanist ideas of the West. Third, in opposition to this tendency and in the face of the dissolution of Diaspora Judaism, Levinas proposes in both essays an education that is not merely religious education, but the transmission of competence in an entire civilisation or culture. This means not just the acquisition of a certain knowledge, but especially a practice, namely that of working through the Bible and Rabbinic literature, and where this practice links both with the rituals of the Jewish religion and the practice of ethics for the advantage of all people. Finally, in both texts the Hebrew Bible and the subsequent reflection on it in Rabbinic literature gives a privileged and decisive access to what the human being is.[1]

1 DF 275 and 284 / DL 383 and 395.

If there is a distinctive tension or progression between the two essays, then this can to a large extent be attributed to a change in Levinas' attitude in associating Judaism with humanism. In order to appreciate this change with respect to the central reference to humanism, I shall now look more closely at the two essays in turn.

1 "FOR A HEBRAIC HUMANISM"

Against the background of Jewish assimilation and concerns about the desirability of learning Hebrew and the risk of imperilment that a Hebrew education might pose to the secular education (*éducation laïque*), Levinas suggests that Jewish education be rethought from the perspective of the meaning of Judaism in the contemporary world, that is, a world in which humanity is in question.[2] It is, in Levinas' view, a Hebraic humanism that is required to reanimate Judaism in a manner that is relevant for the contemporary world. In order to understand this claim, one first needs to understand what is meant by humanism in general. Humanism might be a questionable term, as Levinas points out, but this much can be said for the purposes of his essay: humanism is

> "a system of principles and disciplines that free human life from the prestige of myths, the discord they introduce into ideas and the cruelty they perpetuate in social customs."[3]

We have seen in Chapter 2 the importance of secular (desacralising) thought for Levinas, and the key role that it plays in his philosophy and social diagnoses – it is by attributing such a secularising quality to humanism in general, that Levinas derives the secular (*laïque*) quality of the Hebraic humanism that he advocates. This doesn't necessarily mean that for Levinas humanism can be reduced to its secularising or demythologising nature, but that this is at least one central aspect of humanism, and that this quality should, in his view, suffice to appease his readers' concern about the maintenance of secular education. To be true, there is

2 "[T]he study of Hebrew itself lends support to what can today give a meaning to Judaism. It lends support to the Jewish humanism which cannot remain indifferent to the modern world in which it seeks a whole humanity." (DF 273 / DL 381). It is because of this importance of the study of Hebrew and Hebrew texts, that I prefer to render the title of the essay as "For a Hebraic humanism" [*Pour un humanisme hébraïque*], rather than "For a Jewish humanism" as the English translator does. Besides, Levinas uses in the text both expressions: "Hebraic humanism" and "Jewish humanism".

3 DF 273 / DL 381.

certainly much more to Judaism than secularising thought, but this set of principles and disciplines that opposes cruelty, this secularity, is a common denominator of all forms of expression of Judaism. What makes this humanism "Hebraic" is the centre of its discipline: the study of a literature and a civilisation that turns around the commentary of the Jewish Law and that is maintained in practice.

As important as the study of texts may be, it is the practice that ensues from it, that is essential. For it is only in the practice of justice (of which this humanism is the incessant contemplation and study) that God can be seen. Indeed, according to Levinas, the monotheism of Judaism (from the Bible, throughout the Talmudic commentaries) that is the ultimate source of this Hebraic humanism, is not bent on facilitating a privileged vision of God for the faithful, but on steering them towards their work for other people. In this sense, Levinas can claim that "[m]onotheism is a humanism".[4] One could paraphrase that monotheism is a secularising (including, possibly, atheistic), never-ending reflection on justice for all people through the incessant study of the Talmud. But this humanism needs its humanists to give access to its treasures. This is the importance of Jewish humanism,[5] which is at least as necessary for the contemporary world as the Greco-Roman heritage of the West.

From this perspective, it should be clear that Levinas is grappling here with much more than teaching an old language. The education that he has in mind is an access to and an institutional support for a "civilisation of justice". The Jewish institutions of the Diaspora can be mobilised for an ambitious cultural programme of uniting spirit and justice, somewhat parallel to Gellius', *paideia* and *philanthropia*. And if this means that a particularity of Jews and Judaism has to be affirmed in the process, it is at the service of excavating from the Jewish heritage that which is needed for the accord amongst all people.

This, then, is Levinas' message to the Jewish community in France in 1956: continue to have your children and students study Hebrew and everything that is associated with the discipline of studying the text of the Hebraic tradition. Sure enough, this will help you to keep Judaism alive and relevant, which might be important to you for whatever personal, religious or cultural reason, but the real objective thereof is not the continued existence of a religion or even the continued service to its God, but the fate of human beings, in other words, justice.

4 DF 275 / DL 383.
5 DF 275 / DL 383.

But since one cannot accept that the contemporary reader would simply agree with this point of view, it is important to reflect on what the structure of validation is that implicitly supports Levinas' point of view: what is required from a reader to accept what Levinas proposes in this text? Since Levinas wrote the text for Jews in the Diaspora, one could suppose that he counted on a Jewish faith or an acceptance of the authority of the Jewish religion or at least on a pro-Jewish sentiment in order to make his point. From the content of the argument it seems that non-Jews that, for whatever reason, are convinced that Judaism or the Hebraic literature makes a decisive contribution to the schooling of humanity for justice, would also be likely to accept Levinas' point. However, Levinas doesn't make such reasons explicit (beyond what is summarised above) and his essay is not very clear on this issue of the reasons for agreeing with its point about Hebraic humanism. Since Levinas did develop similar ideas or a similar perspective on Judaism in other essays from the same period and for a similar audience, it seems legitimate to receive instruction from them regarding the structure of validation that Levinas supposes as sufficient support for this "Hebraic Judaism". This regards (1) the kind of Judaism, (2) the universality of Judaism and (3) the "atheism" of Judaism.

In examining Levinas' other pleas for the importance of Talmudic studies, one is struck, on the one hand by the specificity of what is required from his readership in terms of the *kind of Judaism* necessary in order to "play his game", but on the other hand, by the fact that this specificity has not much to do with enthusiasm for a sectarian piety, but with the shock and horror of the fate of the Jews of Europe in the fifteen years and more preceding these essays. In "Education and prayer"[6] Levinas expresses the conviction that, as important as prayer might be or might have been for Jews the

> "Judaism of the house of prayer has ceased to be transmittable. The old-fashioned Judaism is dying off, or is already dead. This is why we must return to Jewish wisdom; this is why in our recitation of this wisdom we must reawaken the reason that has gone to sleep; this is why the Judaism of reason must take precedence over the Judaism of prayer: the Jew of the Talmud must take precedence over the Jew of the Psalms."[7]

The Judaism that Levinas has in mind is one that has given up the desire (or that never had it) to conquer a part of the public space by its edifices – it has

6 According to the information on *Espacethique* (http://espacethique.free.fr/index.php?lng=fr, consulted 9 June 2010), this essay first appeared under the title "Philosophie de la prière" in *Bulletin intérieur du Consistoire Central des Israélites de France* in 1964, pp. 57–59. Written between "For a Hebraic humanism" and "Anti-humanism and education" it is probably correct to state that it reflects a long standing perspective of Levinas on Jewish spiritual life.

7 DF 271 / DL 377.

no infrastructure that can artificially support it, it is kept from dissolution by a Jewish science of texts, the meticulous study (in Hebrew) of which is comparable to visiting cathedrals.[8] Hence the particular kind of practice, textual and reflective, that Levinas advocates as an indispensable component of Judaism – that is why the "Judaism with a historic reality – Judaism, neither more nor less – is rabbinic."[9] However, having noted Levinas' insistence on the particularity of Judaism or a particular kind of Judaism as essential for the support of an education that is guided by the dream of a Hebraic humanism, it should be pointed out at the same time that being Jewish is actually not a specific enough requirement to go along with Levinas' idea. The centrality of the study of the Talmud in Levinas' educational programme and in his idea of Judaism, serves to lead one back to what is Jewish about Jews: not their blood, history or land,[10] in fact, not a religion or even God in the first place, but rather the study of the law and the relation to other people that it mediates: the singularity of Judaism resides exactly here:

> "the link between God and man is not an emotional communion that takes place within the love of a God incarnate, but a spiritual or intellectual relationship [*une relation entre esprits*] which takes place through an education by the Torah."[11]

Justice is the essence of this teaching and of the practice that should follow from it; justice is the essence of Judaism.[12]

From this point Levinas can insist that the very specific particularity of Judaism doesn't obstruct, but rather furthers its *universalism*.[13] Of this universalism, Levinas gives us a good idea in "A religion for adults" (1957).[14] Jewish universalism doesn't mean the universalism of a truth that is equally valid for everybody, but it is universal because it is open to everybody. Open not in the sense of a desire to proselytise everybody, but to serve everybody. The particularity of Judaism is the flip side of this moral universalism: realising the obligation to serve particularises or singularises the person or group that realises this obligation. In this sense, the particularisation of Israel is an election, it is a setting it apart from other. But according to Levinas' under-

8 DF 257 / DL 357.
9 DF 13 / DL 28.
10 DF 176, 23 / DL 246, 40f.
11 DF 144 / DL 204, translation modified.
12 "The justice rendered to the other, my neighbour, gives me an unsurpassable proximity to God. It is as intimate as the prayer and the liturgy which without justice are nothing. […] The pious person is the just person." (DF 18 / DL 34, translation modified).
13 DF 13 / DL 27.
14 DF 11–23 / DL 24–42, in particular the ideas expressed in DF 21f / DL 38ff and repeated elsewhere in *Difficult freedom*.

standing of election, it is not a "historical, national, local or racial"[15] category; despite whatever impression might be created by the Hebrew Bible or by certain strands of interpretation of Judaism, the particularity or election of Israel has, according to Levinas, nothing to do with being the first monotheism, or having authored a certain wisdom, or being the privileged instance of a whimsical divine decision. This setting apart is proper to every human subject in his or her capacity as obliged to serve the others. A synonym for this setting apart or particularism is (moral) asymmetry. The particularity in Jewish particularism is the singularity of any human subject as situated exceptionally in an asymmetric position with regard to the others. If there is to be equality between people, it can be realised only on the basis of the assumption of this inequality or asymmetry; if there is a universality of humanity, it can be realised only on the basis of particularism (provided that particularism is understood in the sense explained here). The ethnic or historical people called Israel, is in Levinas' interpretation of Judaism, only one possible manifestation of a broader category of "Israel" to which any person may belong, and that carries the particular name "Israel" only because of the particular historical context in which the testimony of this election of all human subjects has been transmitted. But this tradition teaches that a pagan who knows the Torah – or rather a pagan that realises his or her election to serve all people – is equal to the High Priest.[16] Levinas is, of course, not ignorant of the radicality of the interpretation that he gives here of Judaism, in fact, after a similar explanation of election in the *Universalis* article on "Judaism" (1971[17]) Levinas exclaims: "This is the extreme humanism of a God who demands much of people".[18] This exclamation is deserved, not only because of the extreme demand placed on human agents by God, according to this interpretation of Judaism, but also because of Levinas' labelling it as "humanist". The latter refers clearly to the centrality of the service due to human beings. But what then about God?

This question is answered in a radio address, "Loving the Torah more than God" (1955)[19] of which the concluding point is summarised in a similar exclamation about Judaism: "It is a complete and austere humanism, linked to a difficult adoration!"[20] It is everything to understand why the adoration of such a God is difficult – it is historical circumstances that,

15 DF 22 / DL 40.
16 DF 22 / DL 40.
17 Date of publication confirmed on *Espacethique* (http://espacethique.free.fr/ index.php?lng=fr, consulted 9 June 2010).
18 DF 26 / DL 46, translation modified.
19 DF 142–145 / DL 201–206.
20 DF 145 / DL 206.

whilst making a certain kind devotion to God impossible, still require a service to humanity. The suffering of Jews in the last century has made more than evident the death of a certain God:

"What can this suffering of the innocents mean? Is it not proof of a world without God, where only man measure Good and Evil? The simplest and most common answer would be atheism. This is also the sanest reaction for all those for whom previously a fairly primary sort of God had dished out prizes, inflicted punishment or pardoned sins – a God who, in His goodness, treated men like children. But with what lesser demon or strange magician have you therefore filled our heaven, you who claim that it is empty?"[21]

But even if by "God" Levinas has in mind the "adult's God [who] is revealed precisely through the void of the child's heaven",[22] what makes him persevere in the use of this word? It is the belief that

"[c]onfidence in a God Who is not made manifest through any worldly authority can rely only on *internal evidence* and the values of an education. To the credit of Judaism, there is nothing blind about this."[23]

And this loving of the Torah, more than God, would be a

"protection against the madness of a direct contact with the Sacred that is unmediated by reason. But above all it is a confidence that does not rely on the triumph of any institution, it is the *internal evidence* of morality supplied by the Torah."[24]

This concession to atheism should be added onto the appropriation of the history of secularisation that is central to Judaism:

"Judaism has decharmed [désen*sorcelé*] the world, contesting the notion that religions apparently evolved out of enthusiasm and the sacred. […] Monotheism marks a break with a certain conception of the sacred. It neither unifies nor hierarchizes the numerous and numinous gods; instead it denies them. As regards the divine, which they incarnate, it *is merely atheism*."[25]

21 DF 143 / DL 202.
22 DF 143 / DL 203.
23 DF 144 / DL 204, my emphasis.
24 DF 144 / DL 204, my emphasis.
25 DF 14–15 / DL 28–29, translation modified, my emphasis. At this point the conclusion of Levinas' 1957 essay on Lévy-Bruhl should be called to mind: "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?" (ENT 51 / EN 63). If the West has the capacity to resist the modern avatars of the mythical gods, then Levinas seems to claim implicitly, it is because it has emerged from monotheism, of which the excellence is also in this non-confessional context indicated to be its secularising potential.

There is for all intents and purposes, no meaningful discourse on God possible independent from the question of ethics. Ethics is that by which God is seen;[26] but what can be known about God, God's attributes, are all imperatives.[27] And by this different way we arrive once again at the primacy of the Judaism that contemplates the Talmud, over the Judaism that praises the attributes of God in Psalms.[28]

After this detour through *Difficult freedom*, let us get back to the question posed at the end of our reading of "For a Hebraic humanism": what is the structure of validation assumed by Levinas' plea for a Hebraic humanism? The answer consists of three interdependent elements: (1) Talmudic study as the essence of Judaism, (2) a universalism that is both a task and a recognition to all those people of other traditions that recognise this task, and (3) an embracing of the history of secularisation, complemented by a large concession to atheism. The support that these three elements could gain stem, in turn, (1) from an inner affirmation of the validity of the texts and debates of the Talmud and the study and commentary thereof, (2) from the message of the Talmud concerning the universal reach of its meaning, as well as the capability demonstrated by people from other traditions to contribute to the debate about justice and their capability to arrange their action accordingly and (3) from the evidence imposed by world historical events that place a question mark on certain kinds of religious practice. This means, for Jews, a clear relativisation and reinterpretation of theological claims to an exceptional, God-ordained election, as well as a considerable deflation of claims about God or revelation. For non-Jews, this means a strong claim as to the importance of the study of Judaic antiquity, next to and at least on a par with, for instance, Greco-Roman antiquity (one might say, a relativisation of the inferior position accorded generally in the contemporary study of antiquity to the Hebraic heritage), as well as a claim, not only to the universal validity of its ethical demand for justice, but also to incorporating the reflection of other traditions on justice into a Talmudic debate on justice, presented as universal. This holds for the adherents of other monotheisms,[29] and beyond.[30] However, in this debate, the study of classical texts – a study that avoids the dead-end of mere philology, but enters the game of debate about

26 DF 17 / DL 33.
27 DF 17 / DL 33.
28 As in the citation of DF 271 / DL 377, above.
29 DF 180 / DL 252.
30 "Rest assured that the light is not reserved for Israel alone, and darkness for the rest of humanity." (DF 240 / DL 335–336).

justice – is crucial and for this reason it is difficult to see what place non-scriptural religions and cultures would take in this debate.

In short, monotheism as humanism, and in particular its Hebraic version, is the quasi-atheistic study of Talmudic text, with the view to a just human practice. The last element of this circumscription – just practice – is crucial and follows not only from the particular claim to universalism and a deflated theology, but – and this is dear to Levinas – from the teaching of the Talmud itself. About Jews, he can state that

"the truth – the knowledge of God – is not a question of dogma for them, but one of action […] a Jew can communicate just as intimately and religiously with a non-Jew who practises morality […] as with another Jew".[31]

And this communion doesn't only require the common recognition of the monotheistic heritage, but subsequently requires recourse

"to the Greek civilization and what it engendered: *logos*, the coherent discourse of reason, life in a reasonable State".[32]

Note that this is Levinas' conviction from a Jewish point of view. In this context, he still affirms the universality of Judaism, which has been defined as the irreplaceable responsibility for others.[33] The importance of the religious tradition of Judaism is nothing more than that of having participated in the discussion about justice and in the effort to realise this responsibility for a long time. To this the Talmud bears witness and constitutes a part of the debate – it deserves a humanist discipline, not because it is Jewish, but because it speaks about the justice of humanity, which in any case was, according to Levinas, the Old Testament's main cause.

This use of other texts from *Difficult freedom* to clarify the nature of the Hebraic humanism pleaded for by Levinas in the education, especially, but not exclusively, of young Jews, does not only enforce our understanding of Levinas' idea of humanism, but should also guard us against a too hasty conclusion about its status. We have to do here with texts that have been written in or about the context of Jewish practice in the Diaspora; furthermore, it should be clear that when Levinas exclaims that Judaism is a humanism, his point is also to articulate the surprise of non-Jews about the importance of service to humans over against faith in theological statements (and to tease the Sartreans) and should not be reduced to a

31 DF 176 / DL 247, translation modified.

32 DF 176 / DL 246. To which Levinas will add: "That is the true terrain of all understanding." (DF 176 / DL 246) – but, as we shall see later, his esteem for the State and for Greek thought about the State, will not always be so charitable.

33 DF 177 / DL 247.

constant concern for the establishment of a humanism. The issue is the manner in which Judaism is to continue to exist after the Shoah – any contribution to humanism is a secondary goal. "Humanism" is an important argumentative tool for Levinas, it is also a useful word to explain the study of the Talmud, next to other old traditions, but it would not be correct to say that Levinas' point in all of these texts is primarily humanistic. His point is an ethical interpretation and practice of Judaism.

Yet two aspects of his ideas about the form of existence of diasporic Judaism merit the use of the word "humanist" and thus prevent one from interpreting the use of the word as merely rhetorical. (1) When speaking here of humanism, Levinas' concern is the study of the Talmud with a universal ethical rather than theological objective, and "humanism" serves to articulate his argument for this practice. (2) Humanism is also an appropriate term to capture the spirit of Levinas' train of thought in which the discourse concerning justice across the differences of culture takes a central position. Whereas Levinas seems to indicate that the value of the Rabbinic texts can be accepted only if the difference of their message, textual practice and required interpretation strategy with respect to other traditions is accepted, this is not an insistence on particularity for the sake of maintaining and celebrating the difference with respect to other cultural expressions, but a confidence in the importance of the contribution that this particular position can make to the universal coexistence of people. If Levinas is convinced of the excellence of Jewish religious texts, this excellence is only incidental and in principle replaceable or copyable. This universalistic claim is not the universalism of "our truth should be held by all", but of "all can be the beneficiaries of our truth and all, through their own traditions, have some access to it and can discuss with us about it". One might therefore encapsulate Levinas' position in a reformulation of Terence's humanist thesis: I am an ethical subject and no concern about justice for others is alien to me.

This presentation of Levinas' Hebraic humanism of the 1950s certainly doesn't capture all of the nuances of his position, but this is of no vital concern for the current purposes. What should retain our attention is the fact that once Levinas has pleaded for this humanism – as textual practice and universal ethical reflection – in education and as a cultural political project, that he should have been quite troubled by the wave of anti-humanist philosophies from the 1960s (and of which his reading of *Tristes tropiques*, referred to in Chapter 2, was an early experience). The essay of 1973 testifies to Levinas' reflection on this challenge posed to his thoughts on Jewish education.

2 "ANTI-HUMANISM AND EDUCATION"

If the last essay in *Difficult freedom* also aims at advocating a "true humanism"[34] as the objective of Jewish education, the approach is nonetheless quite different from that of the previous essay, as the use of the word "anti-humanism" in the title already indicates. The change in perspective on how the humanistic character of Jewish education should be approached becomes clear if one considers Levinas' effort to define humanism. Humanism, that has served for a long time as the strategy for the self-justification of Western culture, entails:

> "the recognition of an invariable essence named 'man', the affirmation of his central place in the economy of the Real and of his value which engendered all values. This created respect for the person, both in itself and in the other, which made it necessary to safeguard his freedom; a blossoming of human nature, of intelligence in Science, creativity in Art, and pleasure in daily life; the satisfaction of desires without prejudice for the freedom and pleasures of other men and, consequently, the institution of a just law – that is to say, a reasonable and liberal State or, in other words, a State at peace with other states and – an important point – above all opening up for individuals as broad as possible a domain for private life, on the threshold of which the law stops. A limit to law is necessary to humanism, for humanism can perhaps see no laws other than those of the State and of nature."[35]

In practice, and in the narrower sense, humanism refers to the promotion of these principles, which happens in the study of certain texts.

The first pitfall of humanism gapes in the centrality of the writing and studying of texts: the possibility of forgetting the beautiful ideas behind the texts and of becoming wrapped up in the celebration of eloquence.[36] Since there is no *a priori* reason why this illness cannot also infect a Hebraic humanism, Levinas needs to rethink, under the pressure of the anti-humanist critique of humanism, if and how to affirm his appropriation of the term "humanism" for his politics of Jewish education. It is clear, in any case, that in doing so he rejects the implicit idea that he has to measure his vision of about Jewish education against the secularised version of Judeo-Christianity. Not only does this strategy do injustice to Judaism, since it debases Judaism to a variant of Western humanism and thus compromises its particularity, but it also lacks credibility, since it doesn't consider the "crisis of humanism". If Jewish education is to have any significance, it will have to go beyond humanism, and especially

34 DF 286 / DL 398.
35 DF 277 / DL 385, translation corrected.
36 Cf. also IH 80.

beyond the humanist reduction of Judaism (i.e., the desire to measure Judaism against the standard of ambient humanist values).

As in the writings of the 1950s, Levinas cannot but start reflecting on this issue by taking his distance from a certain kind of religious discourse. Without justifying the conviction further, he states:

"This was the century in which God died – that is to say, in a very precise sense, in which a certain discourse on God became increasingly impossible."[37]

If it is taken into consideration that the intellectual opposition to theology had gained significant impetus in the 18th century, Levinas' reference to the 20th century most likely rather stresses the impact of the political catastrophes. However, when he then discusses these, it is done to illustrate the "crisis of humanism"; it should probably be concluded that the same events that engendered the crisis of humanism, also make a certain discourse about God impossible. The presentation of these events by Levinas is of significant importance to us, since it makes a connection between historical events, and intellectual developments in a politico-intellectual diagnosis of his times, and that will be in force also in his philosophy:

"The 1914 War, the Russian Revolution refuting itself in Stalinism, fascism, Hitlerism, the 1939–45 War, atomic bombings, genocide and uninterrupted war. On another level, a science that wants to embrace the world and threatens it with disintegration – a science that calculates the real without always thinking it, as if it were created on its own in the human brain, without man, who is reduced purely and simply to the fields in which the operations of numbers unfold. Or in a different atmosphere, the ambitious philosophical enterprise which charms many of us, the ambitious philosophical enterprise in aid of thought and against pure calculation, but subordinating the human to the anonymous gains of Being and, despite its 'Letters on humanism', bringing understanding to Hitlerism itself. A liberal politics and administration that suppresses neither exploitation nor war; a socialism that gets entangled in bureaucracy."[38]

Such are the events that have shown not only the fragility or incapacity of the humanist project to realise itself through States and to protect humanity, but the incapacity of a certain idea of the human essence to produce the values needed to prevent these disasters and finally, in addition, the increasing impossibility of a certain kind of discourse on God. Furthermore, in order to fully appreciate the critique of contemporary society and the response that Levinas will propose to it, one should notice that the three kinds of developments identified by Levinas have in common the fusion of the human being into a blind process, whether this is war and tyranny, the physical succession

37 DF 280 / DL 389.
38 DF 281 / DL 390–391.

of events of the cosmos or the flux of Being (*être*). We have seen in Chapter 2 that such a fusion is for Levinas typical of the defenceless horror of exposure to the sacred in "primitive" religions and again quintessential of the return thereof in the indifference of modern atheism; in both cases it is ethical agency that is suffocated. If a certain kind of humanism is going to be proposed as an appropriate response to this situation, such a humanism is, implicitly, once more called to a task of desacralisation. In addition to this, the global reach of this societal diagnosis (clearly traced in the citation above) should again be underscored, as was done in Chapter 3, in order to be perceptive to the implied reach of the proposed response.

As perpetual victims of the failures of Western humanism Jews have been privy to this "crisis of the human ideal"[39] – this is a programming error: humanism is since its Greco-Roman inception the human ideal of the conqueror[40] and doesn't exhaust the meaning of the human. It is (at least initially) out of concern for a more complete or realistic idea of the meaning of the human and out of a realisation of the reduction committed against it, that a new wave of challenge to humanism and a "suspicion regarding a certain kind of language on the human"[41] gains momentum. Of this wave of "anti-humanism", Levinas retains the following important characteristics: first, the denunciation of literature and eloquence that hypocritically hides misery and inaction;[42] second, it exposes the cracks in the humanist notion of an eternal human essence; third, in the prolongation of the previous point, as an extension of an uncovering of humans from the hold of a certain essence, is the liberation from economic, moral and legal constraints. Up to this point, Levinas clearly gives his support to the anti-humanist critique of humanism. However, he is not willing to continue too far along this line of thought: when the fight for freedom from forms of oppression risks turning into a fight without limit, Levinas insists on the need to educate children in the distinction between good and evil;[43] when the liberation from traditional morals risks losing all responsibility and permitting anything, including in one's action towards others, Levinas proposes a moral orientation based on Jewish values.[44] Against the complete disintegration of an idea of the human essence, Levinas poses the irreducible essence of the human being (without elaborating on it) and the supremacy of the human being according to the

39 DF 281 / DL 391.
40 See also DF 170 / DL 239.
41 DL 393, phrase missing in DF.
42 DF 282, 283 / DL 393, 394.
43 DF 285 / DL 397.
44 DF 285 / DL 397.

Old Testament.[45] Against an abusive, hypocritical eloquence and literature, he advocates the study of the Talmud, the Jewish study of the Law, and the practice that ensues from it.[46]

If humanism as a strategy for the self-justification of the West has been shaken by these events, it seems simply naive to think that a simple religious education along traditional lines will be meaningful. Besides, submitting Jewish children and students to a religious education measured against humanism would be futile in the light of the crisis of humanism. Again the alternative that Levinas proposes is the same: the Jewish scriptures, with the Rabbinic commentary and the practices that go along with them.[47] At the same time, Levinas yet again questions certain forms of Jewish expression for the relevance with which they act in the contemporary world (e.g., Jewish apologetics[48]). Whereas it is quite obvious that a humanistic study of the Talmud could succumb to the temptations of eloquence, Levinas implicitly believes that the thorough study thereof and the practice that is associated with it, would suffice to maintain this form of humanism, without succumbing to the criticism of anti-humanism. But Levinas' claim for the Jewish Law is much more encompassing. In a time of human crisis

> "the Jewish wisdom of the Law, the external act, is no longer simply a reflection or pronouncement of European culture, or the pride of belonging to the oriental origins of the West. Here we have the unique means to preserve the humanity and the personality of people. This agency teaches us true humanism."[49]

What is at stake for Levinas in this crisis of humanism, that is also the crisis of a troubling era in human history, is the "rescue of the Human being [*sauvetage de l'Homme*]"[50] of which the continued existence as person is threatened politically, intellectually and morally. An education that takes as its basis the tradition of Jewish wisdom concerning the Law and that creates the infrastructure for the maintenance and advancement of a Jewish culture ("a culture based on a word which through its elevation can be called the word of God"[51]), is what is needed. This is a universal obligation of Jews; in service of humanity, but not to proselytise humanity. But in the

45 DF 284 / DL 395.
46 DF 283 / DL 394.
47 DF 280 / DL 389.
48 DF 283 / DL 394.
49 DF 286 / DL 397–398, translation modified.
50 DF 286 / DL 398, my translation. This phrase should be emphasised, since we shall see that a salvaging of "the very humanity of the human being" (IH 33) is what Levinas calls for from 1934 onwards.
51 DF 286 / DL 398, translation modified.

spirit of the Judaic tradition, this entails not a war against war in order to install its own humanism of the conqueror, but rather a "humanism of patience".[52] What Levinas has in mind with this humanism of patience is not clear. From the last cryptic remarks of his essay one gathers only the following. It is a humanism that holds to the particularism of its universal vocation and does so in the face of and in opposition to "doctrines, anthropologies, axiologies and theologies",[53] but always in communion with other people, without distinction. Since the languages in the big cities have become confused again (evoking the confusion of languages in the story of the tower of Babel), a particularism "of Abraham",[54] i.e., of the father of all monotheists, is needed, in other words, a particularism of the possibility of a unifying discourse that is moral in nature. If we live in an Abrahamic time it is, according to Levinas, because

> "one must accept obedience personally [*pour son compte*], without counting the faithful [*sans compter les fidèles*]. This personal acceptance is not egoist."[55]

This non-egotistical obedience to the law is what excludes installing another humanism of conquerors[56] and what calls for a "humanism of pa-

52 DF 287 / DL 399.

53 DF 288 / DL 401.

54 DF 288 / DL 401.

55 DF 288 / DL 401, translation modified. Levinas possibly refers to the story of Abraham's dispute with God about the number of the faithful or the just that might be living in Sodom and Gomorrah and about their salvation – it turned out that there were none and those cities were destroyed, while Abraham and his family were commanded to leave the scene without looking back. With this in mind, the "particularism of Abraham" seems to evoke the idea of being just, while suspending judgement about the justice of others or despite the injustice of others. Although not referring to this Biblical story, the clarifications concerning the "descendants of Abraham" might illuminate the ethical quality of this Abrahamic particularism: "The heirs of Abraham – people to whom their ancestor bequeathed a difficult tradition of duties toward others, which one is never done with, an order in which one is never quits. In this order, above else, duty takes the form of obligations toward the body, the obligation of feeding and sheltering. So defined, the heirs of Abraham are of all nations: any person that is truly human is no doubt of the line of Abraham. […] There is more in the family of Abraham than in the promises of the State. It is important to give, of course, but everything depends on how it is done. It is not through the State and through the political advances of humanity that the person shall be fulfilled – which, of course does not free the State from instituting the conditions necessary to this fulfilment. But it is the family of Abraham that sets the norms." (NTR 99–100 / DSAS 19–20, translation modified). I cite at length, because this passage on the "descendants of Abraham", although not explicitly linked to the notion of humanism, is developed in the train of thought following Levinas' significant qualification of humanism as being founded in the other (NTR 98 / DSAS 17).

56 DF 287 / DL 399.

tience", which would be one that is guided by the symbol of the suffering servant,[57] a symbol of all the conquered and suffering of history – that demand justice.

Still, this does not provide a clear image yet of what this alternative post-anti-humanist humanism is. But, in another very dense passage of an essay of the same time ("Jacob Gordin", 1972–1973), Levinas uses most of the same terms to describe an alternative humanism. Reading the two texts together can help to amplify the basics of his idea. After criticising the humanism of the conqueror Levinas explains that

> "[o]ur age certainly no longer needs to be convinced of the value of non-violence. But it perhaps lacks a new reflection on passivity, and a certain weakness that is not cowardice, a certain patience that we must not preach to others, in which the ego [*le Moi*] must be held, one which cannot be treated in negative terms as though it were just the other side of finitude. Enough of Nietzscheanism, even when purged of its Hitlerian deformations! But who will dare to say such a thing? The humanism of the suffering servant – the history of Israel – invites us to create a new anthropology, a new historiography, and perhaps, by bringing about the end of Western 'triumphalism', a new history."[58]

This much can be derived from the two texts from the beginning of the 1970s: after the bankruptcy of the "humanism of the conqueror" in the West, and with the evidence of the need to escape a kind of thinking that engenders violence, a kind of thought (philosophical or social scientific) that praises human interaction in terms of the will to power, of conflict between powerful expressions of creativity (as one would find in many variations of anti-humanism) will not do. A different humanism is needed, which is characterised by the figure of the suffering servant (which is a symbol of the history of Israel – probably meaning here the religious community, rather than the modern State – and of human suffering in general) and by a patience, or endurance of suffering, or weakness, that despite its importance is to be practised but not preached to others (supposedly, others outside of the community of Israel).

This humanism, this quest for the justice of all suffering people should be practised against the current of contemporary political and intellectual history; but in "Anti-humanism and education" nothing is said about this being an ideal for anybody outside of Judaism.[59] Such a prac-

57 DF 287 / DL 399.

58 DF 171 / DL 239–240.

59 However, given the inclusive understanding of the particularity of the "descendants of Abraham" it cannot be excluded that the "humanism of the suffering servant" is in principle proposed to all people.

tice doesn't entail a subjectification or spiritualisation of principles of action,[60] but rather constant externalisation of reflection on it, in continuation of the debate about justice in Rabbinic thought. This might be associated with religious observance, but the practice ensuing from this dialogue about justice doesn't aim at pleasing God, but at "safeguard the human in humans".[61] Levinas' advocacy of this humanism thus clearly implies a plea for a Jewish particularism, but, as previously, not for a limitation of ties to a nation, a State or fellow citizens.[62]

Let us look more closely at the extent or ambition of Levinas' claims in the later thought on an alternative humanism. The problem is dehumanisation and anti-humanism; Judaic schooling is the answer, but only for Jews. But this thesis brings with it a number of implications. First, as before, it implies a clear option for a certain kind of Judaism, as described above. Second, the question inevitably arises – what should non-Jews do with this? Clearly not nothing: the political and intellectual diagnosis can in principle be taken over as is. But no positive answer is given in these reflections. Third, the political catastrophes associated with humanism are particular geographically and historically specific events; likewise, the intellectual phenomenon of anti-humanism is a discourse that has a limited spatio-temporal sphere of influence. Combined, these two facts entail that in order even for a Diaspora Jew to accept Levinas' point, a particular phase in French intellectual life will have to be taken, in combination with a specific configuration of prominent historical events, as background against which the option for this form of humanism becomes intelligible. In negative terms, it cannot be taken for granted that the humanism of the suffering servant or of patience is a model to be adopted by all Jews (although Levinas clearly desires this for Jews in his context) – let alone non-Jews – since they live in a historical, political and intellectual context with different demands. Furthermore, in sharp contrast to Levinas' first version of humanism, there is no suggestion of a universal participation in this conversation about a post-anti-humanist quest for justice. These observations are of considerable importance since, apart from the particularism avowed to by Levinas, this introduces another form of particularism to his plea for a humanism of patience: it is a cultural or context specific humanism. The Judaism advocated by Levinas in "Anti-humanism and education" is itself culturally specific, for other reasons than just for the fact that it is Jewish: even if the essence of this humanism of patience is accepted to be trans-historical, the

60 DF 288 / DL 400.
61 DF 288 / DL 401, translation modified.
62 DF 288 / DL 401.

manner in which this message is expressed and the terms in which it presents itself are specific to a particular context. This context determinacy of the expression of this alternative humanism is not a secondary aspect thereof – this becomes quite clear if one again asks the question concerning what would motivate someone to accept it as valid: only two things: (1) such a humanism should be deemed in line with the message of the Hebrew Bible and the Rabbinic tradition[63] and (2) the horror of the dehumanising political catastrophes and the limitless, lawless freedom as consequence of anti-humanism should be considered as significant justification for a manner of thinking that goes against it. Religious authority (that is, not the authority of the religious functionaries, but the moral – rather than theological – authority attributed to the writings transmitted by the Jewish religion) in combination with a grim politico-cultural diagnosis of a specific era seems to me to be the structure of validation supposed by this essay.

3 UNIVERSALISM AND AUTHORITY: AN UNCERTAIN CONCLUSION

If we look back from the 1973 essay on humanism and education to the 1956 essay on the same subject, a number of remarkable things are worth adding to the list of general similarities between the two essays given at the

63 This impression could be confirmed by the Talmudic readings of the same time – at least in as far as explicit references to humanism are made. In *Beyond the verse*, for instance, the Torah is presented as that which keeps learning or wisdom from becoming purely rhetorical – and in this continues the philosophical project of which the inception is already in Plato's polemics with the sophists (BV 28 / ADV 44). The style of the Talmud is itself an antidote to the "sorcery of language" – in making this statement, the original definition of humanism in *Difficult freedom* (1956) is joined, but reinforced by the anti-humanist critique of the hypocritical eloquence of the 1970s. Again Levinas denounces a "pure humanism, humanism without the Torah" (BV 28 / ADV 44, my translation) as that which suffocates culture. The claim is that the "real humanism" is not one that rejects Western or Greek wisdom, but one that is enforced by what is essential to human culture, namely the teaching of the Torah and the study thereof through the Talmudic tradition.
Or again, where Levinas discusses the humanism of the "cities of refuge", he comments on the form of thought of the Talmudic text: "A question that is often asked in the *Gemara*: what verse is to be quoted? It is not only so as not to affirm without foundation, but also so that the verse throws light for us on the spirit of the institutions attached to it." (BV 42 / ADV 59). In other words the Talmudic text does make a contribution to a certain debate, but not without some form of institutional authority. A detailed analysis of the notion of authority in Levinas' readings of the Talmud would have to complete this remark, but falls outside of the scope of the present study.

beginning of this Chapter. Considering first the implicitly presupposed affirmations needed from his audience in order to accept the validity of his two respective presentations of humanism, we can note that the quasi-atheistic religious orientation of the earlier text is maintained in the later one and with it also the insistence on the appropriateness of a specific kind of Judaism, namely one of which the study of texts of Jewish antiquity forms the basis (not only for education, but for spiritual life in general). It is the third element of the structure of validation – universalism – that is quite different from what is supposed by the 1956 essay on humanism and education: in the later essay there is only the question of a universalism of vocation, not of a universal participation of the plurality of cultural traditions in a discourse on justice. This omission might simply be due to the practical contingencies under which the essay was written. However, it does leave a question open regarding the place of adherents of other religions and other cultural traditions. The broadest reading would be that Levinas here leaves the question in suspense; the narrow reading would be that he bases his claims about a humanism for Jews on the authority of the Hebrew Bible and the tradition that comments on it and that not much is to be said either about those that do not accept the authority of this tradition, or about an internal evidence that the teaching contained in these texts could draw from its scholars.

This is an important issue since it concerns the practices by which claims concerning just action are produced and practice itself is justified, planned and launched. I do not think that the exposition of the two texts of *Difficult freedom* (and those used to supplement them) suffices to establish a clear line of development in Levinas' thought on this issue. In fact, our reading of Levinas' thought on humanism in the religious context, leaves us with a question about two central issues. *First*, is the humanism pleaded for one that invites a universal participation by any and all people irrespective of their cultural heritage in a debate about justice, or is this humanism the roadmap for survival, exclusively for Jews, albeit in their capacity as servants of the whole of humanity and of suffering people in particular? *Second*, does this call to study the Talmud imply the broad claim that a collection of ancient texts testifies to a source of justice (which is not itself), which it excels in reflecting and to which all people can be invited to join, since their own reflection might give them access to the source of justice independently from the Talmud, or is the call to Talmudic studies limited to those that are linked to Judaism, either by their family history or by the acceptance of the authority of the religious texts (or probably both) and in which the scriptures themselves form the indispensable access to reflection on justice?

4 CHANGING OF THE GUARDS: TALMUDIC HUMANISM AND A PHILOSOPHICAL POST-ANTI-HUMANIST HUMANISM

Although I don't claim to render the full nuance of these texts and those of the same period, it seems reasonable to state that the nature of these writings probably doesn't allow for an absolutely clear and precise description of the evolution of Levinas' position on these issues concerning Judaism and humanism. We have seen the different manners in which Levinas would probably have responded to these questions – our reflection is, of course, limited to the two important texts about humanism written in a religious context and outlined in this study.

However, there is the philosophical text, *Humanism of the other*, in which humanism is again thematised. Here it is with a notably different discursive practice: as philosophical text, it constantly resubmits the authority of texts to questioning; there could be no question of referring to a "Book of all books". The same criteria for accepting the validity of his arguments cannot hold. No tie with Judaism or a wish for a contemporary vitality of the Jewish community as religious community can be taken as a point of departure (even though the arguments advanced may be of Jewish religious inspiration). This means at the same time that a key aspect of the two versions of Levinas' humanism in *Difficult freedom*, namely the study of the Talmud, cannot simply be required as the central piece of this philosophical humanism – or, if it is part of this philosophical humanism, then the place given to the Talmud would be next to other traditions speaking about the same concerns and certainly not on the basis of a preconceived idea of the excellence of the texts, and even less on the basis of religious authority, but only in as far as it contributes to a theme of reflection. No desire to speak or reflect about God or religion can be supposed in his general readership – especially not in France in the 1960s and 1970s. Universalism would enter the argument, not in the sense that it would be required to write from no perspective, but rather in the sense that it would be indispensable for Levinas to show that he can relativise the position from which he writes (in relation to all other positions) and be lucid about what this position brings with him to the argument.

Yet, with all of these differences with respect to the discursive practice, the essence of the theme is the same, namely responsibility for the other human being and justice. This can be shown clearly by comparing the title of the *philosophy* book – in which the decentring of a humanism to the concern of the "other human" is strikingly displayed in the title

Humanism of the other – with an explicit remark in *Du sacré au saint* about what Levinas identifies as an essential trait of *Jewish* humanism:

"the person whose rights must be defended is in the first place the other human being; it is not initially myself. It is not the concept 'human' which is at the basis of this humanism; it is the other human beings."[64]

Even though the other human and the responsibility and justice due to other people have been the core of all Levinas' philosophy since the war, he did not always refer to his thought as humanist. Also, after *Humanism of the other* Levinas never nurtured the term; particularly significant is the practical absence of any reference to humanism in *Otherwise than Being*, which is with *Totality and infinity* arguably Levinas' most important book in philosophy and was written just a few years after *Humanism of the other*. The justification for the adoption of the title "humanism" is to be sought elsewhere than in the will to contribute to, remain true to and extend the tradition (or one of the traditions) of European cultural life that carries that name. One finds an indication of this in the interview "Philosophy, justice, and love" (1982), where Levinas explains his ideas concerning human subjectivity as constituted by responsibility – he declares:

"My view is opposed to the tendency of one whole portion of contemporary philosophy that prefers to see in man a simple articulation or a simple aspect of a rational, ontological system that has nothing human about it […]".[65]

He advances then with a short elaboration of the Heideggerian version of this tendency, highlights a trace of the same tendency in Merleau-Ponty's work and then continues his reflection on the general tendency of his time:

"In the same distrust with regard to humanism according to contemporary philosophy there is a battle against the notion of the subject. What they want is a principle of intelligibility that is no longer enveloped by the human; they want the subject to appeal to a principle that would not be enveloped by concern for human fate. On the contrary, when I say that consciousness in the relation with the other loses its first place, it is not in that sense; I mean to say that, in consciousness thus conceived, there is the awakening to humanity. The humanity of consciousness is definitely not in its power, but in its responsibility […] I advocate, as in the title of one of my books, the 'humanism of the other'."[66]

These then are the concerns that warrant giving the title of "humanism" and particularly "humanism of the other (human)" – which is equally the essence of Jewish humanism – to one of his books (but not to his philo-

64 NTR 98 / DSAS 17, translation modified, similarly GDT 182 / DMT 213.
65 ENT 111 / EN 121.
66 ENT 112 / EN 122, translation modified.

sophy in general): a dispute with contemporary philosophy about the status of the subject, and a concession about the decentring of the subject, but this by a responsibility for the other and a care for human well-being. Everything hinges on the "… of the other (human)" by which the polemical appropriation of "humanism" is qualified. And in this, the resonance with "Jewish humanism" is willed.

It is the contemporary intellectual tendency that occasions the polemical appropriation of the title "humanism", but the title is equally justified by the "anti-anti-humanist" thematic.[67] One could say that the "humanism" adopted in *Humanism of the other* is equally circumstantial as that of *Difficult freedom*, except that in the former there is no question of the humanistic study of the Talmud. This fact will have to be contemplated, since if there is a humanism advocated by Levinas, that could at least in principle sidestep the study of the Talmud, while remaining true to the ideal of his Judaic humanism (namely justice towards people), one would have to know where the resources for this other philosophical humanism come from. Furthermore, if there are such Talmudic-independent resources, we will have to consider in what position it leaves the Hebraic humanism or the humanism of patience.[68] Let us then without further ado turn to *Humanism of the other* to explore these questions.

67 See similarly PN 17 / NP 102.

68 A response will be suggested to this dilemma in the two concluding points to Chapter 5, §4.