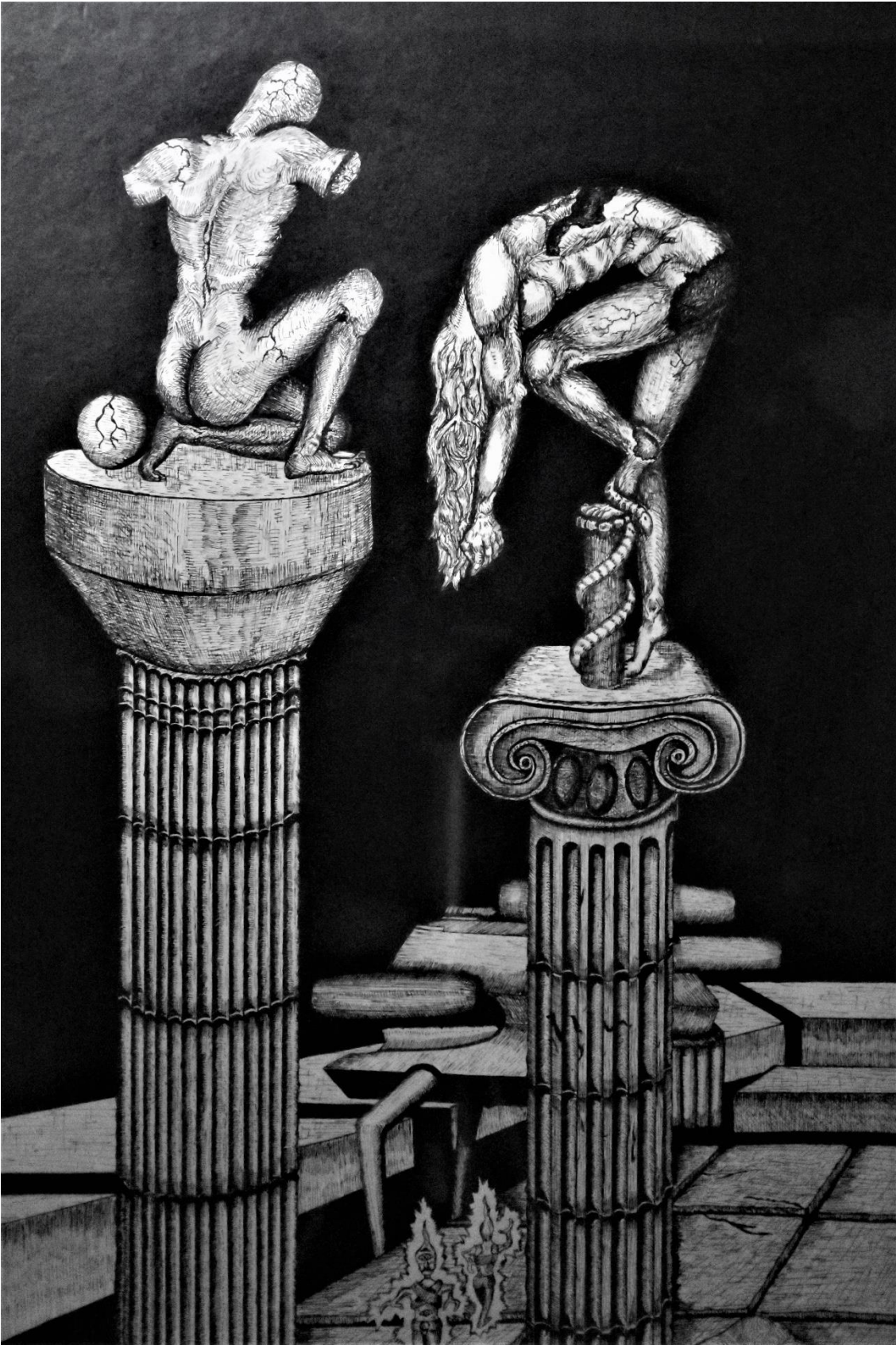


A Collection of Essays on a selection of chapters from Levinas' Thinking of the Other

Joeri Kooimans



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## Is Ontology Fundamental?

### **The search for a humane philosophy inclusive for the Other**

In his philosophy Levinas seems to attempt to put Western philosophy on its head, like Marx put Hegel on its head by replacing idealism with materialism. The reversal seems to be one from a subject orientated philosophy committed to the ego and the self, to a philosophy that is committed to an ethical engagement with and inclusion of the Other. The former is, in Levinas critique, detached, disengaged and to egocentrically biased. This can be traced back to Descartes, because Descartes sought to found his philosophy on his own cogito, and thus his ego.<sup>1</sup> The latter is an intentional philosophical stance, a phenomenology committed to a concrete being in the world where we are connected with and constituted by others. To achieve a humane philosophy that includes the Other, an special kind of ontology is needed.

Here we can try to ascertain what exactly is at stake for Levinas. He seems to be searching for a new type of philosophy, a phenomenology that goes beyond phenomenology which does not involve a self-indulgent subject that constitutes and affirms itself through its cogito, consciousness, reflection or contemplation, but one that is engaged ethically and responsibly to the Other, thus moving beyond our ego-logy. Levinas, in his philosophy, seeks nothing less than peace, moving beyond the violent Hegelian attempt to reduce the multiplicity to totality, which crushes all possible experience of otherness, of the Other.<sup>2</sup> This thinking of totality is fundamentally violent, according to Levinas, because totality is only possible with the (violent) exclusion of the Other.<sup>3</sup>

### **Relationship precedes all ontology**

What does Levinas set out to do in his attempted answer to the question if ontology is fundamental or not? To him, it is evident that beings and relations exist, and the understanding thereof is fundamental, of which he seems to argue that it should be prior to all other forms of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> The subject thus cannot constitute knowledge from out of itself, by itself like with Descartes, but is dependent upon others. Additionally, Levinas critiques this philosophy of being to abstract and detached from our concrete reality, being too timeless and a-historical. The mind that knows, according to Levinas form of ontology, "*coincides with the facticity of temporal existence.*" This facticity is bound up with contingency and is an act of intellection, here being understood as an intentionality. Unlike other philosophies, this is not merely a theoretical attitude, but is interwoven in the whole of human behavior, which must be understood ontologically.<sup>5</sup> Levinas seems to be in agreement with Heidegger in stating that this amounts to an understanding of being as concrete existence, this is what makes humanity intelligible.

In this sense Levinas can be read as a critique on intellectualism, or an idealist interpretation of the human subject, especially when the latter is understood as being selfconstitutive through a *cogito*, a Kantian autonomous consciousness, or a mere contemplative reason like with Aristotle.<sup>6</sup> In philosophy, thinking is then no longer just seen as a contemplative act, but an engagement, as being launched in "*the dramatic event of being-in-the-world*".<sup>7</sup> This is an attitude where it is not the self-indulgent subject opposed to other objects and other people in the world, but a *Being-in-the-world*

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<sup>1</sup> Welten, 2011, pp. 154-5

<sup>2</sup> Critchley, 2015, p.2 & 6

<sup>3</sup> Welten, 2011, pp. 154-5

<sup>4</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 1

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 2 & cf. Critchley, 2015, p. 15

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 4 & cf. Critchley, 2015, p. 15

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.3

*with others*.<sup>8</sup> How our intentions shape our engagement with the world is something to take responsibility for. This responsibility even goes beyond our intentions, because with every intended act, we bring about unforeseen, unwilled and unforeseeable consequences. Our relationship with the world goes further than our ability and wish to master reality through consciousness, our presence in the world is not only bound up with our consciousness of it. Our ontological make up, the fact of being launched, cannot be reduced to thoughts. The result for philosophy is a paradigmatic shift from intellectualism, where not contemplation is key, but a thrown and *factual Being-in-the-World*.<sup>9</sup> Here Levinas still follows Heidegger, agreeing namely with arguing that this ontology pertains to an existential engagement of human beings in the world. This consists not in a theoretical, contemplative stance towards the word, but a practical existing in it, which we see in how people practically handle the things surrounding them, engaging concretely with them. It is this that leads to the comprehension of things that exist in the world.<sup>10</sup> But with Heidegger this engagement is still too egocentric, because it is mainly concerned with the personal, individual *Stimmung* that determines one's thrownness. The facticity that results from this, consists in a disclosure of "*oneself as stuck to oneself*."<sup>11</sup> This will still not prevent us from becoming conscious in such a way that we grasp possession of the Other by the Same, in our reducing of others or things for us to manipulate and use.<sup>12</sup> To form an ethical relationship with others, we must move beyond a being where we are stuck to ourselves.<sup>13</sup> Escaping this stuckness to ourselves can be overcome by not taking this as the fundamental ontology, but our relationships with others, that is prior to any ontology, and thus more fundamental.

Levinas therefor sets out to argue that it are our relations that are fundamental in this sense, our being is relational. Our openness of being, is being in relation to other beings (and not being stuck to ourselves). Being thus consists of being in relation.<sup>14</sup> Levinas claims here that any "*comprehensive relationship to beings or to things is an ontological relationship. Any relationship to any thing that is a relationship of understanding is ontological*."<sup>15</sup> Further arguing that our relations constitute our subjectivity, Levinas brings our attention to the observation that we are linguistic beings. Through language we do not only comprehend, we relate. Language and reason being undivorceable seems to point out that relations are constitutive of reason and that language precedes any possibility of understanding. We are thus interlocutional beings, because language can only exist in a relational reality.<sup>16</sup> This also shows that the "*relationship with the other is not reducible to comprehension*." This makes the relation ethical.<sup>17</sup>

The relations we engage in are either intimate with other beings, or forgetful thereof. Understanding a particular thing, is also being related to it. Here Levinas still seems inspired by Heidegger, especially in his attempt to prevent a Heideggerian *Seinsvergessenheit*, because the danger of going into reflection in a Platonian or other sense risks "*subordinating the relations between beings to the structures of being*." Heidegger's *Gelassenheit* and *Sorge* also inspire Levinas' thinking, because the relation to a being, and the understanding of the being must also include freely letting that being be. Even though there is a will of understanding the other, it should also appertain

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<sup>8</sup> Critchley, 2015, p. 7

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 17

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pp. 18-9

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 19

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 25

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 27

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 4

<sup>15</sup> Critchley, 2015, pp. 13-4

<sup>16</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 4

<sup>17</sup> Critchley, 2015, pp. 14-5

to an exceeding of this mere understanding. Levinas again seems to criticize forms of philosophical reflection that disengage us in an abstraction or in a detached mode of contemplation, because knowledge of the other should also be sympathetic, loving and not distanced and contemplative. We must not only understand the other in a conceptual way, but the other should also be apprehended as a beginning, and approached responsibly as such.<sup>18</sup> Again, Levinas follows Heidegger's example: relating to beings means letting them be, "*to understand them as independent of the perception that discovers and grasps them.*" Being ethical here seems to mean that we should not reduce other beings to objects, our relationship should be one of a letting be. In our understanding of the other, we also address the other. That is to say, understanding the other implies speaking to him. Positing the existence of the other is taking it into account. Here language again plays a role. The function of language is to come to a conscious realization of the other.<sup>19</sup> Having an ethical relationship with the other means not to possess or consume it as an object, but consists in the calling into being of the other, calling upon him as a partner. When understanding the other as being, he is simultaneously being told about my understanding of him. In meeting man, one always greets, and here knowledge separates from the meeting. When understanding the other, that understanding is offered in the same expression. In the approach of the other, we speak, which means thought and expression are inseparable. For Levinas this is ideally an egalitarian relation, where one does not overwhelm the other with the pouring of thoughts into the mind of the other, but it is a common content through understanding. This is what institutes sociality. It is here, again, where we see Levinas departing ways with Heidegger's thought; the relation with the other, namely, is not ontology.<sup>20</sup>

What is fundamental, is not ontology then, but relation: the meeting that takes place in the relation is already always given and precedes any knowledge. Thus sociality seems to be fundamental in Levinas' account. The relation between men, must be distanced from the exercise of power, and here Levinas invokes what he calls religion, "*the relationship to a being as a being.*"<sup>21</sup> And the other as a being can only be "*in a relation in which he is invoked.*"<sup>22</sup> When we are truly responsible ethically towards the Other, also means not being tempted to negate the Other. To truly be in relation is facing the other, coming face to face. This is an event of collectivity where the relationship to a pure being is constituted in speech, leading to a relational depth where we are humanized by the face of the Other. This humanizing effect results from the ethical appeal the Other makes of by revealing its vulnerability through its bare face.<sup>23</sup> Here we find the meaning of life, which is to live for the Other.<sup>24</sup> We can only be humane when we answer the call of the Other, we become responsible by our coming aware of the Other, as Other and by not expecting anything in return for having answered his call. It is the Other that thus makes me human and free, shackling my enchainment to myself (stuckness to oneself as we saw earlier). Being human and humane thus means recognizing this responsibility and bearing the consequences thereof.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 5

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 6

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 7

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 8

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 9

<sup>23</sup> Welten, 2011, p. 150

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 149

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 155

## The I and the Totality

### ***How the 'I' can form a responsible, thoughtful relationship with the Others in a society***

One can begin with wondering what the meaning of this title is. What is problematic about the I, and what place does it take in the totality? Or is the I a totality in itself, which is problematic? And what amounts to being innocent?

Levinas starts this paper with the bold claim that a particular being (or an I?) can only see itself as a totality when it is unthinking. This has nothing to do with poor thinking, or foolishness, it is sheer thoughtlessness itself. The confusion that then ensues is that the I conflates particularity with totality, which Levinas seems to denote as a violent gesture; for beings that live in totality, exist in totality, seemingly putting themselves in the “*center of being*”. The forces (or also events?) it experiences, are, as a result, “*integrated into its needs and enjoyments,*” thus taking ownership of it, thereby stripping it from their independence, and hence we may argue, its freedom. The being that simply lives but does not think is ignorant of the exterior world, resultant of an absence of thought, which has nothing to do with the Kantian problem of the limits of the known. Due to this absence of thought, one only senses, which is thoughtlessness: “*Sensibility as the very consciousness of what lives is not thought that is simply confused, it is not thought at all.*”<sup>26</sup>

What exactly does Levinas here mean by the ‘unthinking being’? And what does he mean with the denotation of the forces that are subjugated to an ownership of needs and enjoyments? Are those Others Levinas here only names forces, in order to prevent conceptualizing the Other and thus reducing it to an abstract totality?

When Levinas talks about thoughtlessness, I cannot help also being reminded of Arendt, who stated that doing evil does not so much derive from evil, conscious well thought through motives and intentions, but actually stems from a form of thoughtlessness, an unreflective form of acting where one does not think, not out of stupidity, but due to a lack of imagination and the inability to place oneself in the perspective of others. Intentions, Arendt argues, means reflecting on one’s actions as a political being “*whose own life and thinking is bound up with the life and thinking of others.*”<sup>27</sup> Banality, then, is or results from, non-thinking. This is where violence comes from, according to Arendt. The failure to think begets destruction and crimes to humanity itself. Judith Butler in her interpretation writes: “*Just as the failure to think was a failure to take into account the necessity and value that makes thinking possible, so the destruction and displacement of whole populations was an attack not only on those specific groups, but on humanity itself.*”<sup>28</sup> Can we conclude from this that Levinas has a similar goal as Arendt: hoping to avoid cruelty by reflexive thinking, in order to become more humane? Or am I wrong in making this comparison. Is there something else, or even more at stake with Levinas? Namely, for instance, the refusal to enter in a relationship with the Other, especially with the excluded third party? Levinas seems to be in agreement with Arendt when he states that: “*there is a level of innocent injustice in which evil is done naively.*”<sup>29</sup> The difference might be that Levinas conceptualizes self-centeredness differently.

When positioning the I in relation to the Other, it is again the self-centeredness of the Cartesian ego Levinas seems to criticize. Here the problem is not only due to the cogito thinking and thus constituting itself, but also due to its utilitarian relation what is sensible. In this utilitarian stance,

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<sup>26</sup> Levinas, 1998, pp. 13-4

<sup>27</sup> Butler, 2011, quoted from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/aug/29/hannah-arendt-adolf-eichmann-banality-of-evil> & cf. de Brabander, 2017, p. 115

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 30

useful is that which can be sensed and grasped by life. Moreover, the Cartesian form of consciousness has a consciousness without problems (for it can clearly and distinctly think itself and then be sure of its thinking in the same move) and need not concern itself with exteriority, because it occupies its center and does not have to relate itself to an exteriority. The only exteriority that is assumed, is then sensible, it being opposed to the thinking subject. In this way. The Cartesian cogito, or consciousness, is always the same and can always determine every Other, without having to fear being determined by any Other. This is what I think Levinas might find problematic about the Cartesian subject: it is self-centered and utilizes the exteriority with its senses, and traces every Other back to the Same.<sup>30</sup>

But if these are all forms of thoughtlessness, or a confused way of thinking (since it might go so far to accuse Descartes as a lack of thinking?), where does thought consist in then? *“Thought”*, Levinas writes, *“begins the very moment consciousness becomes conscious of its particularity.”* This means it also must become aware of the exteriority, and this is where a relationship begins: between thought and *“an unassumed exteriority.”*<sup>31</sup> It is then, I think Levinas might mean, the I does not conflate its particularity with totality anymore, like in the Cartesian way of thinking. What seems important to Levinas, is that the exteriority must be conceived of as foreign, so that exteriority does not become subsumed under an interiority.

Thinking accomplishes something else for Levinas as well, it namely helps in situating oneself within a totality while not being absorbed by it at the same time. Here again, thinking seems to be constitutive for a relation, now with a totality. Yet, the I (me) remains separated from it. Levinas tries to explain this relationship and says that the meaning of the relationship with an unassumed exteriority amounts to the problem of the I and the totality it is inclined to raise: the problem of innocence.<sup>32</sup>

Totality being violent in the eyes of Levinas, the move from reducing the Other to the Same, by subsuming or even assimilating every exteriority to an interiority, must be avoided somehow. Levinas seems to seek the solution again in relationship with the Other. When forming this relationship, it is not enough to affirm a separation between free beings, *“since innocence entails a relationship between beings and engagement in a totality.”* Innocence, then, must again not be sought in any interior state of being, but must constitute itself through a presenting of the exteriority. This leads to a penetration of a total system into a partial one. The impossibility of assimilation in this respect is what Levinas calls wonder. This is where Levinas situates thought, but also the beginning of experience. *“Thought at its beginning finds itself before the miracle of fact. The structure of the fact as distinct from the idea resides in the miracle. Hence, thought is not simply reminiscence, but always consciousness of the new.”*<sup>33</sup>

For Levinas, this conception of thought also bears consequences for how the thinking individual posits himself. It must do so within the totality, by not opposing itself to it (which would be the Cartesian way of going about things), but by also being a part of it. Only then can it form a relationship with the other parts. It is here the I can also form its identity by distinguishing himself from the other parts, with the restriction it should not coincide with any concept, which would occur if his identity is derived from its place in the whole. Instead, it must derive its identity from himself. Here I think I can draw another comparison to Arendt. According to her it is through acting that we give expression to how we distinguish ourselves from others, reveal who we are and become an unique being. Furthermore, acting and speaking are related to the fact that living always means living

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.14

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 15

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, pp.15-6

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

between others, my equals.<sup>34</sup> With Levinas, identity is not constituted by one's distinction from others, but from a reference to oneself. The totality where this thinking being is situated in, is a whole, and this, according to Levinas, is the originality of society. Here Levinas gets back to the subject of innocence, when arguing that: "*simultaneity of participation and non-participation is precisely an existence that moves between guilt and innocence, between ascendancy over others, betrayal of the self and return to the self.*"<sup>35</sup> It is here where Levinas again conveys what he understands as thought: the relationship of the individual with the totality, where the *I* is a face which is being faced. Here the parts of the whole are constituted by the freedom of the parts, this is what Levinas understands as a society: where we begin to speak to and face one another. In other words, "*thought*", Levinas writes, "*begins with the possibility of conceiving freedom exterior to my own.*" It is even the first thought, for it marks one's presence in the world. And when perceiving, we are affected by things that are possessed by the others.<sup>36</sup> So again, it is not ontology that is fundamental, but the relationship.

Because the *I* is in relationship to the Other, we recognize the independence of things, as belonging to the other. In the relationship of the *I* with totality, a recognition of the face through the *I* is constitutive. Therefore moral consciousness is requisite for thought. Thought has, in other words, moral conditions. And in this facing of the other, I am either guilty or innocent.<sup>37</sup>

But when is one guilty of something in Levinas' philosophy? And what does it mean to be innocent? Since every relationship is an ethical one, how can innocence even be a possibility?

Firstly, having a moral status as either guilty or innocent, presupposes freedom, to have the ability to either harm or help another. However, guilt or innocence can only be conceived with respect to God, He being exterior to this world. To me it is unclear why Levinas needs God to make this argument all of the sudden. What I do think I can understand is the problematic consequences Levinas ascribes to divine pardon: for it can restore any *I* at fault in its integrity and sovereignty<sup>38</sup>, of which Levinas later states that infinite forgiveness makes infinite evil possible, for there is always the possibility of absolution and forgiveness.<sup>39</sup>

When speaking of legitimate forgiveness, later on, towards intentional transgressions can only be realized "*in a society of beings totally present to one another, but in such a way as to control every facet of that society; an intimate society in truth, quite similar in its autarchy to the false totality of the I.*" And this is also where a problem occurs: "*In fact, such a society consists of two people, I and thou. We are among ourselves. Third parties are excluded.*"<sup>40</sup>

Here Levinas seems to argue that if I take up my responsibility for another person, this means a third one, also maybe in need, or suffering, is excluded. It further seems to indicate that a community without exclusionary mechanism is impossible, because if we form a community with certain others, there will always be other others that will not be included.

Further in the text Levinas comes back on his problematizations of forgiveness. Problems with forgiveness arise in the intimate society. Forgiveness makes it possible to free "*the will from the weight of acts that both escape and commit it [...].*"

Levinas distinguishes the intimate society from the real society. A difference between the two he seems to allude to is that in the intimate society I might have more overview of my actions and the consequences they bear, but in the real society the will and the way I act might escape me. The

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 118

<sup>35</sup> Levinas, 1998, pp. 16-7

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 17

<sup>37</sup> Ibid

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 18

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 37

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 19



intentional meaning will escape me, and thus I will inevitably commit faults beyond it. In a similar vein, Arendt argues that this is also inherent to acting in a context of plurality. When one speaks amidst others, we cannot predict how others will respond, nor what they will do as a response to our speaking. Neither do we know exactly how we will undergo the speaking and acting of others. This means that per definition the consequences of our acting are unforeseeable. The web of narratives is thus limitless and unpredictable.<sup>41</sup> The objective meaning thus prevails, says Levinas, over the intentional meaning.

Coming back on the subject of forgiveness, Levinas argues that the fact that some things are beyond forgiveness, is not so much because something is unforgivable, but that it is outside the order of forgiveness. So one cannot hide beyond good intentions, nor can a good conscience take away a social guilt.<sup>42</sup>

Another characteristic of the intimate society is that it is established on love, which makes it exclusionary, because: *[t]o love is to exist as if the lover and the loved one were alone in the world. The intersubjective relation of love is not the beginning of society, but its negation.* Further, Levinas writes *“[t]he society of love is a society of two, a society of solitudes, resisting universality. Its universality can be constructed only in time, by successive infidelities, by the change of friends.”*<sup>43</sup>

Levinas seems to especially fear an exclusion of a third party in these passages, again. Love blinds respect, leading to blindness of a third party. To achieve justice in a society, the general laws of it must be fair, and it must take into account the impact of our actions on third parties. The amorous dialogue between the lovers, a third party listens, wounded.<sup>44</sup> A third comparison to Arendt can be made. In order for a society to be just according to her, it should be plural. This means it has to be inclusive and allow more people in the exchanging of thoughts than just two loved ones. Thus, Arendt argues, a just society is one where there is a public domain in which everyone is free to judge, to act and express himself. In a just society, Levinas similarly says, the absolute of justice is upheld by the absolute of the interlocutor. It makes itself present by turning its face toward me. Social wrongs can then be committed without my knowing, because the multiplicity of third parties cannot be overseen, for the I, no longer master of his intentions, cannot face everyone.<sup>45</sup> With another critical gesture towards Descartes, Levinas points out the consequences of this: *“we are not what we are conscious of being, but are the role we play in a drama of which we are no longer the authors.”*<sup>46</sup> Or, with Arendt: we are not the sole authors of our narrative anymore, this narrative is carried onwards by a multiplicity of others and is thereby anonymous, because we cannot oversee who contributed to this narrative and to what extent and effect.

Levinas seems to find a common ground of importance for a just society as well, and here language is of help. *“Language, as the manifestation of reason, awakens in me and in the other what we have in common.”* And in speaking the I becomes respondent, responsible.<sup>47</sup> Levinas again like Arendt seems to emphasize the importance of speech, for: *[o]nly through speech between singular beings is the interindividual meaning of beings and things, that is, universality, constituted.”* Additionally, like Arendt, Levinas seems to think in terms of a natality, for *“each encounter is the beginning of a new amorous adventure.”*<sup>48</sup> Thus, we might hope, in reflexively and thoughtfully speaking to one another, thoughtfully, we might achieve a more humane society.

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<sup>41</sup> De Brabander, 2017, p. 118-9

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 20

<sup>43</sup> Ibid

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 21

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 22

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 23

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, pp. 25-6

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

## Diachrony and Representation

### ***The bearing of responsibility for the Other in the exchange of thoughts***

In *Diachrony and Representation*, Levinas seems to return to the topic of intelligibility, that is, the question on what it means to think, or to know. Levinas sets out by first reflecting on the way thinking, or knowing, as a theme, is approached in daily life and by tradition. It thus seems Levinas formulates a critique, before making his own argument. Indeed, according to Critchley then, “Levinas’ texts usually begin with the position he disagrees with (...), then a series of questions, then a transition to another position he will seek to defend.”<sup>49</sup> Or, not an argument – as Critchley argues – but “a certain accumulation of terms, a rhetorical intensification through forms of repetition, invocation and multiplication.”<sup>50</sup> It indeed seems Levinas tries to empower the position he attempts to convey by means of repetition, because like in this text, thinking, knowing and intelligibility also was an important theme of the text *The I in the Totality, or Innocence*. We will see in what way Levinas seeks to strengthen his position in this next text. As we will see, there is some repetition already seen in this text, so Levinas does not take us on a maiden voyage, but instead tries us to grow more familiar with a position already defended earlier. In following Levinas’ example, I will also try to repeat and elaborate further on the similarities and differences between Levinas thinking and that of Arendt, which I already tried to make in a previous paper.<sup>51</sup>

Traditionally, as well as in daily life, Levinas argues, the sphere of intelligibility is characterized by vision. The seeing, as an intentional structure is seen as constitutive for having access to things, in all modes of sensibility. Levinas argues this can be seen in “the intellectual accession to states of affairs or the relationships between things (...) [and] the way human beings interact.”<sup>52</sup> It is through this that the priority of knowing is formed, according to Levinas. Does Levinas here deliver a critique to empiricism, or Husserlian phenomenology and the intentional (but also empirical?) accession of *dem Sachen Selbst*? Perhaps here Levinas subtly reveals himself as a rationalist, once again?

Levinas brings forms of knowing and thought under the header consciousness, which - problematically according to Levinas – is understood as an *I* identical to itself in the *I think* where every alterity is thematized under the intentional gaze. Subsequently, this seeing has a contemplative character, and is positioned at a distance, and as such, disinterested. From this we might derive a lack of ethical engagement which is so characteristic for every ego-logical form of thinking (“a moment of egotism or egoism”), for Levinas. We falsely, Levinas again seems to argue, think we can constitute ourselves and are self-legislating beings. This is a philosophical phantasy, one of authorship, in the “I think therefor I am”<sup>53</sup>, or “I am intentionally aware of things and therefor are conscious.”

Levinas seems to seek to expose again a moral opprobrium by bringing our attention to what this way of practicing philosophy means for our treatment of the Other. The other, as being intentionally aimed (in perhaps even a militaristic way?) at is being colonized by the *I think*, by utilizing the other to fulfill the desires and drives of this *I think*. The Other is thus being brought in the presence of the *I think*, and therefor at its mercy. It is seen as a mere *Gegebenheit*, as something that can be taken at hand, as becoming graspable. Levinas seems to argue that the Other is (Sartrian?) being objectified, that is, reduced to a mere thing, or what Levinas calls the promotion to a thing.<sup>54</sup> I do wonder why

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<sup>49</sup> Critchley, 2015, p. 48

<sup>50</sup> Critchley, 2015, p. 68

<sup>51</sup> See: *Small paper on The Problem The I in the Totality, or Innocence*

<sup>52</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 159

<sup>53</sup> Critchley, 2015, p. 59

<sup>54</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 160

Levinas calls it promotion, and not degradation. Perhaps this resonates with Lacan, who would perhaps speak here of sublimation (which is a theme Critchley finds lacking in Levinas) where, the other way around an object is elevated and transformed in a sublime Thing?<sup>55</sup>

With this intentional step, the temporality of thought is privileged, as is the present over the past and future.<sup>56</sup> Does this result from the fact that intentional consciousness means always being conscious of something, in the moment? But what if one is aware of one's past in reminiscing it, or when projecting one's thoughts into the future? An attempted answer, with Levinas, might be that when we try to comprehend past and future, we do so by reducing and bringing them back into the present, by re-presenting them. And here again ego-logy intensifies, because the presence then again becomes synchronized in the I think, thereby reducing this alterity (of the past, future, and what is Other in it?) to the identity of the I. Here again the violent move can be revealed of how knowledge, employed by the *I think*, can be an instrument of dominance by "*reducing one's other to the same.*"<sup>57</sup>

Here even language will not save us from this ego-logical way of thinking, for language can be used as an Platonic, inner dialogue, where thought just reflects on itself, or such is the pretention of this ego-logy. This is even extrapolated to inter-human speaking. Levinas says: "*For each of the interlocutors, speaking would consist in entering into the thought of the other, in fitting into it.*"<sup>58</sup>

Reflecting on my previous paper<sup>59</sup>, I am inclined to think that perhaps this is why for Levinas Arendt's suggestion for plurality and the exchange of thoughts is not enough for justice or a true ethical relationship with the Other. Arendt, indeed, also agreed with Plato that a dialogue can also mean an internalized speech of oneself to oneself. Another reason why Arendt might not be radical enough is that in the exchange of thoughts it is still one interlocutor as an I think that tries to either fit into the thought of the Other, or tries to colonialize it. So maybe, in a sense, this pluralistic exchange of thought cannot be entirely innocent? Because it are cogito's competing for fitting one another's thoughts into the interiority and Reason of each respectable cogito? An egological work of representation, in Levinas terms?<sup>60</sup> In other words, Arendt's plurality "*is a plurality of individuals.*" Levinas seems to be more radical, because for him, "*plurality is being's multiplicity. We are plural.*"<sup>61</sup> This does make me wonder how, with Levinas, an ethical relation is possible. Because if we already are multiplicity, or plural, how then can we form a relationship with the Other? Are we then not already completely submerged and moored in another totality, namely that of multiplicity, where the individual is lost? Because if there has to be an alacrity to form a relationship with the Other, as result from an appeal, invocation, does that not at least require an individual faced by another?

But, Levinas urges us to understand, there is a forgotten sociality here.<sup>62</sup> This sociality, as a result of the above treated problem, is "*reduced to the knowledge one can acquire about the other person as a known object, and would already support the immanence of an I having an experience of the world.*"<sup>63</sup> However, in that case, the critique to Arendt of Critchley via Levinas might then not entirely hold. Because is it not that Arendt argued that when one truly exchanges thoughts, one cannot predict how the other will share his or her thoughts, and that this other will be respected and recognized in his or her other-ness, which means not colonializing that person with the thoughts of the ego? The aim is consequently not so much to acquire knowledge of the other person, but to let

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<sup>55</sup> Critchley, 2015, p. 90

<sup>56</sup> Levinas, 1998, pp. 161-2

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 161

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 162

<sup>59</sup> See again: *Small paper on The Problem The I in the Totality, or Innocence*

<sup>60</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 162

<sup>61</sup> Critchley, 2015, p. 105

<sup>62</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 163

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 164

the other person unpredictably and sometimes anonymously change the whole web of meaning of also the individual that undergoes the exchange of thoughts?<sup>64</sup>

Levinas further reflects on the role of language, again, in asking if it can instead of doing harm to sociality, can be conducive to it. It seems clear when language is meaningful to the ego-logical form of thinking, namely when it helps formulate one's own thoughts, or reduce the thoughts of the Other into the Sameness of the *I think*. In that case, language is meaningful in its *said*, where its propositions are indicative and constitutive for the theoretical content of the *I think*. But if language is to become meaningful for sociality, it is only meaning when it is a saying, "*in responsibility with regard to the other person who commands and questions and answers of the saying (...)*."<sup>65</sup> If we take this criterium, might then an Arendtian exchange of thoughts be possible, when it are not only propositional *said*s that are being exchanged, but where there are meaningful *sayings*? This does seem possible to me, because the web of narratives for Arendt are boundless, limitless and timeless, always bearing in it the possibility of new beginnings, which might be aligned with Levinas demand that when truly bearing responsibility for the Other, we must go beyond the temporality of the said and the written, that is always a "*from-me-to-the-other*", which thematically brought back to the *I think*.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps another difference with Arendt is that the Other is never an anonymous contributor to a web of meaning, because Levinas situates rightness and justice in a *proximity* to the neighbor, and that true knowledge is dependent upon the ethical significance of the other. And this other does not seem to be anonymous, as it can be with Arendt, but in one's proximity, present as a *face*.<sup>67</sup> Also it is not quite so timeless and boundless as with Arendt, for the responsibility for the Other exists in a concrete temporality. A similarity might be with Arendt that one should be able to express one's uniqueness and distinctiveness in the exchange of thoughts. Levinas, in a similar vein, seems to state that a demand of justice means "to compare unique and incomparable others"<sup>68</sup> So then we should perhaps not express our uniqueness, but allow ourselves to be invoked by the Other, making our distinctiveness less relevant than the responsibility we bear for the Other. This might be important, because an account of the uniqueness of the Other might already be an movement of an *I think* that thinks the Other is different from me, in this or that way, which is perhaps an ego-logical move. And Arendt also does not say anything about the extent to which we should be responsive for the Other, and not merely reciprocally exchange thoughts. Indeed, the being-for-the-other lies in obedience to that Other, responsibly being responsive without worry about reciprocity. This obedience can be upset by the third person, also falling into the *I*'s responsibility. This, for Levinas, is plurality and it is here where a demand of justice is made.<sup>69</sup> This is then where perhaps the difference lies, because Arendt does not seem to speak of the risk of an excluded third party in her conception of plurality.

Coming back to the theme of knowledge, it is from this demand of justice where knowledge stems from, Levinas writes: "*An objectivity born of justice and founded on justice and founded on justice, and thus required by the for-the-other, which, in the alterity of the face, commands the I.*"<sup>70</sup>

Another difference that might be pointed out, is that in Arendt's natality, plurality holds the potential of new beginnings, whereas Levinas sees the demand for justice as a pure expression of the face, showing its vulnerability "*an exposure unto death*" (and not birth) where the Face is shown "*as the very mortality of the other human being.*" So Levinas philosophy does not project into a future, as with Arendt, but radically has to do with the obligation towards the other human being

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<sup>64</sup> See again my other essay *Small paper on the Problem of the I in the Totality or Innocence*

<sup>65</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 164 & cf. Critchley, 2015, p. 76

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 165

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 166

<sup>69</sup> Ibid

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, pp. 166-7

that makes me answer for his death, and thereby holds me hostage. And this responsibility is *“independent of every engagement ever taken by this I and of all that would have ever been accessible to its initiative and its freedom, independent of everything that in the other could have “regarded” this I.”*<sup>71</sup> So it is not the other-ness, or uniqueness of the Other that counts, nor its contribution to a public domain with its reflexively thought through *acting*, that constitutes the responsibility for the Other. And when it comes to uniqueness, it is love that constitutes its very possibility, and not merely recognition for the other-ness of the other. Above all, for Levinas, more is at stake when facing the Other than the quality of the public domain or our *sensus communis*, namely the sheer mortality of the Other, where *“the face signifies to me “thou shalt not kill,” and consequently also “you are responsible for the life of this absolutely other other – is responsibility for the one and only. The “one and only” means the loved one, love being the condition of the very possibility of uniqueness.”*<sup>72</sup> When the I is approached by its neighbor, the uniqueness of this neighbor cannot be replaced, it is the *“I who speaks in the first person, like the one Dostoyevsky has say “I am the most guilty of all,” in the obligation of each for each, as the most obligated – the one and only.”*<sup>73</sup> It is here where infinity plays a role with Levinas, which is also different from how Arendt thematizes infinity, namely infinite directions a web of meaning, or web of narratives can take in a truly pluralistic society. And whereas Arendt suggests equality and symmetry between participants in the exchange of thoughts and in the contribution to the web of narratives and meaning, with Levinas the above proves that the relationship is always asymmetrical.<sup>74</sup>

Another difference perhaps noteworthy to point out, is that with Arendt there seems to be a collective responsibility when it comes to maintaining plurality where everyone has an equal opportunity to exchange one’s thoughts. For Levinas, we live in complete solitude whereas it comes to our responsibility for the Other. For I am elected by the Other that invokes me, and this is a responsibility *“prior to deliberation and to which I was therefor exposed and dedicated before being dedicated to myself.”*<sup>75</sup> So instead of first ascertaining one’s own uniqueness in *acting*, with Arendt, responsibility for the Other is already prior to that.

However these differences, the theme *future* does resonate with Levinas as it does with Arendt, for when we bear responsibility for the Other, when perceiving indeed the mortality of a finite being, inscribed in the others’ face, we can perhaps see *“the meaning of a future beyond what happens to me, beyond what, for an I, is to come Thus we have not gone to the end of thought and meaningfulness in dying. The meaningful continues beyond my death.”*<sup>76</sup> Indeed, when thinking of Arendt’s *natality*, where *acting* can bring new beginnings and new possibilities for future communities - in relation to which we cannot predict what the effects of our (common or individual) contributions are - meaningfulness indeed does not end with our deaths. Every birth, every *act*, or every taking up of our responsibility for the Other, bears in it the hope for a better future.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 167

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 168

<sup>73</sup> Ibid

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p. 170

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 174

## Nonintentional consciousness

### ***An intentional Earthly-civil responsibility to the Other***

In introducing the position Levinas will come to defend in this chapter, he shows to whom he is indebted, philosophically and methodologically speaking. He first refers to Husserl, owing to him *“the concept of intentionality animating consciousness, and especially the idea of the horizons of meaning which grow blurred when thought is absorbed in what it thinks, which always has the meaning of being.”*<sup>77</sup> A horizon of meaning comes into being when thought thinks what it thinks in being conscious of something, which is always a certain mode intentionality. The essential contribution of Husserlian, but also Heideggerian phenomenology is the principle that thought refers back to thought, such that being determines the phenomena.<sup>78</sup> This seems to mean that if indeed consciousness is always consciousness of something (an object, theme, or meaning) such that the thought is concretely engaged with the being it is conscious of, thought is concretely engaged with the being and in the same move refers back to itself. It seems as such it determines phenomena.

What is important to Levinas, is exactly this concreteness, because his critique is that normally we maintain naïve abstractions of everyday consciousness, or the absorbance in an object, which is characteristic for scientific consciousness. *“Hence a new way of developing concepts and of passing from one concept to another.”*<sup>79</sup> However, Levinas argues, this concreteness still encompasses and sustains these naïve abstractions, because when the concreteness of mind is phenomenologically analyzed, the theoretical, representational form of knowing is still privileged, and thus the ontological meaning of being as well.<sup>80</sup>

Levinas remembers us why his critique is so essential (although only shortly in brackets this chapter). Namely, conceptual knowledge (in the form of these naïve abstractions and the ego-logy Levinas repeatably criticizes) has been unable to understand nor avoid the events that took place from 1933 to 1945. Instead of giving priority to this conceptual form of knowledge, Levinas seeks to prioritize the relation to the other person, which precisely does not *“involve the knowledge structures contoured by intentionality that Husserl calls into play in the study of intersubjectivity.”*<sup>81</sup> So, when it comes to being humane or non-violent, conceptual knowledge is of no help to us.

Levinas again begins by criticizing the philosophy he is against. Traditionally, Levinas writes, *“[i]t is in the psyche qua knowledge (...) that traditional philosophy locates the origin or natural place of the meaningful and recognizes mind.”*<sup>82</sup> What is problematic about this mode of philosophy, Levinas again emphasizes, is that it assumes a *“unity of the I, in which all knowing is self-sufficient.”*<sup>83</sup> The problem, according to Levinas, is that knowing is then too much preoccupied with thinking itself (as with Descartes, Levinas keeps mentioning him in this regard) and thereby encapsulated in its own interiority. Even when it focuses on something outside of itself, it always returns within or to itself. In the same move, *“exteriority or otherness of the self is recaptured in immanence.”* In other words, every otherness is reduced to the thought’s self, which means that nothing new is ever learned, everything is made to fit into the mold of self’s thought *“in the guise of recallable, re-presentable memory.”*<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 123

<sup>78</sup> Ibid

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, p. 124

<sup>80</sup> Ibid

<sup>81</sup> Ibid

<sup>82</sup> Ibid

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 125

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

The violent nature of this form of philosophy consists in the fact that this means that every mode of thinking privileges the present (by taking the future in hand, by bringing it back to the present understanding as if it were a protention, the present thus comes to be at hand) and forces everything in thought's own representational sphere. "*Thought*", Levinas writes, "*qua learning [apprende], requires a taking [prendre], a seizure, a grip on what is learned, a possession.*"<sup>85</sup> In other words, the self-proclaimed self-sufficient consciousness colonizes every exteriority by reducing it back to a familiarity contained in itself. Everything the self thus perceives is a being giving, which is taken into possession as an enjoyment and satisfaction. Within this falsely assumed unity of the *I*, a harmony is supposed "*in the act of grasping, between the thinkable and the thinking, that the appearing of the world is also a giving of itself, and that the knowledge of it is a satisfaction, as if it fulfilled a need.*"<sup>86</sup> Levinas sees this in Husserl's work, where empty intentionality fulfills itself and in Hegel's work, which "*is a philosophy of both absolute knowledge and the satisfied man.*" Levinas hereby seems to argue that these forms of philosophy function as a loop: thought thinks according to its own criteria, is equal to itself by always referring back to itself and because of that the Same, as a result, always rediscovers itself in the Other.<sup>87</sup> Or in Other words: thought thinks itself, perceives something outside of itself, and sees how this can be brought into harmony with that which already exists in its own mind, namely the thought thinking itself, of which the Other, or exteriority, becomes merely a part. The already existing thought as thinking itself is only colonially expanded. Here we might draw a comparison with the Borg in the sci-fi series *Star Trek*, in order to visualize the argument. The Borg can serve pretty well as a metaphor of Hegelian thinking. The Borg, half-cyborg and half-organic, assimilate beings to their mode of techno-organic being, making them part of their hivemind. As such, they could be understood as an *Absolute Geist*, of which its main purpose is to encompass everything in its interior being, in this case, the hivemind thinking itself, only for itself. Every other being the Borg come across, are viewed as an exteriority, an otherness that it negates by seeing it only as a potentiality to be colonized and subsumed under the hivemind and subsequently reduced to it. The Borg consider themselves as a self-sufficient unity, a totality of an *I*, thinking itself and trying to expend this thinking.<sup>88</sup> The Borg, like Hegelian thinking thus "*triumphs over all otherness and it is therein, ultimately, that its very rationality resides*" and this refers to "*the unity of the I think [which] is the ultimate form of the mind as knowledge. And all things lead back to this unity of the I think in constituting a system.*" All that is intelligible, is a consciousness of self. Like the Borg, there is a complete refusal to think the other in its otherness without reducing it to the Same.<sup>89</sup>

In the latter half of the chapter, Levinas comes back to the theme intentionality. Consciousness, as intentional, Levinas argues, must be seen as "*a modality of the voluntary.*" This intentional structure, is furthermore characterized by representation, which implies presence, positing the self as given, which thereby can be grasped, comprehended and appropriated. And it is this intentional consciousness that plays out an active intervention "*of the stage where the being of beings is played out, gathers and shows itself*" Levinas critiques Spinoza in this vein, because he deems this "*an exercise of the conatus.*" To me this resonates with a point Peter Sloterdijk makes in his book *Eurotaoism*. In it he argues that humankind, from the Enlightenment onwards, has brought itself in a techno-scientific mobilization to usurp the world in service of its goals, be they emancipatory (by the spread of human rights) or induced by greed, such as by capitalism. As such, we have reduced the world to our resource (or with a metaphor: one giant gasoline station) to exploit and to a stage

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 126

<sup>87</sup> Ibid

<sup>88</sup> See for more on the Borg: [http://www.startrek.com/database\\_article/borg](http://www.startrek.com/database_article/borg)

<sup>89</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 126

whereupon we enact our self-realization drama. Sloterdijk calls this historical narcissism.<sup>90</sup> With Levinas, we bring everything in the world into our presence and grasp everything in it to fulfill our needs.<sup>91</sup> Or, in other words, we usurp the whole earth.<sup>92</sup>

It seems that Levinas also criticizes Enlightenment thinking when he states that reflective consciousness aims to make its mental acts and the self its mental objects and tries to illuminate every darkness under its illuminating gaze, to perceive and control it, fulfilling its needs and enjoyments. Sloterdijk, in another of his works *Critique of Cynical Reason*, also calls our attention to these violent aspects of Enlightenment thinking. He argues that especially the powers that be have succeeded time and again to dictate the course of Enlightenment thinking, thus appropriating it to satisfy their needs. They were particularly successful in this attempt because they were quite able to disguise the bad parts of the Enlightenment (the instrumental appropriation of strategic Reason to control nature and man). Every 'progress' ever since made, serves the interests of very few<sup>93</sup>, usurping Others in its course - we might say - and leading to the exclusion of third parties that will not benefit from this progress, or worse, are used as a means in the attainment of egotistical needs. And even when we strive for emancipation, the problem then becomes that Enlightened engagement becomes engagement for itself, and not for the *others* one feels engagement towards.<sup>94</sup>

Levinas in addition criticizes reflexive consciousness as introspection, where in reflection one's own self is focused upon itself. He distinguishes this from a prereflexive consciousness, which he understands as a pure passivity, understood as something that has to be brought to light by reflection. The consciousness this gives rise to, does not signify knowledge of self, but "*is a self-effacement or discretion of presence.*" This is what Levinas calls bad conscience, being stripped from intentions and aims by assuming a prereflexive presence, "*without the protective mask of the character contemplating himself in the mirror of the world, self-assured and affirming himself.*" This assumed nonintentionality exists thus prior to any wrong-doing, and the identity "*draws back from the eventual insistence that may be involved in identification's return to self.*" The self that, in a reflexive move becomes intentional, puts itself forward and affirms itself and becomes hateful in its manifestation of itself in saying "I". The *I*, in this maneuver, becomes assured of its right to be, and comes to dominate the timidity of the nonintentional.<sup>95</sup> "In the passivity of the nonintentional, Levinas writes, "*the very justice of position in being which is affirmed in intentional thought, knowledge and control of the now is questioned.*" In being prereflexive, it still has to answer for its being, and no right to such has been claimed yet. This seems to refer back to what Levinas calls innocence.

The form of consciousness Levinas criticizes is what he calls bourgeois. "*The bourgeois is understood as he who is sufficient to being and who lives in peace.*" The bourgeois subject, we might say in providing an example, demands peace and peace of mind and consequently does not wish his peace of mind to be violated by being bothered by any problems of the Other. Or as Paul Schnabel once said in an article: citizens demand the freedom to enjoy the right of not being disturbed.<sup>96</sup> Many people thus oppose the rupture, the invocation and appeal of the Other.

This bourgeois existence is identified with the above described philosophy. The Hegelian idealism, the idea of sufficiency between mind and world, is for him the expression of bourgeois sufficiency.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Sloterdijk, 1989, pp. 236-7, 239 & 252

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Levinas, 1998, p. 127

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 130

<sup>93</sup> Sloterdijk, 2013, pp. 130-151

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p. 137

<sup>95</sup> Levinas, 1998, pp. 128-9

<sup>96</sup> Schnabel, 1997, p. 181

<sup>97</sup> Critchley, 2015, pp. 47-8 & cf. p. 60



Sloterdijk points out similar problems when he argues that Hegels logics has conquered a space that has become mediated immanence. This resulted in historical forms of thinking and perceiving structures that seek to interiorize everything exterior, and vice versa, in order to be at peace with himself, as Levinas figure of the bourgeois. The bourgeois figure Sloterdijk describes seems to assume that when the otherness, or society is banished out of the *I* that thinks through reflection, a nicely formed *I* remains that enjoys the taking into possession if itself. Reflection, Sloterdijk argues, is cruel and anti-social in this sense, which reveals a rulers-reflection.<sup>98</sup> The strategic Reason the subject uses (which becomes particular reason) thus comes to serve his egotistical needs.<sup>99</sup>

This egoism is also thematized by Levinas when he states that when we claim our place in the world, we usurp *“places that belong to the other man who has already been oppressed and starved by me[.]”*<sup>100</sup> Or again with Sloterdijk: the historical narcissistic attempt to build a ‘house of man’ on universal scale created not only ‘islands of wealth’, but also resulted in desertification.<sup>101</sup> Indeed, our production and consumption driven economy (where many *I*’s fulfill egotistical needs) has brought climate change in its wake, leaving others in poorer countries to find themselves desolated in an expanding desert, and consequently left to starve and die.

It is again only through the Other that we might find redemption for this. This stems from the fear for the usurpation of the other man or the Earth, which *“comes to me from the face of the other person”* that appears *“defenseless; and, before all language, and before all mimicry, a demand made of me from the depths of an absolute solitude; a demand addressed to me or an order issued, a putting in question of my presence and my responsibility.”* This fear is also a fear for the responsibility of the death of the other person, which means we must *“not [...] leave the other alone in the face of death.”* Not leaving the other alone means answering the Other with *“Here I am”* (...) [w]hich is, no doubt, the secret of sociality and, in its extremes of gratuitousness and futility, love of my neighbor, love without concupiscence.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, we can for instance ask ourselves what effects taking up our place as a consumer or traveler has on the excluded third parties in expanding deserts. We must allow ourselves to be faced by those others, and bear responsibility for their fate and take seriously our fear of being an accomplice to their deaths.

With Sloterdijk this would amount to overcoming our historical narcissism, which can only be done by developing an *Earthly-civil ethos*. This consists in becoming more modest in our needs and developing a more considerate attitude towards others and the Earth. Human acting should, in order to achieve this, have as its main purpose and aim the avoidance of even more blind demands towards the capacity of the Earth. For this to be attainable, we must become more humble and abandon our normative loyalties and legitimizing claims of the Hegelian epistemology of imperialism, which would also mean becoming more ahistorical<sup>103</sup>, as Levinas would perhaps agree. Therefore, we should not reduce others and the Earth as ends to attain our egotistical needs, but as beings with which a responsible, social relationship has to be formed.

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<sup>98</sup> Sloterdijk, 2013, pp. 144-6

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 654

<sup>100</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 130

<sup>101</sup> Sloterdijk, 1989, p. 253

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p. 131

<sup>103</sup> Sloterdijk, 1989, p. 252

## The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture

### ***The Enlightened culture of knowing and its usurping reduction of the Other to a commodity***

#### Enlightened rationality, culture and subjectivity

When describing culture, Levinas sees it as immanent as the self-proclaimed self-sufficient ego. Whereas the ego tries to remove all otherness out of its consciousness, culture seeks to “*remove the otherness of Nature.*” The human as the *I* that thinks (as consciousness of self and identity in oneself) and culture as knowledge is where all meaningfulness and intelligibility is situated. This is typical of all spirituality in the West, according to Levinas. As with time, but also with our conceptualization of the Other, we bring the exteriority of Nature into presence, placing it “*at the disposal and within reach of the thinking thing(...).*”<sup>104</sup> Everything has to be brought back to the systematic and mathematical thinkable and “[e]ven the absence that makes science incomplete is henceforth present in the opening of the world to research.”<sup>105</sup>

In this way mankind uses knowledge to form its relation with exteriority, where every Other is again reduced to the same, stripped of its alterity in the interiority of the *I* that thinks. This inhibits us to learn anything new, because everything is made to fit in the interiority of the *I* that thinks. Any true affection or enlargement of the mind subsequently becomes impossible.<sup>106</sup>

When Levinas ascribes this role to human culture and its formation of knowledge, where thinking has as its aim to remove the otherness from nature, but also seeks to control it and make it fit into interiority’s (Kantian or other) schemata’s, it reminds me of how Adorno and Horkheimer describe the dialectical turn of the Enlightenment. As Levinas, they ask themselves why we have not become more humane since the Enlightenment onwards, but are instead slipping into barbarity. They write: “*What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarity.*”<sup>107</sup> As with the *ego-logy* that Levinas describes, where the Other is not appreciated in its otherness and where we seek to reduce all otherness to the same in our violent, intentional representations, Adorno & Horkheimer also notice a (self-)destructive tendency in the Enlightenment, where man does not only seek to understand the exteriority of nature by reducing it to concepts, but also seeks to control it. This is comparable with the Levinasian description of understanding as *apprendre*, a taking in hand, a taking into possession of what is learned (or in Dutch: *be-grijpen*), to make it fulfill a need.<sup>108</sup> In relation to this Adorno and Horkheimer write: “*What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings.*”<sup>109</sup> Also for them this leads to a loss of “*innocence regarding the habits and tendencies of the Zeitgeist.*”<sup>110</sup> Even thought has become a commodity, with language as a celebration of that commodity, which exposes a similar utilitarian manipulation of the *cogito* as Levinas speaks about.<sup>111</sup> Thought becomes a mean in the service and reproduction of an existing order, transforming it into something destructive.<sup>112</sup> As with Levinas, this form of thought is violent, and forces every exteriority into the interiority of intentional and representational consciousness.

Adorno and Horkheimer trace this form of thinking back to the Enlightenment, where man

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<sup>104</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 179

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, p. 180

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>107</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. xiv

<sup>108</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 125

<sup>109</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 2

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid* & cf. Levinas, 1998, pp. 15-6

<sup>111</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 14

<sup>112</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, pp. xiv - xv

pursued knowledge to install him as master. They name Francis Bacon as an important proponent who sought to dispel all tradition and prejudice, in order to achieve a *“happy match between the mind of man and the nature of things.”*<sup>113</sup> This is similar to the mode of thinking Levinas exposes in the *ego-logy*, where everything is made to fit the interiority of the *cogito*. Mind is then made patriarchal: it strives to conquer superstition and aims *“to rule over disenchanting nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters.”*<sup>114</sup>

Coming back to the utilitarian character of this form of rationality, thinking is thus commodified in such a way that it serves the bourgeois economy and *“is at the disposal of entrepreneurs regardless of their origins.”* The Other is consequently violated in his otherness in the exploitation of his labor. In other words: the Other is usurped by capital.<sup>115</sup> *“For enlightenment”*, Adorno and Horkheimer go on, *“anything which does not conform to the standard of calculability and utility must be viewed with suspicion.”*<sup>116</sup> When it comes to this commodification and reification of thought, Levinas in a similar vein argues that perception (as within Baconian empiricism) *“is a holding onto, appropriation, acquisition and a promise of satisfaction made to man; a rising up within the self of an interested and active subject.”*<sup>117</sup> Levinas later calls this ‘main-tenance’, where the ‘taking in hand’ *“brings forth a form in the material of things.”*<sup>118</sup> This is seen as a triumph of reason where *“thought completes itself by equaling and interiorizing the other – culture triumphs over things and men.”*<sup>119</sup> Resistance here is futile, because the other is not able to challenge or unsettle this form of reason, manifested in the identity of the subject.<sup>120</sup> Likewise, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that *“[a]ny intellectual resistance it [this form of rationality] encounters merely increases its strength.”*<sup>121</sup>

The Enlightenment, which sees itself as other than myth also cannot help to only recognize itself therein. It is, Levinasian speaking, a thought of the equal-to-thought,<sup>122</sup> it recognizes nothing new. Likewise, bourgeois society this gives rise to is ruled by equivalence and it *“(…) makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities.”*<sup>123</sup> This reminds us of Levinas argument on naïve abstractions.<sup>124</sup> Again in more Levinasian words: things are made similar by bringing each otherness back to the Same, in the form of abstract representations and conceptualizations. This enlightened awaking of the subject also makes an ethical relationship to the Other such as Levinas envisages impossible, because this subject can only see power as the principle of all relationships (they being dominated by economic forces),<sup>125</sup> or again Levinasian, it usurps the place of the Other through power.<sup>126</sup>

In conclusion we might say that Levinas and Adorno seem to both criticize a form of rationality that absolves the subject into an absoluteness, wherein it is utilized to satisfy a need, with the former in terms of the *cogito* and with the latter in terms of capitalist usefulness.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p. 1

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p. 2

<sup>115</sup> Ibid

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p. 3

<sup>117</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 180

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 181

<sup>119</sup> Ibid

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 181

<sup>121</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 3

<sup>122</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 181

<sup>123</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 4

<sup>124</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 124

<sup>125</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 5

<sup>126</sup> Cf. Levinas, 1998, p. 130

### Culture, art and the culture industry

Later in this chapter Levinas reflects on the expression of culture in art. He first seems to speak about expression in embodied form (seemingly following Merleau-Ponty), where the expression of the one in the other is a cultural event, which he deems *“a source of all the arts.”*<sup>127</sup> And here something else goes on than an interiorization of knowledge in domination of the Other by bringing it back to the Same. Here the meaningfulness of expression is signified otherwise. It seems not to be an usurpation of a place by intentional consciousness, *“but a creation of perceptible expressive forms in being by a non-thematizing wisdom of the flesh, which is art or poetry.”*<sup>128</sup> Given that Levinas is suspicious of thematizing forms of consciousness, since it is intentional and representational, he seems to evaluate art differently. A few passages further Levinas seems to address the instrumental approach in art, because the technical gestures applied in art aim to attain a proposed goal, where *“skill and elegance are already delineated (...).”* This might reveal Levinas’ critical posture to art.<sup>129</sup>

The meaningful in art, Levinas argues, does not refer to forms of knowing that is noetic/noematic, nor transcendental, and does not adhere to a common rule. It rather makes harmonies or disharmonies occur in the human, without taking recourse or making reductions to the universal, which makes it remain *“in the extreme exoticism of that variety.”* So again, Levinas seems to see art as being able to express meaningfulness in another way than in the conceptualizing forms of philosophy he criticizes. In another assessment of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas points out that differences between persons and dispersed collectives are revealed and celebrated in its soul. The human thus becomes the locus of this kind of expression, and *“of the original incarnation of the Same in the Other.”* Might Levinas see this as another way of reducing the Other to the Same? Here we see, according to Levinas, a manifestation that is different from that of cognitive adequation. This still resides in the culture of immanence, however, but now with a more atheistic character. Levinas might assert this critique because of the materialistic character of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, with an emphasize on (bodily) matter, which in a Levinasian sense might be read as another reduction of the subject, but this time to a materiality, instead of to a concept. The alterity, Levinas asks himself, might still not be *“sufficiently measured and appreciated as the other of the human [.]”*<sup>130</sup>

What is problematic about the artistic expression according to Levinas is that in it the unity of the one is affirmed and confirmed between the soul and the body, and thus made meaningful once again, but this time not by knowledge’s reduction of the Other to the Same, but by art. The multiplicity of the world is again made immanent in the unity of the One, but now with different means: artistic ones. And here the self-sufficiency is not constituted in the cogito, but in the Beautiful. In other cultural expressions, the latter tries to imitate the former in its autonomy *“or the freedom of knowledge and technique[.]”*<sup>131</sup>

For Levinas this has political consequences as well. The culture of knowledge and art, which both strive for unity, sees the state as essential for gathering human multiplicity. The aim of politics is then a common participation in this unity and it connects interhuman proximity in a reciprocity of citizen members into a Whole. Further, it seeks to derive the same history, Logos or phenomenology from a universal state that blossoms out sensation into absolute knowledge.<sup>132</sup> The problem for Levinas seems to be that art is just as unhelpful in forming an ethical relation to the Other as conceptual

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid, pp. 182-3

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, p. 183

<sup>129</sup> Ibid

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 184

<sup>131</sup> Ibid

<sup>132</sup> Ibid

knowledge is. It lacks an *Ethos*, and perhaps that is why the next paragraph has the title *The Relation to the Otherness of the Other Person: Ethics*.

To ascertain how an ethical relationship is to be formed, Levinas first again seeks to give the alterity of the otherness a place, for he asks himself if in the human multiplicity where relationships are commanded by the Whole this could be the case. Could the *I* recognize itself as a fraction of that Whole, governing human solidarity? Would the otherness of the other in this Whole be seen in its alterity?

A second question Levinas poses is if the otherness of the other man, does not have for the *I* an absolute character, “as if the other were not only other in the logical and formal sense[.]”<sup>133</sup>

Levinas rejects both these approaches for a relation between the *I* and the Other. For Levinas, the other must be able to exist in an irreducible fashion, “with an otherness and a separation that resists all synthesis, prior to all unity, in which the possible relationship between me and the other (the otherness of an undesirable stranger) – in which sociability – is independent of all previous recognition and all formation of totalities[.]” This for him is necessary for the ethical relationship.<sup>134</sup>

The title of the next paragraph seems to further emphasize that culture must consist in a responsibility to the Other, and not find its expression in art. It is here again the face of the other that can bring forth an irreducible difference. Thought is then not as with intentional consciousness a thought *of* (itself, its objects or whatever), but here thought is a thought *for* the Other. This amounts to a non-indifference for the other, which means we must let the other break “the equilibrium of the equal and impassive soul of knowledge.”<sup>135</sup> Levinas reminds us why conceptual knowledge and art is not helpful in our being appealed by the other. The face signifies in such a way that it cannot be discerned by knowledge, nor can it be expressed by art, the face is prior to all conceivable knowledge and prior to any expression we can make of it.<sup>136</sup> The message of Levinas seems to be that we cannot represent and reduce the otherness signified by the face to conceptual knowledge, nor can we express it in art. Maybe the danger for Levinas is that this would reduce the otherness of the other to a visual, literary, poetic or other artistic form of expression.

Only the face of the other can make us aware of our responsibility; what the other is confronted with becomes my business, as if his invisible death has to do with me; the *I* becomes an accomplice to it and has to answer for this death and not let the other die alone. The face of the other summons, demands and claims to be my fellowman. In the proximity of my fellowman the responsibility of the *I* for another is formed, which shows the “gravity of the love of one’s fellowman.”<sup>137</sup>

An ethical culture, then, is where the *I* can be awakened to the inalienable responsibility for the Other. Culture therefor consists of an ethical responsibility and obligation to the Other. This can be called love. For Levinas this seems to be the ultimate antidote against the barbarism of being, for: “[a] breach [is] made by humanness, (...) even if no philosophy of history guarantees us against the return to barbarism.”<sup>138</sup>

Adorno and Horkheimer also problematize the striving for unity within culture. In their critique on the culture industry, they point out that everything in social relationships is oriented to the unity of production, even leisure time, the latter being made sure of by the culture industry, which makes leisure time quite similar to the modes of production.<sup>139</sup> They also problematize the Kantian schematism, because this is abused as a secret mechanism by the culture industry to make people fit

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p. 185

<sup>134</sup> Ibid

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, p. 186

<sup>136</sup> Ibid

<sup>137</sup> Ibid,

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p. 187

<sup>139</sup> Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 109

into the system of pure reason. All classification is thus done by the schematism of production, so any otherness, we might say with Levinas, is preempted.<sup>140</sup> All individuality or attempt thereto is consequently absorbed in production. The way the culture industry likewise appropriates art, leads to an aesthetic barbarism, subordinating all branches of intellectual production to a unity dictated by the culture industry.<sup>141</sup>

Since the culture industry mainly has commercial goals and has appropriated the capitalist means of production, it hems all subjects in so tightly, *“that they unresistingly succumb to whatever is proffered to them.”* This forces consumers to conform and to *“content themselves with the reproduction of sameness.”* For Adorno and Horkheimer this also leads to all exclusion of the new.<sup>142</sup> With Levinas we might say that no rupture or breach can then occur (also not by an excluded third party demanding justice), which would be able to facilitate a new experience, but only that which is already known can be repeated and reproduced.

This also leads to a particular form of exclusion of the third party, because the *“more all-embracing the culture industry has become, the more pitilessly it has forced the outsider [the excluded third party] into either bankruptcy or a syndicate.”* And hence *“[i]ts victory is twofold: what is destroyed as truth outside its sphere [a Levinasian Whole or unity] can be reproduced indefinitely within it as lies.”* The problem with bourgeois art in particular is that it is *“hypostatized as a realm of freedom contrasting to material praxis, [which] was bought from the outset with the exclusion of the lower class [or the excluded third party, we might say].”*<sup>143</sup>

Thus the power of the culture industry lies in its *unity* with fabricated need. Work is unified with entertainment, because the *“only escape from the work process in factory and office is through adaptation to it in leisure time.”*<sup>144</sup> What is characteristic for the amusement that is sought, is that it leads to boredom, because the forms of offered amusement prevent logical connections being made, avoiding mental activity, for it only accepts meaninglessness. Thus, again, nothing new can arise.

This also leads to a lack of engagement towards the suffering of others, because *“[a]musement always means putting things out of mind, forgetting suffering, even when it is on display.”* When the culture of industry has this type of dominance, an ethical culture such as Levinas envisions becomes unattainable, because amusement is so stripped of human elements and so detached from it that: *“[i]t is no longer possible to lose oneself in others.”*<sup>145</sup>

So it seems not only does expression through art form an inhibition to forming an ethical relationship to the Other, but also the culture industry and the means by which it has appropriated art and is dominated by economic forces. This has led us to become more detached from others, if we are to believe Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s argument. This means that if an ethical relation with the other is to be formed within a society, we must not only address and problematize conceptual knowledge mediated by intentional consciousness and the way it reduces the Other to the Same, nor only the material reduction of the Other through expression in art, but also other societal phenomena such as economic forces, money and our mode of production and consumerist culture.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid p. 98

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, p. 104

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, p. 106

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p. 107

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, p. 109

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, p. 116

## Useless Suffering

### ***From the uselessness of past and future suffering as a strategic means to an end to an interhuman order without rationalized, utopian ends***

Levinas opens this chapter with a phenomenology of suffering. Suffering, he first says, is a datum in consciousness, a certain “*psychological content*,”[.] However, it is something unassumable, it exists *in spite of* consciousness. This means that it cannot be measured by our sensibility, nor by our means of grasping and holding (characteristic of apprehending). Instead, it is “*an excess, an unwelcome superfluity, that is inscribed in a sensorial content, penetrating, as suffering, the dimensions of meaning that seem to open themselves to it, or become grafted unto it.*”<sup>146</sup> Levinas seems to mean that any attempt to ascribe meaning to suffering from the representational consciousness of the *I* is met with refusal, for it cannot be assembled in data. Instead, it disturbs order and as such it is a disturbance in itself. Further, it amounts not so much to a consciousness of this rejection, or a symptom thereof, but it is a rejection in itself: “*a backward consciousness, “operating” not as “grasp” but as revulsion.*”<sup>147</sup> With this I think Levinas means that suffering cannot be represented by intentional consciousness, it cannot be brought back to a synthesis of an *I* that thinks. The denial with which this attempt is met, or refusal of meaning, is thrust forward as a sensible quality, it is disguised as an experienced content and in this way, the unbearable within consciousness is not borne, and this not-being-borne, is, paradoxically, itself a sensation or a datum. It is this contradiction (which answers to a quasi-contradictory structure, to nuance with Levinas), qua sensation, which is the ache of pain, or woe. Levinas here seems to mean that this felt contradiction, is an ache of pain, or a woe in itself.<sup>148</sup> Because suffering is an in-spite-of-consciousness in its woe, it is passivity. Instead of a taking into consciousness, characteristic of apprehension, there is no “taking”, there is no performance or act of consciousness. Instead of an apprehension, suffering, as passivity, consists in a submission, or even further, a submission to submission. However, there is still a certain consciousness of suffering, not in the representational sense, but otherwise. The “content” suffering is conscious of, Levinas argues, amounts at the same time to an adversity of suffering and its passivity signifies a quiddity. The passivity suffering consists in, is conceptually opposed to activity (of intentional representation). The fact that Levinas places content between quotation marks seems to signify that we still must not view this content in the traditional psychological or philosophical sense. The passivity of suffering, in its pure phenomenology is abstracted from psychological and psychophysiological conditions, it is, Levinas goes on, even more passive than the receptivity of our senses. Sensibility, in suffering, is a vulnerability, “*more passive than receptivity; an encounter more passive than experience.*”<sup>149</sup>

When furthering his description of suffering, he also denotes it as an evil. Suffering, Levinas namely argues, is an evil, but that evil is not described through passivity. Suffering, Levinas goes on, must be understood as an evil. After this description, he again seems to move back to his claim on passivity in coining suffering as a pure undergoing. But this undergoing is not a matter of “*a passivity that would degrade human beings by affecting their freedom, which would be curtailed to the point of compromising self-consciousness, thus leaving the human being, in the passivity of undergoing, the identity of a mere thing.*” With suffering, something else is at stake, namely the “*humanity of those who suffer is overwhelmed by evil that rends it, otherwise than by non-freedom (...).*” It is the concreteness of the *not*, which cannot be logically defined, making it more than a simple negation,

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<sup>146</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 91

<sup>147</sup> Ibid

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, pp. 91-2

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, p. 92

(like in Aristotelian logics), nor can it be seen as a mere assertion of suffering as a *present-at-hand* (in the Heideggerian sense of the word). Levinas understands suffering instead as a looming evil. The not of evil is a negativity that extends to the realm of the un-meaning, and all evil relates back to suffering, which is an impasse of life and being and as such an absurdity.<sup>150</sup>

Suffering then, Levinas seems to mean, consists of more than a negation of someone's freedom. If we were to understand it as a negation of someone's freedom, the problem might be for Levinas that this would mean to define it in terms of a content of a consciousness (as being free or not) and subsequently as a form of subjectivity, namely as the subjective experience of being robbed of one's freedom, which then can be described as a quality of a subject that can be apprehended by representational consciousness. Levinas seems to want to point out the sheer absurdity, and thus incomprehensibility of suffering. In the same move, he seems to attempt to undermine any undertaking that might ascribe meaning to suffering, a meaning that can only be arrived at by the same representational consciousness. Instead, Levinas argues, suffering is useless, it is for nothing and this cannot be apprehended.

Levinas again brings our relation to the other under attention, by pointing out that the cruelty of pain impoverishes one's social life. When suffering, one becomes impaired in the relation to the other person, but, at some point *"that relation in which suffering, without losing anything of its savage malignancy, no longer eclipses the totality of the mental and moves into a new light, within new horizons."* This does not seem to be the mental horizon of the one who suffers, because the *"horizons remain closed to the mentally deficient [mentally being deficient, indicating a state of suffering, I think]."* Yet, in this moving into a new light, salvation for suffering also seems to lie. In the pure pain of the ones who suffer, their horizons *"are projected into them in exposing themselves to me, raising the fundamental problem posed by pain "for nothing": the inevitable and preemptory ethical problem of medication, which is my duty."* The one who suffers is thus first cast upon himself, it seems, by being completely mentally absorbed in the suffering and as such is socially impoverished. But this impoverishment can come to an end, by me taking responsibility for this suffering. The eclipse of the mental horizon of the sufferer, namely, can only be opened by me, by answering his call for aid, a call that slips through an opening by *"a moan, a cry, a groan"*. Only *I* as an exteriority, an alterity to the one who suffers can help him, by responding to this opening, which makes this an opening to merciful care. Pure suffering is, until this merciful care is offered, condemned to itself, it finds no way out. A beyond can thus only appear *"in the form of the interhuman."* Or, in other words, only *I* can save the other from being enclosed in the mental horizon of suffering, only *I* can open this closed mental horizon by reaching out and offering care.<sup>151</sup>

Because Levinas earlier stated the ethical problem of medication, he comes to speak of medicine as technique, and thus the whole of technology it presupposes. Seemingly sensitive to the danger that technology can be used as means for power, he argues - to circumvent this attack - that medicine as technique cannot be derived *solely* from the *"will to power"*. Levinas seems to ask us to be willing to pay that as a price for being high-minded enough as a civilization that is being *"called upon to feed human beings and to lighten their sufferings."*<sup>152</sup> With this Levinas seems to suggest that if mankind becomes high-minded, then let that at least be to alleviate hunger and suffering, instead of oppressing and starving others through a high-minded will to power. Peter Sloterdijk also points out the danger techno-scientific progress poses, especially when it is deployed to oppress people, or worse, when it is abused for the extermination of people, as we have seen in Verdun, Auschwitz and Hiroshima.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid

<sup>151</sup> Ibid

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, p. 94

<sup>153</sup> Sloterdijk, 2013, pp. 46-7



The high-mindedness Levinas speaks of derives from modernity, of which he seems ambivalent, for modernity, he argues, is still uncertain and vacillating. Levinas traces the emergence of this high-mindedness back to the end of a century of unutterable suffering, *“but in which the suffering of suffering, the suffering for the useless suffering of the other, the just suffering in me for the unjustifiable suffering of the other, opens suffering to the ethical perspective of the inter-human.”*<sup>154</sup>

So although there has been an unsurmountable amount of suffering in the century Levinas mentions, this has opened an ethical-perspective, one of a relation with the Other. Fitting of Levinas' philosophy, suffering, we might say, has opened up new possibilities for relational subjectivity. Within this perspective of the inter-human, Levinas draws a distinction between *“the suffering in the other, where it is unforgivable to me, solicits me and calls me, and suffering in me, my own experience of suffering, whose constitutional or congenital uselessness can take on a meaning, the only one of which suffering is capable, in becoming a suffering for the suffering (inexorable though it may be) of someone else.”* Levinas thus draws attention to the suffering of the other, which is where he situates human subjectivity. As we can read, the suffering in the other is an invocation upon me and is relational in this sense. Furthermore, one can suffer because of the suffering of the other, which is again a relational mode of being. So again, subjectivity only arises from my relation with the other, in this case through suffering. And it is thus only in this relation that suffering is capable of attaining meaning, meaning manifesting itself only on the level of the inter-human, in *my* response to the suffering of *the other*.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its abhorrent cruelties and the immense suffering it brought forth thus gives shape to new openings for ethical relationships. Levinas raises this nexus of human subjectivity to *“the level of supreme ethical principal.”* Levinas argues that this principal cannot possibly be questioned, thus leading to an inescapable obligation which brings us closer to God than any kind of theodicy, which means God manifests himself in the relationship.<sup>155</sup>

For Peter Sloterdijk modernity, and its abuse of techno-scientific progress also had its share of negative consequences for our consciousnesses, especially in relation to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Due to all the catastrophes that ensued in this century, the collective consciousness of European humanity has become pessimistic; it has lost all hope for the future. With this, the future takes on the double aspect of indifference and an anticipation of catastrophes, with only a small hope for survival.<sup>156</sup> Levinas seems to be sensitive to this fear of catastrophic risks and maybe would partially share Sloterdijk's view, for in an interview he says that so-called modernity is characterized by ineradicable memories on the one hand (of previous catastrophes and suffering), and fear for the future on the other hand (due to potential catastrophes to come).<sup>157</sup> However, Levinas does seem to have more hope for modernity, since he seems to be more ambivalent than pessimistic compared to Sloterdijk.

Later in the chapter Levinas attacks other strategies to ascribe meaning to suffering, strategies that seek to rationalize or justify suffering as a means to an end, as though it can have some merit or reward. We can easily think of instances where we see this strategy deployed, for example when suffering is seen as a necessary evil for reaching some (socio-political) goal. Peter Sloterdijk in this regard speaks of a *cynicism of means*, where every means is deemed justifiable in the attainment of some utopian, visionary goal or some conception of 'progress'.<sup>158</sup> Sloterdijk sees this as a total instrumentalization deployed for utopian reasons. The suffering of human beings is then imbedded with a historical main course, and suffering is subsequently seen as a true and inevitable function of

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, pp. 94-5

<sup>156</sup> Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 149

<sup>157</sup> See Levinas in the Dutch program IKON, at approximately 7.55 minutes via the url:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQPjVT3WU5I>

<sup>158</sup> Sloterdijk, 2013, pp. 254, 258 & pp. 653-4

progress. Suffering as such becomes strategy. Sloterdijk further argues that as soon as we strive for “rational” ends and combine knowledge and power to reach those ends, consciousness will reach a cynical, and indifferent state, thus becoming selfish and inconsiderate of the suffering of others.<sup>159</sup> Like with Levinas, all distinction between good and evil then disappears, detaching politics from ethics. This theodicy, for Sloterdijk, results in a cynicism of goals as well.

Suffering, in short, becomes a price to pay for the achievement of reason, spiritual refinement, the health of the collective body or some other (social) utility. When it comes to striving to make the social body more healthy, the sociologist Willem Schinkel speaks of social hypochondria, a condition in which a society becomes obsessed over its own health. Society then nervously starts to analyze its ‘body’ with the use of statistics and social scientific research, in the attempt to find what might ail this social body. When society thinks to have diagnosed the problem, it tries to purge all allegedly disease-ridden parts of its body through a purification process.<sup>160</sup> Levinasian we might anticipate this will then only lead to the exclusion of the other, especially of any third party seen as other, as an alterity that must be gotten rid of. And we of course see this tendency in Nazism.<sup>161</sup>

The danger of all these different attempts to ascribe meaning to suffering, Levinas objects, is that pain loses its modality of uselessness. But, he says, however one tries to dress up pain and suffering with meaning, the meaninglessness of pain still shows itself “*beneath the reasonable forms espoused by social “uses” of suffering[.]*” This is proven by all the arbitrariness, failures and other aberrations within our institutions such as the justice-system, in wars, in oppressive states and natural catastrophes.<sup>162</sup>

Levinas notices an inclination within Western humanity to even conjure up a metaphysical order and ethics in the attempt to endow meaning to suffering. By appealing to a metaphysical finality, such as a belief in progress, suffering can be made comprehensible, and made fitting to some “*grand design*”. This tendency, for Levinas, is a component of the self-consciousness of European humanity, at least up to the trails of the twentieth century. Levinas also sees this propensity in theodicy, where suffering is explained away by reference to some sin.<sup>163</sup>

This kind of theodicy ends, however, in the twentieth century, where we see a destruction of “*all balance between Western thought’s explicit and implicit theodicy and the forms that suffering and its evil are taking on in the very unfolding of this century.*” All the horrors of the twentieth century, makes it a century “*that is drawing to a close in the obsessive fear of the return of everything these barbaric names stood for: suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason set limits to, in the exasperation of a reason become political from all ethics.*” Levinas here seems to denote that as soon as politics take on a totalitarian form, like with Nazism, it becomes completely detached from ethics, as Sloterdijk also shows. Furthermore, the horrors of Auschwitz for Levinas were so appalling, that there was no correspondence between suffering and any theodicy anymore.<sup>164</sup>

With the extermination of the Jews, something more extreme is going on for Levinas than the killing of people for “rational” ends such as power, territory, or wealth. Quoting Emil Fackenheim, the extermination of the Jews seems to him an annihilation for the sake of annihilation. This makes the situation of the victims rather unique. Where others have been murdered for their race, their faith or for other reasons, the Jews died for reasons unrelated to their faith, but also not for reasons unrelated to their faith. They were killed because of the Jewish faith of their grandparents. So the meaninglessness of suffering, for Levinas, thus seems to take on even more extreme forms. This

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid, p. 249

<sup>160</sup> Schinkel, 2007

<sup>161</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 95

<sup>162</sup> Ibid

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, p. 96

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, pp. 97-98

radical end of theodicy, for Levinas reveals *“the unjustifiable character of suffering in the other”* making it an absolute outrage to justify the suffering of my neighbor. Levinas again emphasizes that the uselessness of suffering, is in principal the pain of the other. The justification thereof, Levinas sees as the source of all immorality. And being for-the-other, Levinas again brings to our attention, *“is the most profound adventure of subjectivity, its ultimate intimacy.”*<sup>165</sup>

The useless pain that appears throughout the twentieth century for Levinas poses a philosophical problem, namely what meaning religiosity and human morality of goodness can continue to have after the end of theodicy.<sup>166</sup> The solution of Levinas certainly does not lie in renouncing God from the extermination camps, whereas many authors claim God to have been absent exactly within those camps. For Levinas this would amount to forgetting the ethical message of the Bible, which would only help the criminal enterprise of National Socialism. Instead, the Jews have an obligation to live and to remain Jewish, also in their faith.<sup>167</sup>

Faced with all the cruelties mentioned, humankind is called upon not to become indifferent, to not abandon the world to useless suffering, *“leaving it to the political fatality – or drifting of blind forces that inflict misfortune on the weak and conquered.”* Humanity’s task is now to use its resources to be compassionate, inspired by the suffering of the *I* caused by the suffering of the other, which then no longer will be suffering for nothing.

In the final paragraph, Levinas tries to envision an interhuman order, in which suffering is envisaged by restoring it to the dimensions of meaning, namely by placing it within the intersubjectivity of the interhuman. The inter-human, for Levinas cannot be simply defined, however, as a multiplicity of consciousnesses, or from a socio-political perspective. The inter-human, for him, *“lies in a non-indifference of one for another, but before the reciprocity of this responsibility, which will be inscribed in impersonal laws, comes to be superimposed on the pure altruism of this responsibility inscribed in the ethical position of the I qua I.”* The ethical relation Levinas thus envisions is prior to any form of contractarianism, or other social principal of order. The inter-human relational way of being would instead consist of the alacrity to help one another, *“before the astonishing alterity of the other has been banalized or dimmed down to a simple exchange of courtesies that has become established as an “interpersonal commerce” of customs.”* When taking up responsibility, one should not be concerned with reciprocity, help is offered from a disinterested disposition.<sup>168</sup> This is fundamental to Levinas’ ethics.

Peter Sloterdijk offers another solution for the strategic use of suffering. Part of his solution consists first of in becoming more modest and humble in our goals. This means we must let go of the mentality and spirit of far-reaching goals - typical of modernity - which we can only arrive at when we realize that life in itself is inherently meaningless and as a result, we will consider suffering to be as meaningless as well. We must curb our will to power and the power to will and desire. Additionally, we must reveal the absurdity and immense indulgence of our modern desires and needs. For Sloterdijk, this would end our striving to attain ‘good goals’ with ‘bad means’. Another author I will just briefly mention here, Amy Allen, states that the solution for forming a more ethical relationship with Others (by which she also means (post)colonial others) also lies in abandoning our complicity to the rhetoric of Eurocentric modernity and our colonial logics. Only when we abandon our asymmetrical power relations that are the result thereof will we stand a chance of forming a responsible relationship with the other.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid, p. 99

<sup>166</sup> Ibid

<sup>167</sup> Ibid

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, pp. 100-1

<sup>169</sup> Allen, 2016, pp. 209-13

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