Memory and the Immemorial in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

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In choosing to analyze Levinas' reflection on the theme of "memory and the immemorial", my purpose in the following pages will be less to engage in an exegesis of his thought than to examine, in its perspective, the theme of memory itself. Levinas elaborated his interpretation of memory in its relation to the immemorial above all in his work *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (*Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*), first published in 1978 and translated into English twenty years later. It is on this work that my analysis will focus. Levinas proposes in this work to distinguish his interpretation of memory from the predominant conceptions of memory that had been elaborated in different ways by earlier philosophical traditions and my primary task will be to reflect on the sense and scope of memory - its place in the "domain of being", according to Levinas' formulation - by indicating in light of these traditions what appears to me to be the problematic implications of the idea of memory that Levinas develops.

What is remarkable in Levinas' idea of memory in the work *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* is the radicalism of the dichotomy he establishes between memory, on one hand, and the "immemorial" on the other. And, far from an isolated aspect of his thinking, this dichotomy is founded on a presupposition which reaches to the heart of his philosophy: the irreducible distinction he draws between immanence and transcendence, between "essence" and what is beyond essence. Given that for Levinas essence signifies "being, which is different from entities" (*l'être différent de l'étant*)[1], the same radicalism which distinguishes essence and what is beyond essence separates being and what is "otherwise than being".

[1] Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Kluwer/Livre de poche: Dordrecht/Paris, 1978), p. 9. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

This dichotomy between being and otherwise than being, corresponding to that between memory and the immemorial, is reaffirmed throughout the work *Autrement qu'être*, and its radicalism is continually reinforced. This dichotomy concerns, on one hand, the order of being, the domain of the ego with its mundane desires and needs, its "interests" through which, as multifarious expressions of effort, *conatus*, modern philosophers in the wake of Hobbes and of Spinoza have interpreted the human essence. From Levinas' perspective, as we will illustrate more closely, the ego's interest, plunged into the past by way of memory, orients the quest to retrieve elapsed time in the form of history and of historiography. The immemorial, on the other hand, extends its reach beyond essence and beyond the interests of this world: it is "otherwise than being", rigorously distinguished from the worldly effort or *conatus* which, by all available means, seeks to persevere in its being. Incapable of being inscribed in memory and in history, the "immemorial" evokes for Levinas "a responsibility which comes from before and reaches beyond what is held in the suspense of an epoch".[2] And, it is in terms of this responsibility, emanating from an immemorial commandment, from an injunction beyond essence and "sundered from being and its history",[3] that Levinas invokes "the Good" or "goodness".

This *radicalism* in Levinas' distinction between the immemorial, on one hand, interpreted as a source of goodness beyond being or essence and, on the other hand, memory, like history, understood in terms of effort directed toward worldly interests, will orient my investigation of the theme of memory in the perspective of Levinas. I will first examine the relation between memory and of the immemorial in his thought and then turn to that between the immemorial and the historical. An analysis of the radicalism of the dichotomy which distinguishes memory and history from the immemorial will set up the framework for my concluding reflection on the theme of memory that Levinas' philosophy inspires.

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2 "…qui vient d'en deçà et va au-delà de ce qui tient dans le suspens d'une époque"; *Ibid*., p.154.

3 "…en rupture avec l'être et avec son histoire"; *Ibid*., p.36.

I. Memory and the Immemorial

At the beginning of his book, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Levinas introduces the dichotomy between essence and what is beyond essence, corresponding to that between memory and the immemorial, in relation to a passage in the sixth book of Plato's *Republic*. As Levinas writes, Plato was the philosopher who posited that the Good is beyond essence. And, in his analysis of Plato, Levinas takes up the task of rethinking this distinction between the Good and being or essence, in order to radicalize it. The significance of this radicalization comes to light, I believe, where Levinas doubts the possibility of grasping the Good - the "immemorial" Good - by way of memory, even if, in the Platonic tradition, the idea of the Good was retrievable through *reminiscence*. Let us examine the precise implications of Levinas' radicalization of the Platonic position, in which his profound ambivalence toward the ancient Greek author comes to expression.

We recall the passage in the sixth book of Plato's *Republic* which Levinas here interprets. In this passage, Socrates says to Glaucon:

> "Admit also that intelligible things do not only depend upon the Good for their intelligibility but also depend upon it for their being and their essence, although the Good is not at all essence, but is high above it (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσιας) in dignity and in power".[4]

In the context of this Platonic dialogue, we recall Glaucon's response to Socrates upon hearing this unusual claim that the Good is "beyond essence in dignity and in power". According to Plato, Glaucon replied to Socrates in a "ridiculous" manner: "May the heavens save us, the hyperbole ('υπερβολή) could never go farther!" And Socrates, as Plato records, in introducing this

[4] Plato, *The Republic*, vol. II, 509b (Cambridge, Mass: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard, 1980), p. 106-107. Levinas had already interpreted this notion of the Good beyond essence in his earlier work, *Totalité et infini* (Kluwer: Dordrecht, 1988), p. 76. On the variety of 20th century Jewish philosophical commentaries on this passage in Plato's *Republic*, see my article "Après Davos. L'éthique à l'épreuve du politique chez Ernst Cassirer et Emmanuel Levinas", *Philosophie et Judaïsme*, *Critique*, 728-729, January/February, 2008, p. 145-157.

suggestion of a hyperbole or exaggeration, *attenuates* the radicalism of this distinction when he responds: "The fault is yours […] for compelling me to utter my thoughts about it".[5] Yet Levinas, far from moderating this radicalism, reinforces it. How are we to interpret this radicalization?

Plato, while situating the Good beyond being in dignity and power, made of it, as Levinas comments in critical perspective, an "idea".[6] Moreover, if in the context of *The Republic*, Plato posited the supremacy of this idea in relation to the True and the Beautiful, like these latter ideas it participates in "essence", as the determining principle of essence. And, as Plato's readers will readily recognize, this mediation between the idea of the Good and essence is accomplished, notably in the *Phaedo* and the *Meno*, through *memory* conceived as *reminiscence*. In this perspective, our ability to recognize the Good, the True and the Beautiful, even in their weak reflection in ordinary sense experience, depends upon a recollection of these ideas, embedded in the soul before all experience. Hence Levinas' radicalization of the Platonic distinction between the Good and essence, by interpreting the Good as "otherwise than being", calls for a dissociation of the Good from the objects of any possible reminiscence. The Good is identified, in other words, with the immemorial which no reminiscence is able to recall. "The Good which reigns in its goodness", as Levinas writes, "cannot enter into the present of consciousness, even were it to be remembered".[7] In these terms, Levinas relates subjectivity to goodness, conceiving it to be a necessary source of meaningfulness of the subject, and he situates the subject, "in an immemorial time which no reminiscence might

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5 Plato, *The Republic*, vol. II, 509b, p. 107. In a footnote to this translation of the English edition of this dialogue, Paul Shorey aptly comments that, in the face of this hyperbole, "the dramatic humour of Glaucon's surprise is Plato's way of smiling at himself"; Plato, *The Republic*, p. 107n.

6 Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être*, p. 36. In *Totalité et infini*, p. 43, Levinas had already raised the decisive question in regard to Plato: "The filiation between the Soul and the Ideas upon which the *Phaedo* insists is it but an idealist metaphor expressing the permeability of being to thought?"; "La parenté entre l'Âme et les Idées sur laquelle insiste le *Phédon*, n'est-elle qu'une métaphore idéaliste exprimant la perméabilité de l'être à la pensée?" Even more radically than *Totalité et infini*, *Autrement qu'être* leaves little doubt that the answer must be in the affirmative.

7 "Le Bien qui règne dans sa bonté ne peut entrer dans le présent de la conscience, fût-il remémoré"; *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, p. 36.

retrieve as an a priori".[8] Then, in a different context, Levinas distinguishes the Platonic dialogue from the drama in which philosophers are engaged and from the intersubjective movement that they elicit since, according to him, the "Platonic dialogue is reminiscence of a drama rather than the drama itself".[9]

These different references illustrate how radically Levinas places in question the traditional Platonic role of reminiscence in its recall of the idea of the Good, and participating in essence as the principle that determines it. We are faced, on one side, with immemorial goodness and, on the other, with essence which is an object of remembrance. Between memory and the immemorial, between being and what is beyond being, the unique point of contact which reveals itself is the drama of encounter with the other, eliciting the pure responsibility of the one for the other. What is significant here for us is less the fundamental role of this responsibility for Levinas' notion of ethics than its implications for the interpretation of memory. And, in the context of the work *Autrement qu'être*, these implications seem to me to be quite clear: once Levinas deflates the Platonic tradition of reminiscence to radicalize the Platonic doctrine of a Good beyond essence, memory must forfeit any fundamental status - above all in the sphere of ethics. In the very first pages of this work, memory is attributed to the domain of essence, in the service of effort, *conatus*, and of its interest in persevering in its being by all possible means. Memory is thus rooted in a *conatus* that finds its typical expression, as Levinas writes in another context, in the philosophy of Spinoza.[10]

What are the consequences of this dependence of memory on being for the theory of memory that Levinas proposes? We recall the theory of

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8 "… dans un temps immémorial qu'une réminiscence ne saurait récupérer comme a priori"; *Ibid.*, p. 47.

9 [le] dialogue platonicien est réminiscence d'un drame plutôt que ce drame même"; *Ibid.*, p. 39.

10 In the work *Noms propres* Levinas refers to a "still natural tension of pure being itself that we have termed above egoism, which is not a vile flaw in the subject, but its ontology, and which we find expressed in the sixth proposition of the third part of the *Ethics* of Spinoza: 'each being expends all its efforts, as far as possible, toward persevering in its being' […]" ("tension encore naturelle de l'être pur lui-même que nous avons appelé plus haut égoïsme, lequel n'est pas un vilain défaut du sujet, mais son ontologie et que nous trouvons dans la sixième proposition de la 3ème partie de l'*Ethique* de Spinoza: 'Chaque être fait tous ses efforts autant qu'il est en lui, pour persévérer dans son être'[...]"); Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1976), p. 82.

memory proposed by Spinoza, which reinterpreted a long tradition in the framework of the *Ethics* that, in its broad lines, may be traced back to Aristotle: far from drawing on the doctrine of reminiscence of eternal ideas, memory for this tradition records only the traces of images perceived by the senses. Like imagination, memory is capable of producing an image independently of the perceived object, but one which, unlike the caprices of fantasy, presupposes a faithful reproduction of the image. In view of this interpretation of memory derived from the perceptual image, it is perhaps not surprising to encounter, in one of the rare passages of the work *Autrement qu'être* dealing with this seminal interpretation of the reproduction of images in the framework of what Levinas terms animation or "psyche" (*psychisme*), and which for him, significantly, must be distinguished from concern for the other, from ethical responsibility. In this context, analysis focuses on a retrieval of the image of being as "presence" or "absence", where memory, like imagination, derives from sense objects once present to perception.[11] If we interpret "being" here, as Levinas does at other points in this work, in terms of the effort to persevere in being - of Spinoza's *conatus* - this notion of memory is entirely consistent with Levinas' overall interpretation: memory which, like perception and imagination, is oriented through the fundamental human effort to persevere in being, is characterized by its "interestedness" (*intéressement*). It is in this precise sense that the representations of memory can never attain the trace of the immemorial from which they are radically distinguished. In Levinas' telling words, the immemorial is "inconvertible into memory".[12]

II. History and the Immemorial

Levinas' depreciation of memory in favor of the immemorial calls at the same time for a parallel devaluation of history. Like memory, history corresponds to a time which is representable or "recoverable" (*récupérable*). A passage from *Autrement qu'être* eloquently states what he takes to be this correspondence between memory and history:

"The one nearby strikes me before striking me, as if I had

[11] *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, p. 115.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

> heard him before he spoke. Anachronism which attests a temporality different from that in which consciousness is articulated. It undoes the *recoverable time* of history and of memory where representation is continuous. If, indeed, in all experience the account of fact precedes the present of experience, memory or history or the extra-temporality of the a priori recovers the gap and creates a correlation between this past and this present. In the proximity, a commandment is heard coming from an immemorial past: one which never was present, and which began aside from any liberty. This *way* of the one nearby is the face (*visage*)."[13]

In this key passage taken from the book *Autrement qu'être*, we find, in regard to history, the same radical distinction from the immemorial that separated the immemorial from memory. And the "history" to which Levinas refers here corresponds in his vocabulary to the two senses that the term history conveys: history as *res gestae*, comprising the experience of peoples – even where this history is only implicit or partially preserved - and as *historia rerum gestarum*, or the retrieval and narration of this historical experience.[14] For Levinas, history, much like memory, operates in the sphere of essence or of the interest of being, which seeks by all possible means to persevere in its being. Like memory, history for Levinas can only prove resourceless before the immemorial.

It is this resourcelessness which leads me to my principal question: why does Levinas insist with such intransigence on this radical distinction

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[13] "Le prochain me frappe avant de me frapper comme si je l'avais entendu avant qu'il ne parle. Anachronisme qui atteste une temporalité différente de celle qui scande la conscience. Elle démonte le *temps récupérable* de l'histoire et de la mémoire où la représentation se continue. Si, en effet, dans toute expérience, la facture du fait précède le présent de l'expérience, la mémoire ou l'histoire ou l'extra-temporalité de l'a priori, récupère l'écart et crée une corrélation entre ce passé et ce présent. Dans la proximité s'entend un commandement venu comme d'un passé immémorial: qui ne fut jamais présent, qui n'a commencé dans aucune liberté. Cette *façon* du prochain est visage."; *Ibid*., p. 141.

[14] Hence Levinas associates memory at times with history and at others with historiography, cf. *Ibid*., p. 140-41.

between the immemorial and the time of memory, both personal and historical?

In order to comprehend this depreciation of memory, it might be tempting to invoke the terrible fact witnessed by a memory at once personal and historical, and recalled by Levinas in his dedication at the beginning of *Autrement qu'être*: "To the memory", Levinas writes,

> "of the closest among those of the six million who were murdered by the National-Socialists, beside the millions upon millions of human beings of all persuasions and of all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other human, of the same anti-Semitism".[15] Faced with the enormity of this crime and of the ethical perplexity it raises, it is evident that the representations of memory or of history can only manifest their helplessness.

And yet, to locate the principle source of Levinas' radicalism, we should not insist too exclusively on the role of memory or of history. The claim of Levinas' work, after all, concerns the *immemorial*, and it raises the challenge of *transcendence* in regard to memory and history, with their source in the effort of being which seeks to persevere in its being. If Levinas draws such a radical distinction between the immemorial and memory and history, it is to maintain the infinite uniqueness of the immemorial before the frailty of mnemonic or historical representations. Capable only of focusing on the concatenation of images or of facts, these representations for him necessarily pass by the non-phenomenal proximity of the Good before being, lying entirely outside their purview. This transcendence, expressed through the face of the other, underlies the most intimate identity of the self. And the presentiment of this transcendence underlying the self, evokes for Levinas the "enigma of the infinite" which distinguishes it, in calling on the name of God, from the phenomenality of essence.[16]

Levinas aims here to clear a way toward Divine transcendence, which

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[15] A la mémoire des êtres les plus proches parmi les six millions d'assassinés par les nationaux-socialistes, à côté des millions et des millions d'humains de toutes confessions et de toutes nations, victimes de la même haine de l'autre homme, du même antisémitisme."; *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 243.

at the same time involves the injunction of the ethical. This accounts for his opposition to Kierkegaard's paradox which underlines, in the face of the divine commandment, the *limit* of all ethical commands. Indeed, according to Kierkegaard's interpretation, the divine command requiring Abraham to sacrifice his son clearly illustrated that an absolute injunction may require what ethics forbids. [17] At the same time, Levinas' hostility is still more sharply directed against Kierkegaard's main adversary, whose ethical reflection proves even more formidable for Levinas than the paradoxical formulations of the Danish philosopher. This adversary is indeed Spinoza, for whom the possibility of an ethical interpretation of God may be elaborated only on the basis of a *negation* of any form of transcendence as such. We recognize here Spinoza's critique of the supernatural and the miraculous, as of all belief in occult powers. In the name of transcendence, such occult powers had often been invoked to fuel the credibility of the superstitious multitude, proving the best of means, as Spinoza had demonstrated in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, of dominating the multitude for political purposes. This is why, in Spinoza's view, true ethics requires a radical critique of all supernatural or transcendent claims of religion.

Levinas was always prudent in his references to God and very much aware of the danger of instrumentalizing faith in function of the interests of this world. For him, Divine transcendence can in no way be separated from ethical proximity. But it is this emphasis on transcendence - on its exceptional, extra-vagant, and enigmatic otherness - which most directly accounts for his attitude toward history: in referring everything to the immanent representations of being, history, like memory, eliminates the enigma of a transcendence which can in no way be accounted for in terms of such representations. Hence the critique directed by Spinozist ethics against the miraculous and, above all, against its instrumentalization in the form of superstition, could only be made at the cost of relegating all human concern to the domain of immanence. Spinoza's thought, as Levinas recognizes,

[17] Emmanuel Levinas, *Noms propres*, p. 86-87; Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness unto Death, trans. Walter Lowrie* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 64-77.

inspired a broad current of historical-critical study of the Bible, which played a prominent role in the development of the modern human sciences. As Levinas writes in commenting on the spirituality of Judaism in the book *Difficile liberté*:

> "The exceptional essence of Judaism, inscribed in square-shaped letters and illuminating living faces, at once an ancient doctrine and contemporary history, does it not risk favoring a mythical vision of a spirituality which is nevertheless accessible to analysis? Objective science - sociology, history, philology - aims to reduce the exception to a rule. Western Jews were the promoters of this research. The *Theologico-Political Treatise* of Spinoza, already at the end of the 17th century, introduced the critical reading of scripture. At the beginning of the 19th century, in Germany, the founders of the famous *Wissenschaft des Judentums* transformed holy scripture into pure documents."[18]

If Levinas aims in his writings toward a transcendence beyond the immanence of being which seeks to persevere in its being, it is above all in an effort to find an alternative to Spinozist immanence and to what Levinas names the interestedness of *conatus* (*intéressement du conatus*).

And this transcendence which for him is the necessary precondition of the ethical injunction, radically opposes the idea of memory and of history inherited from a tradition which, in its refusal of all that cannot be included in the sphere of immanence, found its fundamental expression in Spinoza's

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[18] "L'essence exceptionnelle du Judaïsme - déposée en des lettres carrées et éclairant des visages vivants, à la fois doctrine ancienne et histoire contemporaine, ne risque-t-elle pas de favoriser une vision mythique d'une spiritualité pourtant accessible à l'analyse? La science objective - sociologie, histoire, philologie - s'efforce à réduire l'exception à la règle. Les Juifs occidentaux furent les promoteurs de cette recherche. Le *Traité théologico-politique* de Spinoza, dès la fin du 17ème siècle, instaure la lecture critique des Ecritures. Au début du 19ème siècle, en Allemagne, les fondateurs de la fameuse *Wissenschaft des Judentums* transformèrent les Ecritures saintes en purs documents."; Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963), p. 43.

philosophy.[19]

Must we limit our scope, however, to a choice between Spinozist immanence and a philosophy of transcendence as Levinas conceives of it? To my mind, the gap Levinas establishes between immanence and transcendence hardly permits us to place in perspective the essential character of memory - whether interpreted as personal memory or the historical memory of peoples. In relegating memory to the domain of being which seeks to persevere in its being, in making it a function of interests in the world, Levinas leaves little space for memory beyond a functionalized view of its operation in the elaboration of images derived from perception, once the perceptual object is absent. But then, how might historical experience corresponding to this theory of memory recall, at the level of collective existence, more than the mere concatenation of representations that memory provides? The insistence on transcendence, not as a source of faith - a theme which lies beyond what concerns me here - but as fundamentally constitutive of the self, does it not run the risk of forgetting the time of memory and of history in which the identity of the self finds a living source? Does Levinas' radicalism not risk obscuring the fact that the ethical sources upon which this identity draws flow from an age-old *ethos*, from a memory and a history which in their often implicit significance and their symbolic force are by no means equivalent to simple images or representations? My purpose here is certainly not to overturn Levinas' interpretation by attempting to derive the ethical norm from an historical source - an impossible task, as I conceive of it - but to retain an intermediary space between memory and history, on one side, and ethical goodness, on the other.[20]

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[19] In the words of the first sentences of Leo Strauss' study of this theme, first published in German in 1930: "In our time scholars generally study the Bible in the manner in which they study any other book. As is generally admitted, Spinoza more than any other man laid the foundation for this kind of Biblical study." Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), p. 35.

[20] What seems particularly paradoxical to me in this respect is Levinas' insistence on a radical distinction between memory or history and ethics in *Autrement qu'être* which is particularly difficult to reconcile with the accent he himself places on the role of the Talmudic tradition in his volumes of *Leçons talmudiques*.

It would reach beyond the confines of my present argument to propose a full elaboration of this idea of memory and history, which is currently a topic of a work in progress on the symbolic dimension of collective memory.[21] I readily acknowledge the importance, for me, of Levinas' renewal of ethical philosophy, in spite of this point of disagreement.

I will conclude my remarks with an example which will permit me to illustrate this broad interpretation of memorial time, also comprising that of history. It is taken from the narrative of the Jewish *Haggadah*, which Levinas knew so well. Repeated orally on the occasion of Passover, this narrative has become significant for Jews, Christians and Moslems alike:

> "This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate in the Land of Egypt. Let anyone who is hungry come and eat. Let anyone who is in want come and celebrate the Passover."

Constitutive of memory and of history, of multiple memories and multiple histories, such an injunction to remember and to relive an original historical event has nothing to fear from critical-historical analysis. And I also dare to believe that this injunction, beyond any question of the "authenticity" of its transcendent source, might provide firm support for ethical identity in its profoundest universal sense.

[21] See in this regard my preliminary efforts in this direction in the essay "Analyzing Collective Memory", in Doron Mendels, ed., *On Memory: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 101-116.