I. ONGOING CONVERSATION ON LEVINAS' METAPHYSICS, CONTINUATION FROM VOL. III, NO. 1

Ethics in an Extra-Moral Sense

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To present in a single conference a line of thought as strong, as original, and as peculiar as that of Emmanuel Levinas involves a major difficulty. How indeed do we know where to begin, from what point of view to enter the subject, from which angle to introduce it? Every decision runs the risk of seeming arbitrary, every determined choice of seeming exclusive or forced. However, a choice has to be made, a mode of exposition has to be decided upon. If we reflect upon it somewhat, it does not seem to be the least judicious option to depart from that which is not Levinas's thought, but which is nevertheless often unjustly held to be so. Maybe, in this way, we can shed light upon a paradox which is so surprising that it seems to lead to some redoutable misinterpretations here and there. Perhaps to signal them is not the worst possible way of accessing an oeuvre charged with disdain and overwhelmed with simplified yet dominating readings.

The register where this line of thought is massively inscribed, the space of which its actuality has seemed to impose the motifs is, as we all know, "ethics". As far as this term of ethics and its dominant uses is concerned, we have to be careful from the outset not be misled. The reception of Levinas's oeuvre – understood in a broad sense, i.e. as a public of non-philosophers in the strict sense of the word, a public of non-specialists – had to deal with a conceptuality that is so new that it has, and continues to have, the reputation of being difficult. In this reception, the theme of ethics and

the theme, more or less concomitant, of responsibility have come to add to one another as it were spontaneously, and with good right. In Levinas's own time and its outdated modalities, the reception of his work was largely reactive. If one were to reconstitute its history in the moving panorama of philosophical ideas, one would notice that Levinas, for a good thirty years, was neither read nor heard, except by a few "amateurs" who went to listen to him at Jean Wahl's Collège philosophique, or at the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale for his talmudic Saturday morning lectures. Marked by Marxism and existentialism, and after that by structuralism, over-determined by the political context (the Cold War, colonial wars, the mobilizing theme of "changing the world"), the grand debates in France after the Second World War had no knowledge of him, whereas he most certainly had knowledge of them, as his articles show us very clearly. If we take some distance, we can more easily understand this silence surrounding his oeuvre in its ecumenical reception.

The sixties and seventies were highly sensitive to history and its movements, that is to say, to what Levinas defines as "totality". His times were concerned with urgent and collective affairs in which the individual could only give "meaning" to itself by subordinating itself to a project which exceeded and encompassed it, to a universal and a worldwide revolutionary project. A meditation on the nature of Levinas, concerning my responsibility for a singular other, whatever the latter does, up to the point where I can be held responsible for his very responsibility, and focusing on the absolute uniqueness of the responsive subjectivity, could not but appear as misplaced and in need of actualization in the context of that time. The climate which subsequently allowed Levinas to be read was marked by a general recession of the human sciences, especially of Marxism and structuralism which dominated the seventies – a recession which is itself tied up with the world history, with planetary political events and, specifically, with the fall of communism. The new ideological landscape resulting from these conditions can be described as the condemnation to death of the death of the subject. According to the "structural-marxist" themes (or sometimes the structuralo-marxist vulgate), man is being acted upon rather than acting himself, and subjects merely appear as carriers of functions, as an assembly

of discourses and dispositions, as organizations, that is to say, as the expression of a process of which they are nothing but the unconscious and determined carriers. Putting forward a quasi-paroxystic form of responsibility, of my own-most responsibility, exceeding all determinations to which I may be subjected, Levinas seems to authorize – unlike the line of thought which had been dominant all along, and at a specific moment in intellectual but also in political, social, ideological history – some sort of a self-reappropriation of the subject, of its acting individuality, of its capacity of autonomous initiative.

But, whereas Levinas's thought appears as credible, from several perspectives a real and profound contradiction seems to be in place. The Levinasian responsibility in no way results from an active "I want". It rather constitutes an original predetermination of the subject by means of which the subject is, upon closer look, more determined than it is by the unconscious or the relations of production. In the light of this contradiction, the Levinasian body of ideas runs the risk of being simplified, schematized and fixed as a moral quasi-ideology corresponding in a Hegelian manner to an era of universal history (of which the necessity and legitimacy is by the way understandable), to a determined moment of this history which today is revolutionized itself. This intermediary era is that of altruist and humanitarian morals, that of the verbal inflation of a divided ethics confused with deontological codes, that of the rediscovery of the enterprise, the market, but also of human rights. An era of "an exhibition of ethics", as Plato describes constitutions, concerning democracy. An era where one could, for example, speak of an ethics of journalism, a medical ethics, an employer's ethics, all of which are hardly linked up with one another. Consequently, the theoretical panorama in which they are inscribed, with its disassembled and often chaotic elements, appears as a tower of Babel. Ethics of discourse, communicational ethics, neo-aristotelism, utilitarianism, contractualism, communitarianism, differentialism, meta-ethical reflection, applied ethics – so many moral positions which are practical, sectorial and competitive, which undoubtedly have their effective importance from a theoretical and practical point of view, from the point of view of foundation and of the question of comportment, but all of whom have nothing in common with the ethics of which Levinas constitutes the pivot of all thinking about subjectivity.

The ambition of the author of Otherwise Than Being, indeed, is not to put forward (within the used range of philosophical disciplines, from epistemology to anthropology over hermeneutics) a new theory of ethics as the study of ethos, an analysis of average and general human behavior. Reacting against a number of prejudices or established readings, we have to begin by emphatically stating that Levinas does not propose a moral philosophy. He enjoins us even to be careful never to be the "victim" of it; those are the first words of *Totality and Infinity*. In order to read him well, then, we have to keep ourselves from the hurried and dangerous, let us say it as it is, attempt to find in his body of ideas a prescriptive ethics comprising laws or normative regulations susceptible of improving the moral quality of a given historical community. This preliminary clarification is necessary and very important. Levinas's ethics never engages in a more or less coherent systematization of the entirety of regulations for the behavior of a human group. Neither does he found the possibility of a rational justification of moral norms through or under a unifying principle. It is thus really required to understand and interpret his ethics in its extra-moral sense.

What does this thinking aim at, what does it endeavor in? What Levinas is attempting is to express the "sense" of "what is human in man" – an expression pointing to the "non-synthesizable", as he puts it, i.e. that aspect of and in man which never allows itself to be totalized without remainder nor to be resumed in a totality of "meaning". Levinas's body of ideas constitutes an Ethics of Ethics, according to Derrida[1], or an ethics without law, without concept, without morality, and which precedes its determination in laws, in concepts, and in morals. We are less dealing with outlining the foundations of the subjectivity than we are with returning to its arch-origin along the uncertain axis of the relationships of man to man. Levinasian ethics proposes to think of this interhuman relationship as an encounter, something unexpected, the event of a break-in, and more radically even, as a consequence, a relation to the infinite, of which the face – as the site of the break-in – in its absolute denudation, would be the trace, i.e. the non-site. As such, the face resists all definition. To define the face would be to forget about the infinite it upholds in the finitization of its definition. In other

[1] *L'écriture et la différence,* Seuil, 1967, p. 164.

words, if the other is what he is, that is, if he is defined in any way whatsoever, if he is enclosed in any sort of essence, he is no longer the other, he is what he is, he is his own being. As such, in his alterity of the singular subject, we never encounter his characteristics of being, characteristics which are and which make up the other, but rather his face as nudity "without qualities", without being identifiable.

Consequently, the other is nothing but his face.

One might immediately point out that the usage of the verb *to be* as a "predicate" for the other's "essence" as a face most obviously brings about a considerable difficulty, since the face is employed as its definition. All Levinasian philosophizing is conducted with a sharp attention to "the sealed destiny to which the human being from the outset confines the other's language of the being"[2] while incessantly trying to retract the fatal said where our language definitively fossilizes. This form of prudence makes up his philosophical style and gives his writing an inimitable respiration, breath and breathlessness, anger and disillusion. Rather than encouraging, like many of his contemporaries, the "end" of a philosophy which is ever too metaphysical, Levinas overloads philosophy. To philosophy, he adds an historical effort, while exasperating it when trying to retract it with the exaggeration that animates it by means of what he calls "his emphasis" or his "exasperation" through "excess of expression". For Levinas, this retracting accompaniment of philosophy consists of "passing from an idea to its superlative"[3].

In this way, he carries the contents of philosophy beyond themselves. That is to say, basically, he investigates into and expresses the "truth" of the ontological language which makes up these contents. But he transposes the "truth" of this inquiry and of this expression into the "always" of a promise, of a future, of a love[4]. One could say descriptively that he makes a shift from the essence to the time of the essence; from the truth in philosophy to the temporality of a promise; from the *anankê stenai*, where concepts stand,

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2 *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Livre de Poche, p. 16.

3 *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Vrin, 1992; pp. 141-142.

4 *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Livre de poche, p. 53 (*AE*) : "The truth promises itself. Always promised, always future, always loved, the truth is to be found in the promise and the love of wisdom…" (Cited in French in the original.)

to continuous diachrony. Levinas thus in no way intends to do away with philosophy as conducted in the accepted ways and with what it says. Rather, he invents for it an unprecedented characterization when interrupting it, that is, when desynchronizing it. Philosophy indeed guarantees its prestige as a synchrony of the being and as a line of thought where Levinas finds nothing but a "dialectical" silence where all signification returns and turns back upon itself. But if this is the case, it is equally necessary that from the depths of this silence, from what makes this silence be, something rises up which already disturbs it, which converts it, something to the effect of a pre-synchronic change of lanes, of a gravity, as Levinas also puts it. A Saying preceding everything Said, a doing-being rather than a being has to impose itself and bring into existence its "destructure"[5]. This can only happen in a movement of composition, of decomposition and recomposition – the Saying is "turn and turn about affirmation and retraction" of the Said[6]. We must have philosophy – it is indeed the same "must" which Justice requires – in order to discharge of philosophy. If philosophy is allowed to have the "final word", could this final word, which is never spoken in the said and the written logos of philosophy, ever exhaust Saying? Could it totalize an ultimate meaning in a Said and succeed in saying the end of the word? If there is an ethics preceding ethics (an abyss of responsibility preceding our beginning, freedom and presence of mind), there equally is a result following the result, an ultimate following the ultimate – and this is again the abyss of endless and incessant responsibility, without ever getting unjust satisfaction. This infinite of ethics presents itself to philosophical inquiry and to the mode of this inquiry as a challenge, a task, a duty of invention. The act is at the same time conformity to tradition itself – or at least to a tradition inside tradition (Aristotle, Pascal) – and radically heterogeneous to this tradition. Moving from the truth to the truth, Levinas's desynchronizing transposition equally moves from philosophy to philosophy. It creates – both within and beyond philosophy – the adventure of a disproportion, a transcendence, a disinterest. Levinas manifests a disinterest in philosophy in order to venture into the exploration of the ethical structure of all subjectivity.

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5 *Autrement qu'être*, éd. cit., p. 76.

6 *Autrement qu'être*, éd. cit., p. 75 (emphasis added).

To say that the other is the face of the other thus overtaxes the superlativization of every definition, its exasperation in an indefinable, an infinite. This means precisely that the face is not a plastic form, a sensible appearance, a phenomenon; it does not consist of what I see of it, of what I can touch of it. The face is that which remains out of reach of these figures of meaning (of immediate sensibility and intentional signification[7]). Being the face of the other – necessarily of the other, as we shall see – it decides on the entire appearance of the world, it deforms its own form, it invisibilizes its own visibility, it "takes us beyond".[8] The other thus announces itself as a face among the phenomena of the world, and even, more precisely, as that which undoes all phenomenality: a "hole in the world" as Sartre put it in a text dating from before the First World War, entitled Visages. Somehow, the face is not in the world. The relationship between form and deformation, between a phenomenon and its absence, between visibility and elusiveness, this "relation" between unrelatable terms which the face presents, is the trace of the infinite – but of an infinite which is properly in the finite while nevertheless never being present in it. It is exactly this register of full presence and representation that the face invalidates. One could say that the face runs through the trace of that which never appears – the Infinite – while at the same time appearing somehow in-the-finite, in-finite. Maybe literature is more suitable to capture the face than philosophy is. While watching Albertine sleep, Proust's narrator engages in a meditation about this "in-finite": "Underneath this pinkish face I sensed gathering in the form of an abyss the inexhaustible space of the evenings where I had not known Albertine. I could take Albertine on my knees, hold her head in my hands, I could caress it, pass my hands over it for a long time, but, as if I were handling a stone which enclosed the saltiness of the immemorial oceans or the beam of a star, I felt that I was merely touching the closed envelope of a being which from

[7] The original French text ties up "meaning", "sensibility", and "signification" with a play of words relying on the homonymy of the French *sens*.

[8] *Ethique et infini*, Livre de Poche, p. 81.

the inside accessed the infinite"[9].

We could thus say that the face as the face of the other is, properly speaking, the only expression of alterity. There is no other. There is no alterity, in the strong sense of the word, of an object, or of a subject objectively grasped and understood, or of an other which would be another me, because such an alterity is always reduced to the sameness of the consciousness measuring or considering it. Consequently, there is no way for me to experience the face. In the "science of the experience of consciousness" of the phenomenology of spirit, the subject alien to itself – alienated in and through the other – asserts itself in the other's recognition of its free subjectivity. If it loses itself in this assertion, if it loses itself as subjectivity, as freedom, in the pure eternity of its objective being, it recovers nevertheless from this loss which is the condition of this self-reconstruction. None of this, however, in the submission in which the face immerses me; nothing of the order of a Hegelian Erfahrung. The face comes before all possible coming along; it precedes all experience I might have of it when appropriating it, all "enrichment" of my experience of the world and the others. We are speaking of an ordeal. The infinition is an ordeal; it is the ordeal of the other man, the Other as the absolute other, every other and any other (Derrida), the first one who came along[10] (Levinas). That is, insofar as the infinite can be understood, as we have pointed out, as in-finite, in the finite. An other in the same, such is the "structure of subjectivity" according to Levinas, the most intimate mark of the subject's subjectivity, the inscription of the finitude of a trace which will come to disturb it, do violence to it, desubjectivize it. In this descriptive category of subjectivity, in this structure of the Other-in-the-Same, we can discern a few structural traits as far as the subject is concerned. In this way, we can portray what a subject is, as well as the na-

[9] French original: "Alors sous ce visage rosissant je sentais se réserver comme un gouffre l'inexhaustible espace des soirs où je n'avais pas connu Albertine. Je pouvais bien prendre Albertine sur mes genoux, tenir sa tête dans mes mains, je pouvais la caresser, passer longuement mes mains sur elle, mais, comme si j'eusse manié une pierre qui enferme la salure des océans immémoriaux ou le rayon d'une étoile, je sentais que je touchais seulement l'enveloppe close d'un être qui par l'intérieur accédait à l'infini". (*À la recherche du temps perdu*, Pléiade, III, p. 386)

[10] French original: *le premier venu*.

ture of its relation to the other who faces it. I will discuss at least one of these structural traits: a decisive one since it encompasses all of the others and infinitely over-determines them. More precisely, I wish to point out the trait of the asymmetrical nature of the subject's relation (a formulation which now clearly appears to us as far too imprecise to be honest) to the other. An ethical Me/Other relation is only possible in asymmetry. The reason for this is very simple: in a relation of a face-to-face ethics, I am not the Other, never, and under no circumstances could I possibly be. I and You, me and you, these do not occupy interchangeable positions and are not alternatively experienceable: neither of them could successively also take up the role of the other. This situation, which is ideal-typical of the symmetrization of relations, is present in political citizenship. However, in the rigorous terms of Levinas, this citizenship characterizes something completely different than an ethics; we should thus clearly set apart each of these orders and effectivities. Indeed, in the position I am in, being someone who was to respond to the other, I cannot be replaced by anybody or anything, as is the case for my death. This is so because I myself could never have a face by means of a thematizing reversibilization. If this were possible, I would be implicated in a relation which is not ethical, but rather political or judicial, in which people are juxtaposed to one another as Nebenmenschen (Hermann Cohen), whose places can be interchanged and whose relations can be symmetrized.

The properly ethical relation is structurally entangled in asymmetry. Else we would be changing registers, passing from one domain on to the next. When symmetrizing and equalizing, we jump or overturn into politics in the most strict sense of the term, that is, into the sphere of Justice, as Levinas calls it. When inversing the asymmetry in an asymmetrical way, I find myself confronted with an anti-ethical reversal of the relation, that is to say, in an utterly concrete situation where I, as an individual or a community, would say: the Other is Me myself. The ethical asymmetry thus is the indication of what it is not; being a just politics, it brings about an unjust differentialism from the extreme danger it involves. It pronounces itself in a very articulate manner since the irreducibly dissymmetric positions which it delineates imply practical requirements to which the subject finds itself assigned. The Other differs in his difference; I myself am bound to non-

indifference. The Other calls; Me, I reply; in no way could I not hear the call. The Other has/is a face; Me, I am subordinate to this extreme fragility of the face of the Other. The Other shows himself in the transcendence of this face exceeding all sensible materiality, he is "closer to God than I am"; Me, on the other hand, I respond to this transcendence through the immanence of an immediate material aid: by dressing, feeding, accommodating him. Else, if I respond to the other's transcendence by my transcendence of subject, I fall into the "hypocrisy of the sermon" by seriously undervaluing "the sincerity of hunger and thirst"[11].

Levinas thus touches upon something unprecedented: if the other, and even the absolutely other, is the other man, this expression, the other man, denotes with a powerful precision an asymmetrical inappropriateness. The other and me, we are in no way units of a same genre, two somehow equal individuals which are to be situated indifferently in a relation. The other is not a human being in the way that I am one, in the way that he or she or they are human beings. It thus becomes obvious that the Levinasian thought is philosophically speaking not a humanism. It is, for that matter, on this bending line of humanism and ethics that morality objects to this ethical duo: how am I to do justice to humans, to all other humans, to all these "thirds" to whom I necessarily do violence by subordinating to the singular face of the other? The moral requirement which is opposed to the ethical one is neither illegitimate nor unanswerable, but it can only hold in the aftermath of the immemorial. The other is indeed incomparable, non-interchangeable, he only shows up out of the irreducible and unique singularity of the I, the self which I am and which I am only insofar as this place is untransferable. It is indeed this relation, which is strictly speaking not a relation, that Levinas characterizes as ethical.

When undoing all reciprocity, all reversibility and all isonomy, the asymmetry in particular entails that from an ethical point of view the "relation to the other" does not allow for mediatization. It cannot pass through mediations which would render it intelligible and relative, that is, which would turn it into a relation between terms. This is not possible because the other holds in an absolute, in an absolution of which I am not a part. Levinas

[11] *De l'existence à l'existant*, Vrin, 1990, p. 69.

speaks of a relation/non-relation between me and the other. In the strongest and most extreme sense, indeed, there cannot be a relation in the way that each would be relative to the other, a relation in which I would be the other for the other, and the other another me. We are rather dealing with an exposure, a denudation, the absolute impossibility of escaping the call of a face, my response to it or my renouncing to respond. We are dealing with a subject's structural dis-inter-est for the defection of his being; that is, of his interest, since interest (as Hegel pointed out) means inter-being[12], being in or among. A subject is a being which acquits itself of its condition of being. To be human, to be a human subject, is not to be a being among beings, a being in the being, another being, a class in a general ontology or a region of the being. To be a subject, for the desituated self (dismissed and deposed) thus implies not to have a place in the being, not to have a place there where being-with-oneself[13] means to nomadize the being in its entirety.

Before even constituting a philosophy of alterity, Levinasian ethics thus brings about a theory of subjectivity and its responding structure. This is what is most important. I am being put to question by this face that haunts me, the I is traversed by the other and this transverberation makes up its structure. We can thus come to understand that there truly is a violence of the ethical in Levinas. What appears in the ethical connection as relation/non-relation always and violently constitutes an event; it radically alters the structures of all that appears (i.e. the established order of things) and evidently disturbs, in the strongest sense of the word, my subjectivity of subject, since this appearance which destabilizes all apparition, obliges me to respond or not to respond. In any case, I am obliged through an obligation which does not commence in me. It is, on the contrary, I who commence after this response or this non-response. Subjectivity, penetrated by the other who pierces its self, is structured as having-to-respond. This structuration preceding all I, turns the very use of terms such as "subjectivity" or "response" into a delicate matter, and their usage may sometimes appear as borrowed. The "subject" can both "respond" or not "respond", as we already

[12] The French original *inter-être* refers to the previously mentioned *désintéressement* and *interêt*.

[13] French original: *être-chez-soi*.

pointed out, but we are not speaking here of a choice, since I am not free to hear or not hear the call. Indeed, the response precedes the question, as Levinas formulates it. It is a doing which is not the product of an autonomous decision that sets the interrogation in motion. The having-to-respond is immemorial; it goes way back and precedes all questions I can ever ask myself concerning the reasons why I have responded or not. And often, when I have arrived at weighing the pros and the cons, it is already too late, the time to respond has passed, the time of thinking and weighing has come to abolish it.

As it appears, the ethical produces a radical disruption in the subject which is destabilized in its principles and its origin, disturbed in its assumptions and its initiative; to formulate things in a very euphemistic way, that is. On the other hand, charity, altruism, or, a fortiori, moralizing recrimination always consolidate the subject in itself, in its substantial contentment and its own identity. Another warning imposes itself here if we wish to prevent a contradiction in reading Levinas, one which is less widespread than the contradiction concerning morality in which we take part, but is nevertheless highly prejudicial to the understanding of his oeuvre. To say, as I have just done, that ethics destabilizes, disrupts, desituates and deposes the subject complies to a "logological" constraint, that is, a constraint related to the language saying the being. In other words, the discourse justifying the structures and contents of Levinas's ethics cannot but formulate these in a vocabulary which is that of ontology. It is destined to fix in a said, i.e. in the said of the concept, an ethical saying which actually refers to something which is infinitely more fluid and moving as well as "subject to" an a-chronical and a-logical temporality. It is thus advisable to be wary of the chrono-logy inscribed by the order of the discourse as the necessary ransom for its rigor. Indeed, the subject is always already disrupted, structured as disrupted, if I can say so. Else no subject would ever exist as an "other-in-the-same". If things happened otherwise, i.e. chronologically (first a subject; second its destabilization), the effective, empirical disruption would be nor possible neither thinkable. I am referring here of an objection which has often been made to Levinas (for example by Ricoeur): in order for me to respond for the other or to the other, would I not necessarily first have to come

to grips with myself, assume myself in the authentic manner of the Heideggerian Dasein, before I can turn to the others? Levinas meets this objection by disregarding such a model of reciprocation and chronological interconditioning. Indeed, in his view nothing is less sure than what is presupposed in the objection mentioned and the model it transports. Am I really able to respond in the sense of an ethical responsibility (which is very different from the responsibility of imputation or the penal responsibility), in the sense of a subjectivity structured as since-always having to respond, if I begin responding (or assume myself to do so) from my own being, from my ontological substance and subsistence? Does the objection, on the contrary, not boil down to "somewhat justifying" one's ethical non-response?[14] Such being the case, we can understand why Levinas sought to distance himself from the moral philosophies and the diverse varieties of moralism. All of those consist of reflecting on duties and thinking of them as a more or less superficial or more or less dense crust which agglomerates around an indivisible core of being, the subject. Levinas proposes a completely different figuration and a whole other possibility of thinking the moral link itself. The subject is not, therefore it has no core, neither moral nor pre-moral. The subjectivity of the subject, on the contrary, is a splitting of the self, a loss, an infinite opening. The subject does not direct its approach to the other, it does not take the initiative for it, it does not have the good-will to do it – it is not voluntarily good. It is directed by its drift towards the other. And even if it refuses to partake in it, like Rousseau's "philosopher", this refusal itself is again the indication of this pre-self which is the having-to-respond. Even if I make myself a murderer, this murder perpetrated in an extreme banality and

[14] French original: *"s'argumenter un peu" pour répondre, en raison, de sa non-réponse éthique"*. In a footnote, the author adds that the argument and its formulation are borrowed from Rousseau who strongly senses how obviously *the call* precedes the *reason* (justification). This remark is followed by a quotation from Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (from *Oeuvres completes*, Paris, Le Seuil II, p. 224) which could be translated as follows: "Nothing is left to disturb the peaceful sleep of the philosopher and to keep him out of bed than the dangers of the entire society. One could strangle a fellow human being underneath his window with impunity; he only has to cover up his ears and argue in his favor in order to keep nature from revolting inside him when trying to identify him with the one being assassinated…"

in a confusing ontological easiness is still the sign of a furious impotence before the face. There is no compromise if we are to believe Levinas and read him in the right way. Confronted to the face, "we speak or we kill", as Blanchot writes it in a lapidary way. What a subject says, states, thinks, does, thus appears to flow from a Saying anterior to all signs, gestures and significations of which it can believe itself to be the authorized author in an illusory way, and in which it believes to contemplate its own origin. It is this register that Levinas has thematized as pre-original or an-archic: "The responsibility for the other cannot arise from my engagement, my decision. The boundless responsibility in which I find myself is produced by that which precedes my freedom, by an "anterior-to-all-memory", an "ulterior-to-all-accomplishment", by the non present, par excellence by the non-original, the an-archic, by that which precedes essence or lies beyond it. The responsibility for the other is the site where the non-place of subjectivity locates itself"[15].

It is because of this anarchic aspect that the transcendental model of freedom is radically put to question. For, indeed, as Levinas asks himself with insistence, is the choice for one's freedom really a free choice and can we be truly certain of this? If my uniqueness as a subject resides in my extreme responsibility for the other man calling and if in this irreplaceable uniqueness I cannot possibly flee from it or rid myself of it, my freedom is paradoxically located at the ultimate end of "my" heteronomy. It is obvious that the ethical response is by no means of the order of an obedience. We obey a law, an institution, an hierarchical superior, a function, but never to a person whom, precisely, obedience should not prefer over any other insofar as it is regulated by the preliminary consent to a substantial code of conduct. Ethical responsibility, on the contrary, concerns the type of situation where the limits of regulation and the frame of prescription need to be exceeded by the responding subject without him even wanting to do so: on the spot he cannot but invent the rules of his acts or, more precisely, he has to act on the spot, ahead of all rules. If my self is unique, this is only so through the impossibility of all substitution and all delegation, through my assignment tying me to the ethical moment of response. "To be free means to do only that

[15] *Autrement qu'être*…, éd. cit., p. 24.

which nobody can do in my place".[16] This freedom of uniqueness establishes the ethical discourse. Moreover, it permits us to clearly understand that it is only possible and tenable for the self of the first person. Its extension and universalization would boil down to a reversal through attenuation or anonimization. If Kantian reason presents itself as truly practical by means of autonomy, it is only because the moral subject subordinates to a commandment which is that of reason itself as it imposes itself through the moral law, and independently of others. For Levinas, on the other hand, it is a matter of connecting to exteriority rather than one of autonomy of will. The unconditional moral duty does not come to us through the reasonable will, but through the resistance that the face opposes me. It is not thanks to the submission of will to the law of reason as faculty of the universal that ethics is possible, but thanks to the inaugural and heteronomous fact of the face's word. The law thus appears to result from a facticity: I encounter the other.

Else ethics would quite simply be reversed and wildly converted into a disaster for subjectivity – the disaster of universalisms (me, like all the others!), the disaster of differentialisms (the other, that is me!). This heteronomous freedom where all is irremediably played in the single instant when a response does or does not come, equally allows us to grasp why receiving the other can constitute, and most often indeed does constitute, a traumatism. The traumatism of an untransferable freedom – a freedom so radical and so prevailing that I am in no way free of not being freed of that very freedom – definitively does away with the "firstness" of freedom in the sense of autonomy, its foundational function as the archè of the subject. It is a tragic freedom, surely, since it is exerted entirely in the fine point of an ungraspable instant: a man drowns, a man is beaten, a man is "being strangled underneath my window" and I fail to respond, unalterably, only thinking about it afterwards. But the wording is pleonastic: there is no other thinking than the thinking-afterwards, subjected to the argumentative burden, running the risk of reregistering this non-response in an extra-ethical domain of my responsibility – that is, the domain of the political institution

[16] «La Révélation dans la tradition juive » in *La Révélation*, collectif, Bruxelles, 1977, p. 68 (texte repris in *Au-delà du verset*, Minuit, 1982).

and the juridical administration. Thus freedom is not a structure of the subject consolidating it in its moral or transcendental autonomy; it is nothing but worry and anxiousness, always "younger" than my having-to-respond, since it hits me before all engagement: "I have done nothing and yet I have always been at issue".[17] One could think of this "persecution" of the I by the other as scandalous. The immense force of Levinas's thinking resides in it – insofar as he has showed us that what is "most natural", living and letting die, is most problematic, the most vivid source of our questioning and torments. In its very mineness, in its illustrious "every time", the being – this being which constitutes the existent that I am – can never be its own reason of being.

[17] *AE*, p. 180.