

Feature Article 【專題論文】

Rethinking the Conditions for Inter-cultural Interaction:  
A Commentary on Levinas' *Humanism of the Other*  
文化之間互動條件的再思考：  
評列維納斯《他者的人文主義》

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**關鍵詞：**列維納斯、文化互動、自我、他者、他者的人文主義、  
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## Abstract

Although "humanism" is not one of the important terms in Levinas' philosophy, it hardly surprised that he entitled one of his collections of essays *Humanism of the other human being*. In this paper, I shall examine the perspective on humanism offered by Levinas in this book, as well as the perspective on the "self" and the "other" that it entails. In the first section this book will be set in the context of the early development of Levinas' philosophy. He refers the tension between the self and the other back to a questioning of the ontology of meaning. In the second section, Levinas' defense of a trans-cultural ethnicity will be expounded. This he developed in full recognition of contemporary anti-humanism. Levinas' humanism could be considered as anti-humanist in as far as it remains highly suspicious of situating the origin of ethical conduct in the autonomous self, and ascribes to a high degree of cultural relativism; but he is humanist in the sense that he places the other human being at the very center of all reflection on meaning and action. In conclusion, the cultural specifics of Levinas' own argument are considered and interpreted in the light of the trans-cultural notion of ethnicity that he defends.

## 摘要

雖然「人文主義」並非列維納斯哲學中的重要語詞之一，列維納斯將其論文集的其中一本命名為《他者的人文主義》並不令人驚訝。本文檢視列維納斯於該書中所提供的人文主義觀點及其所涉及的「自我」與「他者」概念。第一部分將該書置於列維納斯哲學早期發展的脈絡中。列維納斯將自我與他者之間的張力回歸於對意義存在論的質疑。第二部分闡釋列維納斯對超越文化的倫理的辯護。在這方面，他展現出對當代反人文主義的全然認可。列維納斯的人文主義對於將倫理行為的起源置於自發性的自我之中保持高度懷疑，而將之歸於高度的文化相對性，就此而言列維納斯的人文主義可被視為反人文主義。但是他將他人置於對意義與行動的所有反思的最中心點，在這層意義上，他是一位人文主義者。結論部分則討論列維納斯有關文化特質的論述，並在他所強調的跨文化的倫理性的視野中加以解釋。

One's first impression in searching for help from Levinas in reflecting about humanism, as access to reflection about the self and the other, might be one of joy. Remarkable as it may be, here is a French author, well informed about his contemporaneous philosophical scene, who in 1972 publishes a book on humanism: it is entitled *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, *Humanism of the other (human being)*. One's joy will be quickly attenuated, though, on opening the book.<sup>1</sup> Not only is there no definition or description given of what the author understands by "humanism," not only is the anti-humanism dominant in the early 1970s French philosophical scene presented as the essential point of reference, but the aim of the book, in apparent disdain for its title, is indicated not as the foundation of a new humanism, but as a research on a kind of meaning to be found in the "proximity of the one-for-the-other" (HH 7) of which the preface gives a brief sketch. The same kind of disappointment will be the fate of the reader seeking insight into notions like "self," "other," "identity," "culture," and a string of other notions that we so direly need to reflect on in the world that is ours.

To be precise, these notions are not absent from Levinas' work. Not only are they present as terminology in his texts, but the terms (as they are traditionally used) are to be found at the very origin of the statement of Levinas' problem. What makes access to Levinas' work difficult is exactly the way in which he uses these words. Invariably, the notions that we would like to interrogate the philosopher on are used, but in a way as to cross out our common understandings thereof at the moment of using it. What Levinas says of the introduction of his book, very much holds for his use of traditional philosophical terminology: just as the preface is not only a repetition of the content of the book but a first

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1 The books of Levinas to be referred to are *De l'évasion* (= EV), *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (= DEHH), *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (= TI), *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (= HH), *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (= AE), *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (= DVI), *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (= EN), *Les imprévus de l'histoire* (= IH).

All translations are my own.

A slightly different version of the current article will appear in Chapter 5 of my *Political Responsibility for a Globalised World. After Levinas' humanism* (forthcoming).

"urgent" commentary on it so as to partially *undo* what is said in the book, so too when he uses terminology, he uses it in such a way as to *undo* something of what has been said of, or by means of, those terms by the tradition of philosophical reflection. If we then want to expose ourselves to the perspective that Levinas presents on humanism, identity and alterity, we will have to examine this way of using terms and undoing them partially at the same time. One understands Levinas when one hears how a traditional philosophical term "rings" after its ringing has been interfered with.

One wouldn't be able to appreciate much of the after-ringing or reverberation of the notion "humanism" without that of "identity" and "alterity" or "same," "self" and "other." To appreciate Levinas' use of these terms, and thus his contribution to our subject matter, one would have to consider the conditions under which the ringing of these words and the interference with them were initiated. The essay takes the form of a commentary on Levinas' *Humanism of the other human being*. In the first part of the commentary, the intellectual background of the book will be presented. Then, through an analysis of the arguments in *Humanism of the other human being*, the reinterpretation that Levinas gives of the "self" and the "other" will be explained. At the same time, this will explain what the basic characteristics of a "humanism of the other human being" is. In conclusion, the difficult question of the cultural specifics of Levinas' own text and argument will be tackled in order to consolidate the insight gained into the radical orientation of the non-cultural, ethical alterity of the other.

For the sake of clarity, I shall present my exposition of Levinas' contribution in the form of theses.

## 1. Background and Formulation of the Problem

The problem with which Levinas would struggle up to the end of his life and the manner in which he would do so, is expressed in embryonic form in two related essays: *Some reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism* (*Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme* 1934, in IH 23-33) and *On escape* (*De l'évasion* 1935). It situates his philosophical problem at a political as well as an ontological level.

Thesis 1. The origin of Levinas' reflection on the self and the other is the political catastrophes of the twentieth century. These are conceived of in political terms as intimately linked to the conflict between the identity of the self and its relation to the other.

Levinas never made a secret of the fact that his philosophical agenda was inspired by his personal experiences. His concerns, political as well as personal, are such that it places the question of the self and the other in the centre of his thought: victim of anti-Semitism in Europe, Jew amongst Christians and atheists, Russian and Hebrew speaking in a French and German world, reader of the Bible in a world of Greek thinking. In other words, Levinas lived and worked in the tension between identity and alterity on the cultural, religious, ethnic, intellectual and language planes. When, in the early 1930s, he observed the rise of Nazism, this tension gave birth to a philosophical problem that, through various reformulations, will remain the major concern for Levinas throughout his way of thinking. This problem concerns the relation between the subject and his/her history or, one could say, it concerns the place to be accorded to the different narratives (cultural, religious, ethnic, etc.) that constitute the identity and the manner of being of the subject. What is at stake for Levinas in this issue, and what he considers to be the decisive core that is to retain our reflection on identity and alterity, is our "conception of the human being." (IH 27 and repeated elsewhere) It is only when one considers this core, namely one's conception of the human

being, that one is able to recognize that whenever the tension between the self and the other arises, the true stake is the very humanity of the human being (*l'humanité même de l'homme* – IH 33).

Thus, what Levinas considers philosophically interesting, or disturbing rather, in the "philosophy of Hitlerism" is that its rise in the political arena confronts us with the ineluctable task of contemplating the humanity of the human being. He does so in his essay by referring to a long and multifarious tradition of liberalism in Europe. Liberalism, that encapsulates for Levinas the essence of the European tradition of the conception of the human being, will be used by him as a standard against which to measure innovation or deviation. The most salient aspect of this tradition is its care for the idea of a human subject that disposes of one or another kind of liberty or freedom. Liberty is the capacity to make a present moment; it is the opposite of being drawn along by history. In fact, as Levinas states, in absolute terms the free individual "has no history" (IH 24), though it is evidently not denied that the individual makes history.

When Levinas highlights the most important moments of this liberal tradition of the West, he insists on the golden thread or "leitmotiv" (IH 26), starting curiously with Judaism, running through Christianity and taken up again in modern liberalism, that situates human dignity – the dignity of every particular human being – in the capacity of the soul to disengage itself of its own history, from whatever particular narrative that could singularise it, give it its particular identity (cf. IH 26). Marxism seems to be a breach with this tradition in that it considers the consciousness to be determined by *being* (IH 27), meaning that the life of the soul, in the great variety of its expressions, reflects the material conditions of being of the respective classes of society. However, even in Marxism the consciousness retains the capacity to throw off the effect of the material condition, and this capacity is situated in the act of taking cognisance of the social situation (cf. IH 28).

A real breach with the European notion of the human being would take place only if the historical situation, attachment or identity of the human being is not taken to be secondary to the free soul, but the very basis of it (cf. IH 28). Such a notion of the human being would centre on the human *body*. Now, one should be very careful not to identify the bearers of such a notion of the human being too rashly only with Hitler or the Hitlerians. Sure enough, in the first sentence of the essay Levinas, in accord with the title of the essay, speaks of the "philosophy of Hitler." (IH 23) But on that same page, he also claims that in as far as this philosophy evokes the question of the relation between the soul and reality (or history), the "philosophy of Hitlerism goes beyond the philosophy of the Hitlerians." (IH 23) Furthermore, the section of the essays that explains this new notion of the human being contains no preciser indication of its bearers than a reference to "modern Germany" (IH 33) and "the Germanic ideal of the human being." (IH 31) No "Hitlerist" author is cited explicitly or named (though the two references to Nietzsche are probably not incidental). I insist on this point because Levinas opens up an ambiguous space in which the reader should fill in a name of a bearer of such a philosophy in which history determines the fate of the human soul – and it is of crucial importance for the understanding of Levinas' entire philosophical project that one fills in the correct name: next to that of whatever Hitlerian, the name of Heidegger. This is the person from whom Levinas learned more about philosophy than from anybody else (except perhaps Husserl); it is also the person that Levinas believes provides the most illuminating perspective on his contemporary intellectual environment.

What makes it difficult to see Heidegger in this text – apart from the fact that he is never named – is that Levinas already transforms Heidegger's analysis of the human being (*Dasein*), at the moment he redeploys it. Levinas does what Heidegger avoided in *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*): he identifies human existence with the fact of being a body. Between the lines of Levinas' text, one reads that it is Heidegger's philosophy of the human being that would clarify the meaning of being attached to your body. According to Levinas: "The body is not

only closer and more familiar to us than the rest of the world, it doesn't only command our psychological life, our mood and our activity. Beyond these commonplace observations, there is the feeling of identity." (IH 29) And he continues by stating that the adherence of the body to the self "is an adhesion from which one can't escape." (IH 29) The echo of probably Heidegger's most important words is still audible in Levinas' text: "Dasein [Levinas says 'the body' – EW] is for itself ontically 'the closest,' ontologically the furthest, but pre-ontologically nevertheless not foreign."<sup>2</sup> Just as, in the new (Germanic) conception of the human being, one is attached to one's body (cf. IH 30), so in Heidegger's philosophy one is attached to your own being; in fact, what Levinas is doing here is to reformulate the most important ontological given of human existence (as analyzed in *Sein und Zeit*) by an introduction of the body: as far as he is concerned, your body is the way in which your being is your own. *Being* is always yours, in such a way that you cannot rid yourself of it. This fact of "being that is always yours," Heidegger called "mineness" (*Jemeinigkeit*) and this term forms the centre of Levinas' polemics with his former teacher.<sup>3</sup> In the opening sentences of § 9 of *Sein und Zeit*, entitled "The theme of the analytics of *Dasein*" Heidegger explains mineness in the following words: "We are ourselves the entities or beings to be analyzed. The being of this entity is *at every instant mine*. In their very act of being these entities are themselves related to their being. As beings of the happening of being, these entities are entrusted to or delivered to their own happening of being. The happening of being is the concern for these entities."<sup>4</sup> For Levinas this summarises the essence of the new conception of the

2 "Dasein ist ihm selbst ontisch 'am nächsten,' ontologisch am fernsten, aber vorontologisch doch nicht fremd," *Sein und Zeit* (= SZ), Siebzehnte Auflage (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927, 1993), p. 16. A similar claim is made after the introduction of the notion of mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*) (SZ 41-43), to which we turn in our text.

3 I argued this in chapter 1 of my *De l'éthique à la justice. Langage et politique dans la philosophie de Lévinas*, *Phaenomenologica* 183 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007).

4 Freely translated from SZ 41-42: "Das Seiende, dessen Analyse zur Aufgabe steht, sind wir je selbst. Das Sein dieses Seienden ist *je meines*. Im Sein dieses Seienden verhält sich dieses selbst zu seinem Sein. Als Seiendes dieses Seins ist es seinem eigenen Sein überantwortet. Das Sein ist es, darum es diesem Seienden je selbst geht."

The link between Levinas' essay on Hitlerism and Heidegger's idea of mineness was affirmed much later (1990), when Levinas commented on his early essay. Cf. his "Post-

human being, that breaks with the European tradition:<sup>5</sup> *being* or history, by means of my body, is so much mine, that I am subjected to what *being* or history imposes on me, to the identity (*Selbstheit, ipséité*) that is historically constituted – and from this there is no escape. The human being's life is characterised by care (*Sorge*), but every caring action is one that has already been entrusted to or surrendered to *being* that draws it along. In other words: "The essence of the human being is no longer in freedom, but in a kind of enslavement (*enchaînement*)" (IH 30) and one can do no more than to accept this fatality.

The political consequence of such a notion of humanity is the immediate exclusion of considering politics as a condition to which free spirits consent (cf. IH 30). Instead of the free play with ideas that would make truly human politics possible, ideas are imposed on individuals by their belonging to consanguine groups (or ethnic, cultural, religious and other groups by extension) – and this necessarily leads to expansion and war: racism seeks universalism by means of conquest, according to Levinas. Or again in other words: particular identity spontaneously seeks to impose itself on what doesn't conform to it; identity spontaneously seeks to impose itself on non-identity, on alterity. These are,

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scriptum," in *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme*, Rivages poche (Petit Bibliothèque) (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1997), p. 25.

5 It is not clear why Levinas, in this essay, puts so much emphasis on the long, continuous Western/European tradition of the liberty of the soul and condemns the breach with *that* tradition. One should notice that it is somewhat problematic, in that he formulates an argument for a conception of the human being that is precisely *not* determined by his/her history. In order to maintain the coherence of the essay one would have to take Levinas' insistence on the continuity of this European tradition not as a legitimisation of his argument, but only a historical background to his ideas of which he approves. However, it is clear that such a benevolent reading would be somewhat forced. That Levinas had a very positive image of European culture is no secret and it even appeared at certain instances in the form of a Eurocentrism (cf. Robert Bernasconi, "Who is my neighbor? Who is the other? Questioning 'the generosity of Western thought'," in *Ethics and Responsibility in the Phenomenological tradition: The Ninth Annual Symposium of the Simon Silverman Phenomenological Center* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1992), pp. 1-31.

according to Levinas in 1934, the terms in which to consider the humanity of the human being that is being put at risk.<sup>6</sup>

Levinas' reaction to this problem will not consist of simply returning to the tradition of the free soul (though his writings up to *Totalité et infini* could be considered to be, to a certain extent, a reworked appropriation of this tradition). His philosophical project starts from accepting the terms in which Heidegger conceives of human existence, but to attempt to go beyond the fatality he sees in them. The first step was to advance the formulation of the problem in ontological terms. This Levinas did in the 1935 essay, *De l'évasion*. Hence forth, the primary terms in which to tackle the question of the tension between "self" and "other" will be a dispute with the Western tradition of thinking in which the question of *being* is central.

Thesis 2. Levinas considers the appropriate way of contemplating these catastrophes, to be the translation thereof into ontological terms learned from Heidegger. The problem is related to the articulation of the subject with regards to being (identity as ipseity or selfness).

If indeed "the essence of the human being is no longer in freedom, but in a kind of enslavement," if indeed human existence is first and foremost characterised by mineness, what would this entail for human existence? In *De l'évasion* Levinas provides what could be considered as a counter *Daseinsanalyse* (ontological analysis of the human being), in which he attempts to show some implications of Heidegger's idea of mineness. *Being* means for the human being that one's identity is firstly to be considered not in terms of the reflection of the subject to itself, but in terms of the continued existence (ipseity or selfness) – the perseverance in one's existence (Spinoza's *conatus*, that the later Levinas likes to use to gloss the ontological identity). Being means for human existence *to be* or

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<sup>6</sup> The most important elements of the 1934 study will reappear in Levinas' later analyses of political and cultural events. See for instance "De la déficience sans souci au sens nouveau," in DVI 77-89.

to exist in such an intimate circuit of "exchange" with *being* (i.e. mineness), that one always understands (pre-predicatively) *being* in the different acts of being. In fact, the entire human existence is a long happening of the understanding of *being*, i.e. ontology.<sup>7</sup> With one's whole existence at every moment, one is a *logos*, a "discourse," concerning the different ways in which one conjugates as it were the meanings of "to be," that is, ways in which one understands *being*. But whereas mineness is at the source of selfness and all understanding (as subsidiary of the understanding of *being*), one is at the same time tightly – Levinas says brutally<sup>8</sup> – bound to *being*. There is no escape; one is attached to *being* without any exit or escape. All understanding, and hence all *meaning*, is imposed on humans by virtue of the circulation of understanding in which they find themselves with *being*.

To this dilemma, Levinas proposes no solution in 1935. The hermeneutics of facticity of human existence offered in the analyses of shame and nausea sets out to express the need of the human being to escape from the apparently inescapable burden of one's own identity, that is "to break the most radical, the most inexorable, enslavement, namely the fact that the self is itself." (EV 98) The urgent problem of "finding the way out" could also be formulated as a question: "Is ontology fundamental?" In these words (the title of the seminal essay of 1951), Levinas restates the question of the escape: are all forms of *meaning* dependent on ontology, on one's always brutally belonging to *being*? Does the human being exhaust the meaning of his/her humanity and selfness by articulating the event (*Er-eignis*) of *being*?<sup>9</sup> Is there not perhaps another form of meaning that transcends my attachment to myself, to my identity, to my body, to history, ultimately to *being*?

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7 This is the centre of Levinas' appropriation of Heidegger: "Tout l'homme est ontologie," stated in "L'ontologie est-elle fondamentale?" (1951), EN 13.

8 That this idea of being narrowly attached to being is opposed to a tradition of liberalism is reaffirmed in the 1935 essay: "La révolte de la philosophie traditionnelle contre l'idée de l'être procède du désaccord entre la liberté humaine et le fait brutal de l'être qui la heurte." (EV 91)

9 These terms are borrowed from a later text DVI 82.

Thesis 3. Practically the whole of Levinas' philosophy could be considered a reflection on how to advance despite this ontological crisis (i.e. the search for alterity, despite identity as perseverance in selfness).

Levinas' project will consist of arguing that, next to ontological meaning or rather more original than ontological meaning, there is a kind of *meaning* that arises between people and that is not ontological, and he will argue that it is *ethical* in nature.<sup>10</sup> The entire question of human diversity, of the tensions involved in the relation between identity and alterity is made dependent on Levinas' heideggerian inspired notion of identity and an alterity that will infringe on that identity. Let it be stressed that the terms in which Levinas approaches this question are terms of *meaning* and not in the first place that of an economics or politics of difference. In fact, he explicitly stated that the alterity in which he is interested, the alterity that makes an escape from the fatal violence of identity as perseverance in selfness possible, the alterity that would be at the root of a peaceful co-existence amongst the diversity of peoples, is to be understood in a very particular way: the other is other – "Other, not at all because he would have other attributes or be born elsewhere or at another time, or be of a different race [...]. It is not at all the difference that makes alterity; it is alterity that makes the difference."<sup>11</sup> I rephrase: it is not at all the difference of singularizing attributes of identity (of a different culture, ethnicity, religion, etc.) that constitutes what is essential to alterity; it is the ethical meaning of alterity that makes the difference with regards to ontological meaning of the relation between people. The solution, or rather the response, that Levinas proposes to the problematic tension between identity and alterity, will not reside in an articulation of the differences susceptible to prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, inequity or other forms of violence, but in

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10 These terms are to be found in the interview of 1981, "De la phénoménologie à l'éthique," in *Esprit*, No. 234 (1997), pp. 121-140 (notably p. 129).

11 "Autre, pas du tout parce qu'il aurait d'autres attributs ou serait né ailleurs ou à un autre moment, ou parce qu'il serait de race différente. [...] Ce n'est pas du tout la différence qui fait l'altérité; c'est l'altérité qui fait la différence." Cited from the interview "Visage et violence première," in *La différence comme non-indifférence. Ethique et altérité chez Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Kimé, 1995), p. 92.

indicating that there is something different to the other (and that is *not* reducible to the qualities of the other) and that the subject (or self) cannot be indifferent to this alterity of the other. The most profound alterity of the other is situated *not* in his/her perceptible difference, but in the *non-in-difference* in which the self discovers himself/herself with regards to the other, whoever that other may be. This alterity as non-in-difference that underlies all difference restores to humans the full sense of their humanity that is at risk in the ontological reduction prevalent in the Western tradition of thought. In other words, reflection on the problematic tension between identity and alterity should in final analysis be referred back to what constitutes humanity, namely ethnicity, and it is only from this perspective of ethnicity that a measure, or common discourse, is discovered that sets a limit to the engagements imposed by what would otherwise be an absolute cultural relativism. This latter point is Levinas' major concern of the first essay in *Humanism of the other human being*, to which we now turn.

## 2. The Self and the Other in Humanism and Anti-humanism

*Humanism of the other human being* is a collection of three essays (published respectively in 1964, 1968 and 1970) to which a preface has been added (for the publication in 1972). It represents Levinas' first attempts to go beyond what he considered the insufficiencies of the major work of 1961, *Totalité et infini*, but without rejecting the basic convictions defended in that book. *Humanism of the other human being* belongs to the second phase of Levinas' work in which *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974) stands in the centre and of which the central piece, the article *La substitution* (first published in 1968), is contemporaneous with *Humanism of the other human being*.

Thesis 4. In *Humanism of the other human being* Levinas takes up the debate with Heidegger in terms similar to those formulated three decades earlier and extends it to a debate with contemporary anti-humanism (or the crisis of humanism) in the social sciences.

In *Humanism of the other human being*, Levinas still considers Heidegger's philosophy as the best key to understanding what is really happening in his contemporary intellectual and even political scene.<sup>12</sup> One could summarize Levinas' reading of Heidegger in this book as follows. Firstly, ontologically human existence is first and foremost characterised by mineness – in particular, Levinas twice cites the phrase by which Heidegger captures the essence of the identity of the human being as care: in human existence the happening of being is what is the concern for the human being (cf. HH 41 & 48, and paraphrased HH 76). Secondly, the existence, consisting of understanding *being*, is at the source of all meaning (cf. HH 41). Thirdly, *being* is so much mine, that my existence brings potential meanings of *being* to expression; but actually, what happens (and this comes better to the fore in the second Heidegger, in Levinas' view) is that I am seized by *being* that expresses itself through me (cf. HH 76) (this seems to be the point of convergence between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger – cf. HH 29). Fourthly, this perspective on human existence necessarily problematises a notion of subjectivity as interiority and reflection; the end of the subject dawns when, as apparently for Heidegger, "the subject has nothing inside to express. It is entirely conceived of from *being* and from the truth of *being*." (HH 122n4, my italics) The consequence of this is that "it is not the human being, that has an I don't know what own vocation that would invent or seek or possess the truth. It is the truth [of being – EW] that gives rise to and holds the human being (without holding

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12 The philosophy of after the so-called *Kehre* is interpreted by Levinas as an extension of implications of what is already implicit in *Sein und Zeit*. He refers to Heidegger's philosophy as "la pensée philosophique, la plus influente de ce siècle et qui se veut déjà post-philosophique." (HH 99). And after having reformulated what he considers the appropriate response to anti-humanism, Levinas confronts Heidegger directly so as to indicate the ambition of his reconsideration of ethics (cf. HH 107ff).

any commitment to the human being)." (HH 76, and almost the same wording in HH 97)

One could call Heidegger's position, summarised in these points, as one of the end of metaphysics, as far as metaphysics (as the term is used in this context) depended on the idea of the individualist, reflective and autonomous or free subject. But this end of metaphysics is to be found much wider than just the thinking of one philosopher. In fact, it encapsulates the state of affairs in the human sciences, dominated by structuralism at the time Levinas writes (cf. HH 95), in which the subject (or at least a certain notion of the subject) has commonly become suspect: just as in Heidegger, here too the subject is not considered to hold the truth, but the truth – in this case the structures directing human phenomena – expresses itself through the human being (cf. HH 76, 118n3).<sup>13</sup> When the social sciences formulate theories that are in accord with Heidegger's end of metaphysics (cf e.g. HH 100), they call this same end of the subject, "end of humanism" or "anti-humanism". As we shall see later on, it could also be referred to as the death of God (cf. HH 95).

Thesis 5. According to Levinas' reading thereof, the essence of anti-humanism consists in the decentring of the subject, questioning the capability of rational human agency and the crisis of cultural relativity, that implies an impossibility to judge actions.

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13 One should be vigilant in reading Levinas' renderings of the essence of structuralism. In HH 118n1 he refers with approbation to the essay of Michel Serres, "Analyse symbolique et méthode structurale" (in *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, No. 171 [1967], pp. 437-452), as an illuminating interpretation of structuralism. I suspect that a detailed research into the sources of Levinas' knowledge and interpretation of structuralism would show that he owes a lot to this essay, if not perhaps, as much as to Merleau-Ponty for the development of his perspective on cultural relativism. The importance of such a research could be indicated by contrasting Levinas' remarks on the profoundest nature of structuralism in HH with his admission in an interview of 1987 that "even today I still don't understand structuralism" (in *Emmanuel Lévinas*, essays and interviews with François Poirié [Arles: Actes Sud, 1987, 1996], p. 161).

This anti-humanism is presented in HH from three perspectives: 1/ the end of the human being as subject (cf. HH 95-101), 2/ the putting to question of the human being as "rational animal" by the political catastrophes of the twentieth century (cf. HH 73-74) and 3/ the crisis of culture due to the diversity of cultural expressions without common measure for evaluation.

### 2.1 End of the Subject

The first aspect of anti-humanism – the decentring of the human subject – has already been presented to introduce anti-humanism. It consists of adjourning the autonomous subject with its lucid, reflective vision of its own interiority and to consider the human being, consciousness and all, as subordinate to anonymous structures, and of which the roots go back at least as far as Hegel (cf. HH 118n3, 97). There is a substantial convergence between the (contemporary, structuralist) human sciences and Heidegger on this point, that amounts to the negation of interiority (cf. HH 99, 100), reducing consciousness to an epiphenomenon (or shepherd, poet, messenger – HH 100-101) of an underlying structural process. Emblematic of this change in paradigm is the decentring of the Cartesian *cogito* by psychoanalysis: what was supposed to be the substantial subject as fortress against the *malin génie*, is now reduced to a mask, a *persona* (Levinas plays with the French word "personne": meaning either "person" or "nobody") of dark forces that has taken control of it (cf. HH 74, which amounts to the rejection of the subject as *subjectum* or *hypokeimenon*). The same holds for the practice of ethnography that describes the objective structures underlying cultural phenomena, even whilst obeying such a structure (cf. HH 77). Of the transmitted safe fortress of interiority remains not much more than an exposure to the whims of unmasterable structures and forces. Or again in ontological terms: the subject, even whilst conjugating the verb *to be*, is so much dominated by it that every conjugation is only an apparent mastery, only a being subjugated to a meaning imposed on it by *being*.

## 2.2 Questioning the Rationality of the Animal Rationale

This dissolution of the subject as master of itself is reflected on the political scene. The subject that would, as autonomous agent, embark on realizing a pre-meditated project, seems in reality to be only rushed along to tragedies for others and for itself. "That a politics and administration that is guided by the humanist ideal, could maintain the exploitation of human beings by other human beings and by war" (HH 97) is a paradox that invites to disbelieve and disqualify the causality of the human agent (which amounts to the rejection of the subject as *causa sui*). This tragic paradox becomes almost comical when one considers the unparalleled means over which the human being of the twentieth century disposes and the ambitions formulated by humans. The human being becomes inefficient to the point of being the toy of its technology and of its political programmes (cf. HH 73). The very idea of the human being as *animal rationale* is thus thrown into a crisis (cf. HH 74, 78).<sup>14</sup> The idea of the subject as master of his/her intentions is not capable of articulating the most pressing questions of the after war years; for Levinas' contemporaries the deepest anguish "stems from the experience of revolutions that sink into bureaucracy and repression and of totalitarian violence that masquerades as revolutions." (HH 98) And one suspects that when the word "totalitarianism" is used, for Levinas the reminiscence of Hitler and the camps is not far away.

## 2.3 Cultural Relativity or the "Death of God"

Although Levinas doesn't call the third aspect of anti-humanism by this name, his presentation of it in a book on an alternative humanism as well as the

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14 But one should be very careful in stating this point. Whereas Levinas remains skeptical as to the restoration of the *animal rationale* in the sense of mastering praxis (as set out here), his entire philosophical enterprise could be considered as rethinking the definition of the human being as *zoon logon echon* (of which *animal rationale* is the Latin translation). Heidegger already undertook such an enterprise and Levinas never rejected the idea that the entire human being is a *logos on being*; what he did was to relativise the ontological *logos* that one is oneself, by another *logos*, spoken by the face of the other (cf. HH 51).

exact equivalence in his way of countering it (equivalent to his response to the other elements of anti-humanism), allow us to name it anti-humanist. This problem, that takes up a very big part of the book (HH 17-41 – much more than the previous two), also leads us to what Levinas considers the core of anti-humanism, namely the so-called "death of God."

The first chapter of *Humanism of the other human being* thematises cultural relativity. As indicated above, Levinas will tackle this problem by referring it to the constitution of meaning. He proposes a basic introduction to the question of cultural relativity by translating it into ontological terms according to which being itself comes to expression in the multiplicity of cultural expressions (cf. HH 30); every cultural action or object speaks of being. In this, according to Levinas, contemporary philosophy is radically anti-Platonic: "For Plato, the world of meanings precedes the language and the culture that expresses it; it [the Platonic world of meanings – EW] is indifferent to the system of signs that one could invent to make this world present to the mind. Consequently, it [the world of meanings – EW] dominates the historical cultures." (HH 31) Contemporary philosophy, therefore, is anti-Platonic in the sense that it rejects outright any conception of such an ultimate and authoritative world of meaning behind the diversity of cultures, and subordinates meaning to the way in which it is expressed, in other words, all meaning is dependent on the culturally specific way of its expression; without this specificity there is no meaning. If this is accepted, it would mean that there is no way to judge or evaluate cultures, or at least there is no way to judge particular cultures, in which the judging itself is not at the same time an expression of a particular culture. There would be no super-culture that transcends its expression. This is maintained in modern ethnology; it is also reflected in the politics of decolonization (which is nothing less than the historico-political manifestation of the rejection of a trans-cultural access of the colonizing forces to a trans-historical human ideal) (HH 33-34). Even Marxist theories that attempt to introduce a cross-cultural criterion by reference to human needs, inevitably slide into this cultural relativism since the discourse on needs is

motivated by the will to create a new society and thus the very formulation and manifestation of needs is culturally determined (cf. HH 35-37).

What this leads to is what Levinas calls "the cultural and aesthetic notion of meaning." (HH 38) Such a notion of meaning inevitably slides into absurdity, according to him – not the absurdity of absence of any meaning, since every culture would still have its internal coherence of references and that would serve to give meaning to every cultural act or object. Absurdity for Levinas means the absence of ultimate, trans-cultural reference. He certainly does not deny that one could establish criteria against which different cultures or cultural elements could be compared or graded (like efficiency in the realization of particular kind of projects, for instance), but such criteria would themselves be cultural specific (cf. HH 59). Besides, such criteria would not be sufficient to determine if elements of cultures are of value at all. As far as the ontological perspective on cultural diversity is adopted no finality could be reached on the significance or importance of a culture.<sup>15</sup> And let it be said that up to this point Levinas ascribes to a cultural relativism. What is lacking from this picture, according to him, is the meaning of meaning, or rather the significance of meaning, i.e. that which would provide the cultural diversity with an orientation. This lack of orientation in the cultural diversity which is inherent in the contemporary cultural and aesthetic notion of meaning, bears, since Nietzsche, another name in philosophy: the death of God;<sup>16</sup> Levinas also calls it "the crisis of monotheism." (HH 40)

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15 "L'absurdité consiste non pas dans le non-sens, mais dans l'isolement des significations innombrables, dans l'absence d'un sens qui les oriente. Ce qui manque, c'est le sens des sens" (HH 40). This statement is never justified by its author. Let it for now at least be noted that an interesting avenue for reconstructing a dialogue between Levinas and the Frankfurter Schule is opened by this remark: cf. Jürgen Habermas, "Zu Max Horkheimers Satz: Einen unbedingten Sinn zu retten ohne Gott, ist eitel," in *Texte und Kontexte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), pp. 110-126.

16 It should be underscored that what is at stake here is first of all a crisis of the human sciences and of contemporary European culture, and only secondarily the question of the existence of a deity. Cf. Paul van Tongeren, *Reinterpreting Modern Culture: An Introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2000), of which the main point is summarised as follows: "The main problem which Nietzsche confronts us with is not so much that God is dead but that we do not understand or do not admit what this means. [...] His

Far from resuscitating a God from one of the positive religions or one from the philosophical tradition (but not without being inspired by what he has learned from Judaism and from Western metaphysics), Levinas will first contest the status of transcendence of such a "God": he ascribes to the death of a certain God, but believes that if philosophy is to surmount the problem of absurdity it is to revert to the notion of God or at least the infinite.<sup>17</sup> The God, whom Levinas believes is dead, is the God of ontology. The "God" that could orientate the plurality of cultures, on whom all cultures depend for the significance of their meaning, is the God of ethics.

To summarize: cultural diversity and equivalence – to which contemporary philosophy, social science and political reality attest – lead to an absurdity without any transcendent, trans-cultural source of meaning that could orientate them. This lack of transcendence is rooted in the ontological existence of the human being, to be precise, in the mineness, from which, as far as one remains Heideggerian (and if Levinas' reading of him is accepted) there is no escape. The diversity of *logoi* that human beings are, are all speaking of *being* (they are ontology), but without any escape. Seeking a transcendent meaning, means the same as seeking an escape from mineness, which also means the same as seeking to overcome the death of God. And this in turn means seeking to avoid humanity from getting lost by lapsing into absurdity. In the first chapter of *Humanism of the other human being* Levinas gives a formulation of his problem in terms of culture, ontology and meaning. However, in the second and third chapters, as has already been indicated, he argued that it would be in vain to attempt to respond to this problem by recourse to the resources or the subject. Let it be stated clearly, that Levinas

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critique of religion is a critique of modern a-religiosity, a diagnosis of modern culture." (p. 285)

17 Levinas refers to the Second World War as a "trou dans l'histoire – année[s] où tous les dieux visibles nous avaient quittés, où dieu est véritablement mort ou retourné à son irrévélation." (HH 46)

Compare with HH 41: "Nous ne pensons pas que le sensé puisse se passer de Dieu [...]" and HH 57 where he refers to the necessity of philosophical meditation "de recourir à des notions comme Infini ou comme Dieu."

accepts the basic ideas of anti-humanism (cf. AE 203) – for as long as one leaves out of consideration what he will defend as ultimate meaning, namely ethnicity.

Thesis 6. Albeit in different terms, the book *Humanism of the other human being* is a continuation of the project started in the 1930s, in that it proposes a solution to the problem formulated there. Speaking about humanism is for Levinas a way of speaking about the humanity of the self and the other. This humanity and therefore this humanism, has no orientating meaning except in reference to an originary ethnicity that produces its meaning between the self and the other, independently of ontological meaning. The essence of "humanity" consists of the ethical significance of the other for the self. This amounts to a post-anti-humanist "humanism."

The problem, and the reason why Levinas feels himself called to write on the *humanism of the other human being*, is however exactly that an infringement is taking place on the humanity of the self and the other. This happens in a contemporary discourse in the social sciences that bears the name of anti-humanism. Levinas doesn't hesitate to link this fact to the name of Hitler (HH 11; and cf. "hitlérisme" HH 47 and the reference to Léon Blum's prison writings of 1941-42, HH 46-47), which means simply that what is at stake in theoretical anti-humanism is not only the affair of an academic debate, since it puts again, as Levinas said in 1934, the very *humanity* of the human being at stake (the book HH ends on exactly the same idea as that of the essay of 1934, cf. HH 113). But how does Levinas justify this idea? And what does his notion of humanity consist of?

It becomes clear, right from the preface, that Levinas' concern in this book is with political and human scientific events or tendencies that do violence to the humanity of the human being. To this he attempts to give a response called "humanism of the other human."

In the preface, Levinas qualifies the project of his book by the word "*inactuel*" or later "*intempestif*." Sure enough, one could take this to mean "non-topical," "untimely" or "misplaced," and Levinas recognizes from the first page that his use of the word "humanism" could, in 1972, be considered to be out-of-date. But "*inactuel*" and "*intempestif*" are more of those words from the Western philosophical tradition that Levinas tries to provide with an overtone or a different reverberation. "*Inactuel*" and "*intempestif*" are in fact the French words with which one translates the German "*unzeitgemäß*," in particular as in the title of Nietzsche's book *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*. Levinas implicitly presents his book *Humanism of the other human being* as an *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtung*, an untimely meditation or an unfashionable observation (as the title of Nietzsche's book has been translated in English).<sup>18</sup> What is more, he will do so by opening up a new meaning of the word "*inactuel*," non-actual. "The non-actual means here *the other* of the actual, rather than ignorance of it or its negation; the other of what is conventionally called, in the high tradition of the West, *being-in-action* [...] the other of *the being-in-action*, but also of its cohort of virtualities that are powers; the other of being, of the *esse* of being, of the movement of being, the other of *fully being* [...] that is pronounced by the term *in action*; the other of being in itself – the *untimely* that interrupts the synthesis of present moments that constitute memorable time." (HH 7-8) Without going into the detail of this dense statement, one should at least notice that what Levinas defines as non-actual (*inactuel* and *intempestif*) and that is equivalent to "the humanism of the other human being," is that which is other to the whole Western tradition of thinking<sup>19</sup> – from Aristotle (cf. "être en acte") to Heidegger (cf. "l'esse de l'être"<sup>20</sup>) – that places reflection on being in its centre. As indicated above, in the

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18 It should be noticed that there is no other text of Levinas in which the references to Nietzsche take such a dominant place.

19 Whereas Levinas will be inspired by another tradition – that of Judaism – his concern is not here to confront Western culture with another culture, but to confront it with what is not only the other of Western culture, but also of *all* other cultures, including Judaism. Though, rarely, if ever, Levinas states it so categorically.

20 Cf. "essence de l'être" (HH 100 & 103, where "essence" is used as abstract noun describing the very verblatity of *being*). This use of the word "essence," rather than the traditional use, is

book *Humanism of the other human being*, Levinas is still occupied with the fact of mineness, i.e. one's attachment to being without any exit (as is said in HH 97: "être sans issue"). Levinas is still concerned with the ontological issue of being drawn along fatally by *being*. And his response will not be of the order of *being*, in fact it will be foreign to *being* in that he will defend the case for a kind of meaning that emerges independently of ontology (cf. HH 11, 57, 110), and that is, for this reason, independent of *being* as act, and therefore in-actual. Levinas' humanism is untimely, not since it has become unfashionable in the 1970s to defend humanism in philosophy, but it is untimely since it draws its sources from what is absolutely foreign to *being* as time, and thus to all ontological sources of meaning. It is in-actual with reference to the human being whose concern in being would be caring for *being*. What is untimely is a consideration of humanism viewed as ethicity (or what Levinas names "l'éthique même", HH 46) that is not reducible to the *logos* of *being*, to the cultural, social, religious, ethnic or whatever condition of the human being – as is done for instance in Nietzsche's *Genealogie der Moral* – but an untimely consideration of ethicity as an irreducible imperative or putting to question<sup>21</sup> addressed by the other human being to the (mostly pre-predicatively stated) ontological identity of the self. That is, a meaning, a *logos*, that is not in the indicative, but in the imperative or interrogative.

If indeed such an originary ethical meaning is more than mere wishful thinking, Levinas will have to present it in such a way that it is not dependent on any specific culture (cf. HH 11). Instead of going into the detail of Levinas' justification of ethics, I shall merely sketch what he considers its essence, referring mostly to *Humanism of the other human being*.

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explicitly announced in the preface to AE.

21 Cf. HH 11, and Levinas insists that this questioning is "la mise en question de la conscience et non pas d'une conscience de la mise en question" HH 53; and a slightly different wording in HH 57.

Levinas never renounces the great lesson from Heidegger, namely that meaning originates in the act of being. What he did question was that this exhausts human access to meaningfulness. His whole project consists in demonstrating another, and more originary, source of meaning that is ethical. This twofold meaningfulness of human existence is analyzed under the name of ageing (*vieillesse*).<sup>22</sup> The human being might be considered to be persevering in his/her existence, or identity as selfness – of which the visible appearance is ageing –, but at the same time, this perseverance is executed only despite oneself (*malgré soi* – AE 86, HH 110 or *malgré l'être* – HH 82), since the more one exists the more one consumes your existence. In ageing one sees existence as *being* gained and lost at the same time. This passivity from which one's active existence cannot be detached is not the passivity of undergoing an experience (since this is, phenomenologically seen, only another form of activity), but what Levinas calls "a passivity that is more passive than any passivity." (e.g. HH 11) Levinas' wager is that this losing existence despite yourself, this extreme passivity, has its own meaning, namely one of inevitably ceding your existence to the other. What Levinas says about the contemporary consensus concerning language, and by implication about all meaning, holds equally for Levinas' perspective on the human being as incarnate *logos* (i.e. the active aspect of existence): certainly one should insist on its hermeneutical (i.e. historically contingent) structure and on the cultural determinedness of all expressions (HH 49-50), but, he adds, one should not forget that the *logos*, in all its diversity, is addressed at someone, in the sense of being *exposed* (cf. HH 104) to the other.<sup>23</sup> Without consideration for this

22 It is used only in passing in HH 106, but developed in more detail in AE 86-94. I should remind the reader here of Levinas' declaration that his philosophical objective was the justification for these two sources of meaning.

23 "L'expression, avant d'être célébration de l'être, est une relation avec celui à qui j'exprime l'expression et dont la présence est déjà requise pour que mon geste culturel d'expression se produise [... L'autre] est *sens* primordialement car il le prête à l'expression elle-même, car par lui seulement un phénomène tel qu'une signification s'introduit, de soi, dans l'être." (HH 50)  
The subject is thus not only decentred by the structures identified by the human scientists and thus exposed to the exterior rather than collected in its own interiority (as described above), but also, and Levinas would say most importantly, one is exposed to the other. This exposure is the advent of ethicity.

directedness of the *logos* that one is, its meaning will remain absurd, like the meaning of a turn of speech in a dialogue in which the fact of being addressed by and responding to someone is ignored. Due to the extreme passivity of one's existence, despite yourself, your whole existence, your entire perseverance in a particular identity is exposed to or addressed to the other. This holds equally for all cultural expressions or utterances, it also holds for all actions (the ontological *logos* as *praxis*). Pre-predicatively, the human being is not only a *logos*, a "statement," concerning *being*, but the human being is such a *logos* always as directed to someone in a very particular way, namely as a response to the other, as "an offering of yourself." (*une offrande de soi* – HH 122n4) The other enjoys a primary place in my existence such that the *logos* that I am, is always only a response to the other. This aspect of responsiveness is a surplus of meaning (cf. HH 113) over and above, or rather before, the meaning of the ontological existence. This surplus in the response is therefore characterised by Levinas as not-ontological, as ethical, i.e. the response-character of my whole being constitutes my being as *responsibility* for the other. The same idea is expressed differently from the side of the other: the face of the other speaks (cf. HH 51); it imposes on the self an inalienable task of responsibility. In fact the other elects the self, as it were, as unique to this responsibility. No one could replace the self in this task and the responsibility remains infinite. This ethical appeal from the other to the self invests it with the first meaning: mere formal ethicity. This non-ontological meaning is completely independent from all hermeneutical and cultural conditions, but determines the latter decisively, since it comes only "after" ethicity (cf. HH 58). This is the meaning and sense of all culture, it is the "God" that Levinas believes is to be salvaged.<sup>24</sup> The world may be de-westernised, but not disorientated, according to Levinas' play on words (cf. HH 60) – a new form of Platonism is introduced in which the entire trans-cultural hinterworld consists only of the Good beyond being (cf. HH 85).

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24 But there is nothing obvious in this appellation: the Good is a value "Valeur qui, par abus de langage, se nomme. Valeur qui se nomme Dieu." (HH 87)

This ethicity thus resides in an "intrigue"<sup>25</sup> that "occurs" between the self and the other: the alterity (of the other) is not to be understood as the difference of the other with respect to the self (since this would make it a relative alterity); it is the other *putting to question* the self (the ontological identity), making and *appeal* to the self for his/her responsibility, and thus investing the self with the most decisive mark of identity: being elected to respond to the other. This obligation of the self towards the other is an "obligation that has asked for no consent, that came into me traumatically from before any recollected present, an-archically [used in the etymological sense of 'not-foundationally' – EW], without beginning. [The obligation] came without offering itself as a choice, came like an election where my contingent humanity becomes identity and uniqueness due to the impossibility of shirking the election." (HH 12-13)

### 3. Conclusion

#### 3.1 What is a Humanism "of the Other Human Being"?

Following the preceding discussion, it should be concluded that, for Levinas, humanism is a discourse on humanity, but in which humanity, even though it says something about the unity of all human beings (cf. HH 11) transcends the idea of "humanity" as indication of a genus of animal – humanity contains an inherent asymmetry: it doesn't mean the same for the other and for the self. For the *other* "being human" means to exert a pre-predicative imperative or questioning on the self (i.e. neglecting the ethical alterity of the other equals

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25 The term "intrigue" is not used in HH, but introduced in "La trace de l'autre" (first published in 1963, DEHH 187-202) and is used to describe the originary ethicity linking the self and the other in exactly the same terms as in the last part of chapter 1 of HH. See also the use "intrigue" in the definition given of ethics: "Nous appelons éthique une relation entre des termes où l'un et l'autre ne sont unis ni par une synthèse de l'entendement ni par la relation de sujet à objet et où cependant l'un pèse ou importe ou est signifiant à l'autre, où ils sont liés par une intrigue que le savoir ne saurait ni épuiser ni démêler." (DEHH 225)

infringing on that person's humanity); for the *self* "being human" means to have one's identity before anything else in the assignment to respond to the other (i.e. removing from the self its obligation to the other is an infringement on the humanity of the self);<sup>26</sup> the *logos* (or identity) that the self inevitably is, now is a *logos* addressed to the other, in response to the other, to the benefit of the other. The identity of the self is a sign for-the-other (cf. HH 13, 122n8). Levinas' humanism is a humanism "of the other human being" in that it could not be a humanism of the single self. It is a humanism that depends on the other, it is "anchored" in alterity, and thus it is a humanism to which the other has the right, it is the other's humanism and thus a humanism for the other. But the humanity of the other and the humanity of the self imply one another mutually in an inseparable way.

### 3.2 Cultural Specifics of Levinas' Argument

Thesis 7. The way in which Levinas conceives of the notion of culture serves to radically undermine, but also to reinvigorate, all particular cultures. The cultural specificity of his own expression in the book *Humanism of the other human being* bears witness to it, and attempts to be true to or obedient to the new notion of culture as ethically orientated by the other.

We have seen then, as announced, that Levinas refers the problematic tension between the self and the other back to a question of the status of the self and the possibility of a trans-cultural meaning that would "make sense" of the plurality of cultures. But he doesn't conclude the discussion of the "cultural and aesthetic notion of meaning" without reinvesting the very notion of culture with a new meaning: "I would say, in conclusion, that before Culture and Aesthetics, meaning is situated in Ethics, which is the presupposition of all Culture and of all

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. HH 109. One sees this asymmetrical, but linked salvaging of the self and the other in different terms also in the preface to TI.

meaning. Morality doesn't belong to Culture: it allows to judge, it uncovers the dimension of height. Height prescribes to being." (HH 58) In a paper of 1983, "Détermination philosophique de l'idée de la culture" (EN 185-194) he takes this perspective on culture further by calling this ethics a "Culture éthique." This notion seems to be justified by the fact that ethics, as the fact of always responding to the other, gives rise to a new notion of spirit/mind (*esprit* – EN 193) that is defined by this responsibility to the other rather than by expressions in art and poetry. It is a culture that is defined in opposition to barbarism, but where barbarism is implicitly defined by the reduction of the human being to *being* (one could recall the remark of Levinas' in EV that "Every civilization that accepts being, the tragic despair that it entails and the crimes that it justifies, deserves the name of barbaric," EV 127). The culture that is ethics is the "Breakthrough of the human in the barbarity of being, even if no philosophy of history could be a guarantee against the return of barbarity." (EN 194) One might perhaps reformulate that this "ethical culture" is a humanism without an optimism of progress. It would also be a humanism without any *Bildung* or cultural formation towards a pre-established model of an ideal human being, but rather a humanism or an ethical culture that is constantly questioned by the other's appeal to responsibility.

But *Humanism of the other human being* allows us a better, albeit surprising, idea of what such an ethical culture is, that transcends all particular cultures and in the light of which all cultural events – also the relations between the self and the other – could be judged. Like all cultures, ethical culture identifies the self. But in Levinas' notion of ethical culture this happens in a very paradoxical way. What is most intimate about one's identity, the very non-founded foundation thereof, is the unique election to be responsible for the other. One's identity is the other in the self, to the point where the meaning of my identity depends decisively on me being for-the-other, as if I were a sign for the other (cf. HH 122n8, as stated above). "Being Myself, henceforth means not being able to shirk responsibility, as if the whole edifice of the creation rested on

my shoulders." (HH 53) And this meaning that constitutes the identity decisively undermines my ontologically constituted identity. The most intimate of the identity of the self is the other that invests it with an infinite obligation. Consciousness, and for the same price, the whole existence of the self "looses its first place," (HH 53) since it is disturbed by an originary alienating proximity of the other.<sup>27</sup> And since the other has the primacy in the identity of the self, Levinas expresses this inversion (or substitution as he also calls it, cf. HH 111), with a grammatical imagery, claiming that "The active I returns to the passivity of a me, to the accusative of the me that derives from no nominative, to the accusation that precedes any fault." (HH 105, similar HH 111) This form of identity in the accusative is expressed in a Biblical formula by which to declare one's ethical availability: "Me voici!" and that Levinas frequently cites (the English, "Here I am!" unfortunately restores the nominative form of the personal pronoun). I am *me* before I am *I*, because of the originary exposure to the other.

My identity is thus not that last stronghold of my being-at-home in the world; it is rather the fact of being "foreign(er) to itself, obsessed by the others, concerned, the Self is a hostage, hostage in its very recurrence of a me that doesn't stop failing itself." (HH 109) In fact the self's identity consists originarily in being without identity (cf. HH 110), since its very identity is constituted by a difference: "The difference that gapes between me and myself, the non-coincidence of the identical, is an intrinsic non-indifference with regards to people." (HH 108-109) Levinas ascribes to the anti-humanist liking for the line of Rimbaud "Je est un autre;" (HH 97 and especially HH 103) he fully embraces a decentring of the subject, but in terms of his own, claiming to be even more radical than the other anti-humanist theorists.

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27 "Dans l'approche d'autrui, où autrui se trouve d'emblée sous ma responsabilité, 'quelque chose' a débordé mes décisions librement prises, s'est glissé en moi à *mon insu*, aliénant ainsi mon identité." (HH 102)

### 3.3. Europe and Judaism and the Discours on a Trans-cultural Ethical Culture

This is the identity with which the trans-cultural ethical culture stamps all agents.<sup>28</sup> It is also the conviction with which Levinas challenges Heidegger (cf. HH 107ff) and with him the entire Western tradition of philosophy and culture (in accordance with what has been stated from the outset – see section I above). However, in this particular part of chapter 3 (IV entitled "L'étrangeté à l'être", strangeness or foreignness to *being*) Levinas clearly sets up two traditions against one another: on the one hand the tradition of the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Heidegger (and the latter's readings of Hölderlin and Trakl) are named and these could be taken to refer to the "être" (being) in the section's title; on the other hand, representing the "étrangeté à..." (strangeness to...) is the Bible (as Levinas says in HH 108, 109), but to be more precise it is the *Tanakh* (what is also referred to as the Old Testament) and the tradition of its interpretation (that echoes the citation of the Babylonian Talmud as epigraph to the chapter), of which the books of Genesis, Leviticus, Lamentations, Jeremiah and the Psalms are named. The aim of the opposition is to further advance the idea of ethics as a strangeness to *being* (that I have explained above; see also the discussion of the in-actuality of ethics). Not only is one's identity originarily not determined by your place in the world or in history, but since the self is a stranger to himself/herself nobody is (originarily) at home (*Personne n'est chez soi* – HH 108<sup>29</sup>).

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28 And the other is as if in the image of God – not an icon of God, but as it were, a trace of God (cf. HH 69).

29 With the theme of being a stranger Levinas implicitly polemicises with Heidegger as author of texts like "Wohnen, Bauen, Denken" and especially the "Brief über den Humanismus" (compare for instance the ethical strangeness with Heidegger's idea of a being-without-home [*Heimatlosigkeit*] that is constituted by a forgetting of being [*Seinsvergessenheit*], as expressed in *Wegmarken*, Gesamtausgabe 9 [Frankfurt-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1967, 1996], p. 339). A careful comparison of these two texts on humanism would bring a myriad of such implicit references to the fore. That would, however, make a separate study. Behind these polemics is a favorite image of Levinas – opposing Ulysses that returns to his patria to Abraham that for ever leaves his behind – as symbols guiding Western civilization and Judaism respectively.

This is as far as the content and purpose of the section is concerned. But this evokes two important questions: firstly, if it is true that the second of these traditions does better justice to ethical alterity, how should its relation to the dominant Western tradition in Europe be considered? This is an intra-cultural question. But the second, trans-cultural question is the following: how could Levinas justify using a particular culture to present the case for the trans-cultural ethical culture?

*Ad 1.* Western culture is dominated by ontology or what Levinas elsewhere calls gnoseology<sup>30</sup>. The practice of placing this form of meaning centrally and maintaining its dominance is possible only by forgetting the ethical meaning of people and veiling this meaning in philosophy (cf. HH 110). Levinas is probably thinking of the Jews in Europe (but not exclusively of them) when he indicates the price of this forgetting and this veiling – the meaning of their suffering, the meaning that considers ethics to be primary and of which their writings testify "is not a philosophical construction, but an unreal reality of persecuted people in the everyday history of the world." (HH 110) Suppression or violence on the level of ontology, reducing ethical meaning to ontology, is reflected in violence in political reality.

*Ad 2.* But Levinas' manner of going about in pointing out this matter should retain our attention. I have said that the third aspect of Levinas' problem with anti-humanism is that of cultural relativism and that this could be solved only if a trans-cultural point of orientation could be found. However, it is impossible for Levinas to do so in a way other than culturally determined: he attempts to develop a discourse on ethics that would be acceptable within the discourse of Greek thinking, i.e. Western philosophy. The choice of discursive partner or opponent is easily imposed by the historical contingency of Levinas' life, but also the dominance of Western civilization in recent world history. He polemises

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30 AE 104: "La philosophie occidentale n'a jamais douté de la stature gnoseologique – et par conséquent ontologique – de la signification."

with this form of discourse exactly for its forgetting of a kind of meaning in the name of which Levinas challenges Western thinking, that is, in obedience to this primary meaning. That meaning, Levinas finds better attested to or more sensitivity shown for, in the tradition of Jewish thought. But one should be careful to understand correctly what he does. On the one hand Levinas explicitly does not want to challenge philosophy with recourse to the authority of religion.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Levinas is aware that his very allegiance to the game rules of Western philosophy becomes a question in the light of the theme of his philosophy, namely the primacy of ethics. This question opens up a space for introducing "the other" (written in inverted commas, since it is meant in the minor sense of cultural difference) of Western philosophy, namely Jewish (religious) thought. And why not, asks Levinas, draw on texts that are equally part of the European cultural heritage as the Hölderlin and Trakl commented on by Heidegger, namely the books of the Jewish Bible? (cf. HH 108) The whole question of the relation between Judaism and the West, between religion and philosophy, is put into play here. Is the other tradition of the West just associated with it by accident, is it only a monster, a historical freak that put Judaism as annex to the West? (cf. HH 108) Or is it testimony to the insistence of the appeal of the other (in the context of the West), of ethnicity in the face of the other (testimony to it, but not the appeal itself<sup>32</sup>)? Jewishness by its existence of living without a State (up to 1948), i.e. living the condition of being a stranger to the world, and bearing the consequences thereof, and by its primacy accorded to ethics *testifies* to the non-being or beyond being (cf. HH 86, 110) suppressed by the West in culture, as in politics.

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31 HH 108: "Les versets bibliques n'ont pas ici pour fonction de faire preuve; mais ils témoignent d'une tradition et d'une expérience."

32 Yet, doesn't Levinas say that there are people (Jews as he implies) whose very existence is one of non-essence or beyond being (cf. HH 110)? As far as this is insinuated, Levinas infringes on his own notion of the alterity of the other as not determined by ontological givens. In saying this, one should however not forget the close link between the mortality of the other (and thus his/her suffering), which is a non-ontological "phenomenon" and alterity.

Of course there is a question of cultural specifics in *Humanism of the other human being*. But the choice of cultural specifics of his polemics is determined by the contingency of the author's historical situation; and the choice for Judaic inspiration is never justified by a supposed superiority of that culture. For Levinas, as far as he is working in philosophy, being Jew, *does not* mean believing in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it does not mean being a child of Abraham, it does not mean being a protagonist for Zionism or living in the State of Israel, it doesn't mean speaking Hebrew (though it doesn't exclude these either) – it means having in final analysis, in what ultimately counts, no identity: being someone else, being without a homeland.<sup>33</sup> For Levinas "Israel, beyond physical Israel, includes all persons who refuse the purely authoritarian verdict of History" (HH 88) and in this sense do not dwell in being, as Heidegger would have it. But since Levinas draws his inspiration from the Jewish testimony and formulates his plea in the language of Western philosophy – both of which are manifestations of *being* – he is obliged, in obedience to originary ethicity which is the theme of his plea, to cross out as it were everything he says. Hence the central importance of the first paragraph of the preface of the book, in which this crossing-out of what follows in the book, is announced. The text in which Levinas pleads for the recognition of the originary ethicity of the other, is inevitably expressed in a particular cultural discourse and thus constitutes the risk that it might at the very moment of testifying to the other, be the first step to its veiling and forgetting.♦

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33 The relation between philosophy and the Jewish religion in Levinas' work is quite complex and there exists up to now no consensus amongst scholars as to how one is to conceive of the articulation between the two elements. I have presented and motivated my own view on this issue in "Giving up Your Place in History: The 'Position' of Levinas in Philosophy and Jewish Thought," in *Journal for Semitics*, 16, 1 (2007), pp. 180-193.

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