

# The Ethical Condition of Knowledge



# The Ethical Condition of Knowledge

A report from the 100 year anniversary of the Levinas seminar  
on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006 in Kristiansand, Norway

Edited by Dag G. Aasland

## Summary

This report contains three papers presented at a Levinas seminar held in Kristiansand on June 19, 2006. In an introduction written by Dag G. Aasland, the title of the report “The Ethical Condition of Knowledge” and its meaning are discussed. Here, the Levinasian ethical perspective on knowledge is presented, viewing as it does the development of knowledge as a response to the questioning of others. In the first contribution following this introduction, Asbjørn Aarnes presents the philosophy of Levinas as a response to that of Heidegger. Secondly, Ole Andres Bjerkeset discusses the question of whether one can speak of “meaningful knowledge” according to Levinas. Finally, Roger Burggraave demonstrates the manner in which Levinas’ knowledge is imparted when applied in the service of justice.

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## Introduction

by Dag G. Aasland<sup>1</sup>

The three contributions following this introduction were all presented at a seminar held at Agder University College in Kristiansand in June 2006, commemorating Emmanuel Levinas one hundred years after his birth.<sup>2</sup>

Why the title “The Ethical Condition of Knowledge?” Given the fact that the seminar has taken place at an academic institution, it is natural to focus on knowledge. Moreover, when dealing with Levinas, one cannot escape “the ethical condition.” However, it is not only for these reasons we chose to address “the ethical condition of knowledge.” I will argue below that the heritage from Levinas itself inevitably leads us to this theme.

The title indicates that the ethics *resulting* from the acquisition or possession of knowledge – a topic that has received much attention through its relation to so-called “professional” and “research ethics” – will not be discussed in depth. Rather, the title is meant to focus on how *knowledge follows ethics*: According to Levinas, ethics always comes first in answering the call to respond to the Other. However, parallel to the encounter with the Other is a confrontation with *the third*, and one is thus forced to compare and to judge these encounters. In order to achieve a higher degree of justice from this process, more knowledge is continually required. In this manner the search for knowledge follows ethics. In other words, in this introduction I want to focus on the “*response-ability*” of knowledge, meaning the *ability* of knowledge to fill the *response* from the subject to the Other – and to the third – with a content that gives meaning to all parts involved. After having accomplished this, the question remains: Is it not also a consequence of Levinas that the ultimate criterion for what is relevant knowledge is that the person or the profession possessing it is also responsible for it in the sense that one is able to defend it with respect to justice? I will claim that an affirmative answer to this question can be supported by the discussions in this report.

In the first of the following contributions, Asbjørn Aarnes brings us from the fundamental ontology of Heidegger to the fundamental ethics of Levinas. Through doing so, Levinas clears a space for something that *precedes* ontology, or, as he

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<sup>1</sup> Dag G. Aasland is Professor of Economics at Agder University College.

<sup>2</sup> I wish to thank Karin Lee-Hansen for the English proof-reading.

himself says, something that is “more ontological than ontology<sup>3</sup>.” This can be explained as follows: The basic ontological question of what is meant by *being* is closely connected to language, as it is by using language we declare something as being. However, Levinas insists that ethics is more basic than this: Ethics already exists before any language is used. What is “more ontological than ontology” is the call to respond to the person addressing me, not by what he says, but from the fact that he speaks to me.

To say that ethics comes before ontology is another way of saying that ethics – and not ontology – is the primary source of *meaning*. Meaning is not, as may be supposed, found through a search for knowledge about the world or what *is*. Meaning is found in ethics, in being an *I-for-the-other*, separated from any knowledge creation. Is this equivalent to saying that knowledge is degraded from being the carrier of meaning to becoming void of meaning? Is knowledge according to Levinas meaningless? Has the term “meaningful knowledge” been by a single Levinasian stroke turned from being a pleonasm to becoming an oxymoron? This question is addressed by Ole Andreas Bjerkeset in the next section. He concludes that Levinas believes it is in fact meaningful to speak of “meaningful knowledge.” This conclusion is followed up by the last contribution to this report in which Roger Burggraeve gives an extraordinary clear presentation of the philosophy of Levinas and through this presentation discusses how the works of Levinas provide a new understanding of both knowledge and the meaningfulness of knowledge. The call both from the Other and from *the third* (who is also the Other), someone who may be an employer, a colleague, or a stranger, inspires me to seek knowledge that is required to continuously obtain an even better justice.

In academia we like to tell ourselves that our knowledge at some point in history was liberated from being *dogmatic* to becoming *critical*. We wish to think that this break from dogmatism marked the end of a naïveté in the belief in an objective truth applied once and for all to every human being. However, as Levinas asks in his appraisal of Derrida’s work: “Are we again at the end of a naïveté, of an unsuspected dogmatism which slumbered at the base of that which we took for critical spirit?”<sup>4</sup> Otherwise stated: Are all the theories we love to construct during our academic endeavors nothing but “old wine in new bottles” in the sense that they are assumed to be assigned

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<sup>3</sup> Levinas, E. *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Stanford University Press 1998, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Levinas, E. “Wholly Otherwise”. In Bernasconi, R. and S. Critchley, *Re-Reading Levinas*. Indiana University Press 1991, p. 3.



the same status of objective truths as the previous dogmas? And yet perhaps this question is not the least bit important; all theories as well as all “old” dogmas belong to the realm of *ontology*, that is, to the world of what is declared to *be*. Consequently, as already mentioned, they depend on language, and thus (according to Levinas) they are founded upon – and are not foundations for – ethics.

In today’s society academic institutions are scrutinised and placed under pressure to become more commercially oriented. A common reaction from academics to these attacks is to speak warmly for a return to “the good old days” when they could cultivate their own theories without being disturbed and questioned by anyone outside their own circles. According to Levinas, this has become an increasingly difficult form of retreat: The “I” becomes an “I” by being questioned, not only by his peers, but also by the totally different Other. In the world of academia, this acknowledgement may chart a way of meeting the pressure for too much commercialisation, or, to remain within business terminology, of setting a benchmark for knowledge creation that is both deeper and higher than that of always attaining higher profits.

The fact that all development as well as dissemination of knowledge depends on language implies that these activities have to be, as language is itself, *intersubjective*; that is, they take place between subjects within a common socio-cultural space. But the question may therefore be posed as to whether there is anything real that is invariable and universally valid, independent from all these socio-cultural contexts. Stated otherwise, is there a reality independent of the numerous socio-culturally conditioned discourses in which development and dissemination of knowledge, and thus also a continuous change in this knowledge, take place? In answer to this question, many people would reply that the invariable “fixed point” is the outer world, the empirically given, before it is interpreted by humans, perhaps even before it is observed, as observations also imply both selection and interpretation. However, even with this fixed point consisting of a physical reality as a common point of departure, an abundance of different discourses seems to run in all possible directions (what Jean-François Lyotard<sup>5</sup> calls *language games*). This holds true *unless* there is also *another* fixed point, one that all discourses (or language games) have as a common, underlying aim (beyond the more trivial purpose of solving practical and economic problems). It could be a point upon which they all converge, a point which (along with the first

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<sup>5</sup> Lyotard, J.-F. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated from the French by Geoff Benington and Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1984.

fixed point of a common outer world) constitutes the two poles between which all discourses move. From Levinas – and from the following contributions – we learn that there *is* such a second fixed point which is *the Other*, and which can assume the shape of any other human being, someone to whom I as a separate being will have to answer in any specific actual encounter.

Before elaborating further on this point, let me first summarise what has been said so far by claiming that there are two “fixed points” that are independent of the intersubjective and socio-cultural conditioned discourses and their respective “knowledges.” These two points are:

1. The outer world; that is, physical objects and indisputable events
2. The Other, experienced as a call to respond with something for which I must account

All discourses and all knowledge fill the space between these two fixed points with a content that varies in accordance with time and space. In fact, what the subject does when he is called upon to respond to another person addressing him – at this point he has no other options – is to refer to something that is (there and then) known by both. This may either be the common, outer world, or it may also be a “truth” extracted from some other commonly known discourse. In any case, the way to making this response is to go into one of the many possible discourses that are known to both. According to Levinas, it is exactly in the response to the call from another person that language and knowledge are constructed. Knowledge is the product of the efforts of the subject to respond in a credible way to the questioning from the Other. Only by going into some temporarily existing intersubjective discourses can the subject respond to the call from the other person, because it is only in this manner that the subject can refer to something that is commonly known to both. In other words, it is only by applying existing knowledge through discourse and its related language that the subject may behave responsibly towards the Other.

Theories are good examples of such constructions. Theories are constructed in order to form a meaning within an intersubjective, socio-cultural context (such as a scientific paradigm), through connecting the outer world with the need of the subject to account for some question in a credible way.

In all enterprises engaged in development and dissemination of theories and other forms of knowledge, such as in an academic institution, it may be useful to keep these two fixed points clearly in mind in order to understand and accept that both the (parallel) ongoing discourses and their related “areas of knowledge” may change according to time and context, in form as well as in content. The ultimate criterion of *truth* within each discourse, then, must be whether what is said is considered to be a credible response from one subject to the other.

How then is knowledge actually developed from this basic event of responding to the call from another person? It is widely known that with regard to any subject, there is always more than one other person to whom one must relate. One will always have to deal with several other people, while at the same time each individual in turn may play the role as the one to whom the subject is called to respond. Thus it will not be sufficient to respond to only one other person. What is said must also be accounted for to any possible third party. This implies that the subject has to be aware that his response to the other must also be credible to *other Others*; one will have to account for what is said to more than only the one person one is at that moment addressing. The awareness of this possibility works as a disciplining force on all players of the discourses that develop and disseminate knowledge. Rules of scientific method, (consistency, reliability, validity etc.) as well as other explicit criteria of truth within any given discourse may be understood based on what are these basically ethical conditions.

To summarise, the fact that there exists more than one other person to address determines what is held to be “true” in the sense of being credible in any discourse; that is, in anything that is said by a subject as a response to the presence of another person. What is said and claimed as true must be understood within the discourse as a sincere attempt to be *for the others*. This means that the subject must enter into the discourse with the intention of making a sincere attempt to achieve an always more just balance among different (and sometimes opposing) interests. In these attempts one will never attain perfection; nonetheless, achieving credibility will depend on whether one is believed to do one’s best in the effort of balancing all possible interests:

“... justice remains justice only in a society where there is no distinction between those close and those far off, but in which there also remains the impossibility of passing by the closest.”<sup>6</sup>

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The consequences of this Levinasian lesson on knowledge appear to be huge. Gone are the days when an academic could cultivate his own ideas without the fear of being disturbed and questioned by anyone outside his own circle. On the other hand, knowledge produced for the single purpose of increasing profit, for either an individual enterprise or the academic institution itself, will not be able to account for itself faced with both the Other and the third.

Must not the conclusion be that all development and dissemination of knowledge will have to account for the purpose of justice in order to be credible (including a credible definition of the word “justice”)? Can knowledge be legitimate if it is not applicable in the service of justice? These are fundamental questions posed from both acknowledging the profound questioning of Levinas and reading the following contributions. The answers cannot be found within merely another discourse. On the contrary, it remains to be seen in the time to come; no single individual is in the position of being able to answer on behalf of humanity.

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<sup>6</sup> Levinas, E. *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*. Kluwer Academic Press 1991, p. 159

## Heidegger and Levinas

by Asbjørn Aarnes<sup>7</sup>

Speaking about Heidegger and Levinas is a demanding assignment, as they must be two of the most difficult philosophers in the history of philosophy. Moreover, they are so entangled in each other that it is difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins. In a presentation such as this, it is important to grasp the essentials of both Heidegger's and Levinas' writings. I will make this attempt and conclude by highlighting one topic which is of great contemporary value.

The situation regarding Levinas in Norway is quite unique. His philosophy has had repercussions on various fields of study, for example medicine, pedagogy and (to a certain extent) theology. In addition, we must mention Dag Aasland's contribution, which expands the Levinasian sphere to include economics. As regards the Norwegian situation in particular, much more might be added to this list. For example, courses have been organised at different hospitals; at the Deaconess' Hospital in Oslo, and, more recently, at the new University Hospital in Akershus, where Levinas' philosophy has been integrated in its planning stages. Viewed from a traditional understanding of philosophy, this seems extraordinary. If it were a question of Thomas Aquinas' or Cartesian philosophy, it would be considered dogmatism. It would merely be a declaration of intent, excluding some points while admitting a very few. However, Levinas' philosophy has a particular quality: it is very complicated but simultaneously very elementary. Levinas himself has said: "My philosophy begins *before* Philosophy, and ends *after* Philosophy." Thus when these hospitals use it as part of their foundation, this is the essence that animates them, i.e. to receive the Other. This is in accordance with Levinas' fundamental belief, which he stresses when stating that philosophy comes after *diaconia*, after concern and care. Thus there is no particular interpretation that justifies his philosophy; we only have his word on it. (If it is of interest to obtain more information concerning Levinas' philosophy being utilised in this context, an article on this topic written by the former chief medical superintendent of Akershus University Hospital appeared in *Dagsavisen* on 10.10.05.)

However, let us next move on to the given topic, i.e. the relationship between Heidegger and Levinas. First a few biographical notes: Levinas met Heidegger in 1928, when he went to Freiburg to study. It was not intended that he would develop a

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<sup>7</sup> Asbjørn Aarnes is Professor Emeritus of European Literature at the University of Oslo.

relationship with Heidegger. He went to Freiburg to listen to Husserl, who was conducting his final seminar that year before retiring. As Levinas himself has explained, "I went to find Husserl, but I found Heidegger." Heidegger was already attracting attention beside his master, Edmund Husserl, an attention which captivated Levinas. Thus when writing about the great names in the history of philosophy, he mentions Heidegger, not Husserl. This relationship with Heidegger, which began in Freiburg, developed different aspects over the years, and lasted until his final works were completed. Burggraeve, who has assembled his bibliography, will be able to relate this story in a more complete version. I believe Heidegger's name is the one that appears most often in his works.

I will not delve more deeply into Levinas' period of study in Freiburg, but will mention one event: Heidegger's invitation to Levinas to participate in the Conference of Davos in 1929. It was a memorable conference of which Ernst Cassirer and Heidegger were the leading figures, but their roles were reversed; Cassirer, the Kantian, lectured on Heidegger, and Heidegger lectured on Kant. Levinas' great discovery in reading Heidegger's chef d'oeuvre, *Sein und Zeit* (*Being and Time*), is that *sein* – to be – is a verb, not a substantive. This signifies a turning away from French essentialism towards a philosophy of existence, i.e. Heidegger's fundamental ontology. *Sein* is a verb of action. It denotes an event which is audible, if not visible.

The other great biographical event between Heidegger and Levinas is, of course, their relationship to Nazism. We know that Heidegger was appointed Vice Chancellor of the University of Freiburg, and that he treated Husserl in a demeaning fashion. Heidegger had become a member of the German Nazi Party (a lamentable chapter in the history of philosophy). When Hans Jonas returned from the United States after the war, he wanted to see his old teachers, and Heidegger had been his great master. He had failed, and Jonas regarded it as a tragedy, not merely on the personal scale, but also a tragedy for philosophy as a whole. However, there was also a lesser German philosopher, Ebbinghaus, whom Jonas wanted to visit. Ebbinghaus had not failed, and Jonas went to see him to thank him for not having yielded to the temptation of Nazism. Ebbinghaus replied quite modestly, "All of this is due to Kant. I am obliged to Kant for everything. But for Kant, I should not have had the strength to resist." For Jonas it is significant that the great, brilliant one failed, whereas the mediocre, insignificant one resisted the temptation of falling in with evil.

The reaction against Heidegger for his relationship to Nazism was and is violent in its nature. One of the first phenomenologists, Roman Ingarden, never reconciled with Heidegger. When Ingarden was lecturing in Oslo, he remarked, "Phenomenology was destroyed by the two H's: Hitler and Heidegger." Levinas never said that. One may ask whether he tried to excuse Heidegger when stating that Heidegger was seduced by Hitler, not by Nazism. It may sound like a strange form of excuse. It seems to indicate that something personal, something existential, determined Heidegger's choice. There was also a massive condemnation of Heidegger in France among people less affected by Nazism than Levinas, who spent the war years in a German concentration camp and lost his whole family in Lithuania. It is not evident that that was due to the Germans, for the Lithuanians also turned against the enemies of Germany in their own country. Lithuania was occupied by the Russians, as we know, and they regarded the Germans as liberators. At any rate, Levinas' entire family was eradicated. A Swedish journalist once asked him, "Will you not be going to Lithuania since you will be so close to it when in Sweden?," he replied, "Never, ever, again!"

These were the external circumstances surrounding the situation.

### **Heidegger's Presence in Levinas' Work**

There are two phases in Heidegger's philosophy. The first is associated with *Sein und Zeit*, the second has been called: the "turning to the poets." In Levinas' philosophy we also find two phases: the first one, which is mainly associated with his essay, *On Evasion* (*De l'évasion*, 1936), and the second, which is associated with the bulk of his work. It comprises his doctoral thesis of 1961, *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority* as well as his remarkable thesis with the mysterious title, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, which literally means: "Beyond Being, or Beyond the Being of Being." "Essence" in this context does not mean what we traditionally think of as "essence." Rather, it is the verbal substantive of "esse", "essence" ("essance"), being's being - that is, a continuous being. There is also his work from 1982, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* - "Of God Who Comes to Mind". I should also like to mention *The Humanism of the Other*, which has been translated into Norwegian. It is considered to be significant as it represents a transition between the two phases of Levinas' philosophy.

Upon comparing Heidegger and Levinas, one notices that the first phase of Heidegger is manifested in Levinas, in the initial phase of *his* philosophy. The philosophy of the young Levinas, which is associated with his essay *On Evasion*, is somehow a form of fundamental ontology, as is the case with Heidegger, since "being" plays its central part. However, it is not a similar notion of "being" that we encounter in Heidegger. To him, Being is before all "beings". Being is sovereign to the extent that one might say that it is man's "home." Moreover, *the forgetfulness of being* has led to the failure of the West, to our becoming displaced and cast into the flow of time. The goal of this first phase is to overcome the forgetfulness of being and regain the fullness of being. It is like an echo of the Greek *anamnesis* – the remembering. The task of *Dasein* (human existence) is to reinstate oneself in being. In order to achieve this, mankind has only one means: death. Heidegger elaborates on Cicero's words: "To philosophise is to learn to die." In Heidegger it is not a question of learning to die, but rather one of returning to being, and that is rendered possible only by confronting death. He challenges his opponent, which is death, and conquers it by dying his own death. Thus one might say that the first phase of Heidegger's philosophy teaches a kind of heroism; authentic life depends on heroic action, as opposed to inauthentic life, which is "one's" life.

Being also plays the leading role for the young Levinas, but his relationship to being is totally different from Heidegger's. According to Levinas, there is no heroism. He has noticed that there is something superhuman, or rather inhuman, about being. "It tramps along on its own," as he put it. *It tramps along on its own*. It is both unable to be ashamed and unable to show consideration. Being is beyond the capabilities of man. Thus Levinas feels it is a question of escaping the onus of being. In Levinas, Heidegger's creative, sovereign being has become a burden that crushes man. He asks at one point, "What is humanity, and what is humanity's relationship to being?" To Heidegger, humanity is heroism, while to Levinas, humanity is "the being that weeps." (*L'humanité, c'est l'être qui pleure*) Like so many of Levinas' statements, it is a metaphor of profound significance in which we sense that Heidegger's philosophy of power has become a philosophy of powerlessness. As Zygmunt Bauman – whose philosophical foundation is rooted in Levinas – has put it: "*Face is not force.*"

In the second phase of Heidegger's philosophy, his "turning to the poets" (Hölderlin, Trakl, Stefan George and others), heroism has disappeared. Man has been given the task of being Being's shepherd. Levinas does not like this phase in Heidegger. He says



somewhere that it is "less accessible to control." This is not a Levinasian expression, for "control" is not particularly high on his agenda. He probably misses logical thought and argumentation. *Sein und Zeit* was his great discovery, which remains a continuing inspiration not only for acceptance but also rejection. In the beginning Levinas follows in Heidegger's footsteps, but in his second phase he parts from Heidegger and leaves Being behind – it is the end of ontology ("*Fin de l'ontologie*").

It is the 'late' Levinasian philosophy that is best known and connected with the epiphany of *the face*. We will not elaborate on how this happens. Nor is it possible to trace how the face appears. It is suddenly there – the face of the Other, the face of another human being. The end of ontology turns out to be the introduction to Levinas' *fundamental ethics*. In this phase Heidegger only plays a secondary, cautionary role. If one had a look at his outline for aesthetics from 1947, one might perceive a certain continuation of Heidegger's influence, but it is the face of the Other that remains the beacon, the lodestar that shows both the meaning and direction of Levinas' philosophy. This is where his great influence makes itself felt. This turning toward the face of the Other is the great event, and we have both heard and hear in his writings that 'the face' is not what the sculptor sees. Neither is it what the photographer photographs, or the painter paints, or the physiologist observes. It is not a visual but rather an audible face, the first that speaks to us in the world, issuing the following command: "Thou shalt not kill!" (Exodus 20). There is another reference that is relevant for Levinas in the Book of Kings (Kings I 19: 11-13): The prophet Elijah lives through a storm, an earthquake and a fire. In the end "there came the sound of a gentle breeze," i.e. a natural sound. Levinas translates the same quotation as "the voice of feeble silence" ("*la voix du fin silence*") – it is the voice of God who is speaking in the face of the Other. But it is a God who is no longer in heaven; he is only accessible through the face of the Other.

## **A New Davos?**

Although Levinas developed his philosophy in a direction turning away from Heidegger's own thoughts on being, the latter did meet him at a central point in his philosophy. At a seminar in Zurich in 1951, when the discussion turned to the phenomenon of ontological difference, Heidegger was asked: "Can God and Being (*Sein*) be posited as identical?" In his answer, Heidegger opens a new line of thought in relation to his former fundamental ontology:

”I am asked this question almost every other week; it seems that this concept preoccupies the theologians. It is connected with the Europeanisation of history, which started in the Middle Ages, when Aristotle and Plato entered the arena of theology found in the New Testament. This is a process whose serious implications cannot be exaggerated. I have asked a Jesuit, who was friendly to me, to show me the texts in Thomas Aquinas, where it might be explained what ‘*esse*’ (being) actually signifies, and what the sentence *Deus est suum esse* (God is his [own] being) implies, but I never received a reply... God and Being (Sein) are not identical, and I should never try to think of God’s essence from Being. Some of you perhaps know that I started out from theology, and that I have kept my love for it. If I were to write a theology, to which I am often tempted, the word *Sein* would not be found there.”

He further points out that faith does not need Being. If it does so, it is then no longer faith. While Luther understood this idea (“*Sola fide!*”), his church seems to have forgotten it. Heidegger concludes his answer with the following remarks: ”As concerns Being, nothing can be done. I am very modest when I consider Being with a view to its suitability to perceiving God’s being theologically. ... I think that being must never be thought of as God’s foundation and essence, but that the experience of God and the revelation of God nevertheless take place (insofar as man has this experience) in the dimension of being, but that it in no way indicates that being might be a possible predicate of God. Here, new distinctions are needed.” (Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 15, pp. 425-439).

This is where Heidegger comes close to the ‘late’ Levinas’ philosophy, which seeks beyond ”the being of Being”, beyond the emergence or event of being. The most important event according to Levinas takes place outside Being both during the encounter with the face of the Other and in the glimpse of God in that face. Thus he says that Hamlet does not reach the core in his question of ”to be or not to be.” The God who acts through the face and only there, which Levinas at one point calls ”the voice of feeble silence” and at another the *illéité* (“being He”) has no Being; ”He” acts without Being.

This experience of transcendence is not limited to theology. Linguistics, the philosophy of language, contains a similar phenomenon. When it asserts that the smallest semantic units of language (phonemes) are elements of *form*, not of content

(Roman Jacobsen), it means that while the diacritical aspects do act, they do so without Being.

This experience of transcendence gives direction and meaning to Levinas' philosophy. The fact that Heidegger comes closer to Levinas in Switzerland is reminiscent of the Davos Conference when Levinas, as Heidegger's personal guest, met fundamental ontology *de vive voix*.

In conclusion, I will look at Levinas' philosophy in light of the history of philosophy. His philosophy arrived at a point in time which is called "the era of crises" (Ricœur), when many "losses" were registered. What had already been lost for centuries was the loss of the world. Cartesian idealism makes it clear that philosophers know with more certainty that the ego exists than that the world exists. Descartes does not need God to know who he is and that he is. But he needs God to know that things are. There have been questions in existence regarding the world that have tantalised philosophers for centuries.

Another loss is linked to the nineteenth century and the philosophy of suspicion as it is found in Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and even such an unsuspecting philosopher (or philologist) as Ferdinand de Saussure. This suspicion (perhaps better articulated by Ricœur than by anyone else) implies that the knowledge of self is also uncertain. Descartes believed that while knowledge of the world is uncertain, knowledge of self is certain. Today, however, even the knowledge of self is lost. You can no longer sit down, like Descartes, search yourself and find the truth. Why? Because you may be altered and influenced by your financial status, race, class, etc. Thus, your understanding of yourself is false, a false consciousness. This is the double loss that faces Levinas, a factor he takes into account. Therefore we understand him when he states that one has to have lost something in order to understand his fundamental ethics. If a person is perfectly content, he will not be able to discover anything in his philosophy. It is Levinas himself who spells this out, and I imagine that I understand him. Moreover, if we go further and ask: "What is left after such a loss: nothing?", the face of the Other looms over us with a new certainty. If we regard this from the point of view of the history of philosophy, we know that ontology originated with Aristotle, who formulated the question: "What was to be?" It is not "What *is* to be?", but "What *was* to be?" This is the introduction to the form of science which is still asking what

*was* to be. It is the introduction to ontology, which is struck down by crisis, even a double crisis: the knowledge of the world, and the knowledge of self.

The other question of origin is Jewish, deriving from the question “Where is your brother, Abel?” This marks the introduction of ethics into the philosophy of Western thought. It is this question, says Levinas, that has never lost its relevance, but rather has remained intact through all crises. Here I will allow myself to mention a metaphor, one which reminds us of the Flood. Noah sends birds from the Ark; some return, others do not. However, in the end, after many days and weeks have passed and the earth has begun to dry up, a very special dove returns holding an olive branch in its beak, which serves as testimony that the world is once more habitable.

If we regard Levinas from this perspective, one may say that the Holocaust, during which six million Jews lost their lives, was a new Flood (Levinas himself lost nearly his entire family with the exception of his wife and children, who were in hiding in France). The face might then be compared to the new olive branch which testified that the world was habitable again. The face moves beyond every individual context – “I see a face.” It is a message from the outside: the world is again a place where man may live.

*Translated by Mette Nygård*

# What is Meaningful Knowledge?

by Ole Andreas Bjerkeset<sup>8</sup>

The title of my paper is the question “What is meaningful knowledge?” This is clearly a philosophical question, yet is not one that has been posed very often by philosophers. Why? The reason is that in the history of philosophy knowledge usually in and of itself is regarded as meaningful. According to philosophical tradition, knowing something is already an encounter with meaning, which is thereby not something that is added to knowledge from outside knowledge itself. Knowledge is meaning precisely insofar as it is just that: knowledge. But not only is knowledge regarded as an instance of meaning, it is also viewed as the very paradigm of meaning. Knowledge is meaning *par excellence*. Consider, for example, Aristotle’s claim in the opening line of the *Metaphysics*: “By nature, all men desire to know.” This is not some random characteristic, but points to the very essence of man. What defines man, according to Aristotle, is not the fact that he walks upright; nor is it Shakespearean passions. What defines man is the capacity for reason, the possibility of living a life in accordance with this capacity and of employing it in research and contemplation of the first principles of thought and universe. Symptomatically, Aristotle clearly states in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that it is the *bios theoretikos*, the contemplative life, which yields the highest form of happiness.

Obviously, this is not just the tendency in Aristotle, but in all Greek philosophy and, consequently, the general tendency in subsequent philosophies until today. The classic paradigm is that of the Platonic myth of the soul as set forth in the *Phaedrus*. What life is really about is the drama of the soul, which at birth finds itself cast into exile, delivered into oblivion, but which nonetheless retains a vague sense of home and belonging. The journey home, however, is not made by climbing mountains and crossing rivers, but by recollecting a knowledge that the soul enjoyed before the fall into the body. But this knowledge regained does not constitute a map that would indicate this lost home. Home is not a place: it is knowledge itself.

We understand then that the question “What is meaningful knowledge?” is not itself automatically meaningful. There is obviously no problem in asking “What is knowledge?” as is asked in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, nor is it a problem asking the question “What is meaning?.” However, the question “What is meaningful knowledge?” is not

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so easily posed. According to the tradition already cited, this question would probably have to be viewed as tautological. The question “What is meaningful knowledge?” would then seem equivalent to the question “What is meaningful meaning?” Should the question be considered meaningful, one would therefore first have to call into question this venerable tradition that names knowledge as being the destiny of man. This is obviously not an easy endeavour, but it is exactly the undertaking that the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is attempting.

Levinas asks if it is obvious that knowledge is the measure of meaning. Is it really knowledge that constitutes the essence of the human being? Is there not something in the drama of being human that is better than knowledge, which exceeds the adequacy of thought and being? Does there not exist a relationship with the world, or if the concept of world sounds too Heideggerian, a relationship as such that is not one of knowledge, and that is not only meaningful, but in fact also creates the order of meaning? Levinas points to the encounter with another human being and claims that this encounter is different from the encounter with the world, which is consummated in knowledge. There is obviously a sense in which another human being is in the world and as such something to know, but there is also a sense in which this other human being is not of the world and in which it resists being known. This resistance, however, is not a violent resistance; nor is the inability to encompass the other a result of an insufficient reason. This inability is not caused by a lack of ability, as if a reason better equipped would be capable of knowing the other. The resistance is ethical and of a peaceful nature.

This resistance is consequently not a result of force, as it is constituted by the absence of force; it is the resistance of weakness, a weakness of such little strength that it seems to fall out of being altogether. It is as if it cannot maintain itself in being. It is as if this resistance creates a gap in being itself, but this gap is not the one Sartre was speaking of when he said that the other was a gap in the world. According to Sartre, this gap constitutes a void, a nothingness, but Levinas traces something else in the face of the Other: he traces the overflowing of infinity that speaks of a responsibility without end. There is an inscription in the face of the Other that cannot be read, but only heard, and this inscription is not in the indicative, but rather in the imperative. It is the commandment “Thou shalt not commit murder.” This commandment is not an appeal to our understanding, and it is not content that must first be understood by reason before it can take effect. The face of the Other makes a claim on us before

consciousness enters the arena. When consciousness wakes up, something has already happened. I am responsible for the Other without ever signing up for this responsibility. Consciousness was never offered the opportunity to reject it. It arrived too late, as the decision had already been made. But the point here is also that it would always arrive too late. However strenuous the efforts of consciousness to stay awake would have been, it would still always arrive too late, and the reason is that this vigilance is precisely that which in this case constitutes its sleep.

The relationship with the face is not, then, that of intentionality, where consciousness is directed towards some object. If there is intentionality in this relationship, it is a reversed intentionality. The I does not act, but is acted upon; however, as we have already pointed out, it is not acted upon by a force, but rather by the absolute absence of force. This absence of force is, however, not the negation of force. The face is neither negation nor negativity. If that were the case, the weakness of the Other would still refer to force. It would still remain within the dialectic of force. The weakness of the Other is of another sort: it is not an inability that just lacks ability. It is weaker than a stone that does not have the ability to move itself. The Other is so weak that not only does this weakness fall short of being an object of the intentionality of consciousness, it returns as a claim made on this intentionality. The Other, Levinas says, is actually so weak that it makes a claim on us, so weak that this weakness becomes a demand.

The face of the Other is the upsurge of the human in being. It is in terms of the responsibility for the Other that the human must be understood, though not in terms of knowledge nor in terms of the employment of certain cognitive powers. The face of the Other places a burden on me, but this burden also tells me who I am and why I am here in this world. This burden thus does not just weigh upon me; it also lifts me up and is itself uplifting. There is exaltation in this burden. This means that not only does there exist meaning outside the realm of knowledge, but this meaning is also the very measure of meaning: the face of the Other signifies *par excellence*. We may then conclude that there does indeed exist something in the drama of the human being that is better than knowledge, and this is the responsibility for the Other, or ethics. This is why Levinas claims that ethics cannot be a branch of philosophy, but must be considered the base of philosophy itself. There exists something better and more important than the insights that logic, theory of knowledge, philosophy of language and so on may yield. Ethics is not something that can wait for the philosopher to finish answering his questions. In this sense Levinas places a limitation on philosophy: no

matter how many questions are still left unanswered, one answer has been given before a question was even posed: I am responsible for the Other. This cannot be undone by any philosophy or inquiry. One may certainly enquire into the specifics of Levinas' philosophy (one may even disagree with him), but when the Other faces, one leaves philosophy entirely to enter the realm of ethics, and of this realm I am not in charge.

Levinas has then wrested the exclusivity of meaning from knowledge. Knowledge is no longer the paradigm or measure of meaning. But what happens to knowledge when it no longer enjoys this privileged position? Is knowledge still meaningful? Obviously, meaning is not something that can be ascribed by means of argumentation, nor is it accomplished by means of deduction. Meaning is a phenomenological event, and as such it does not need support from something extraneous to this self-revelation to retain its status as meaning. Meaning is not something that requires a basis, as it is something one simply encounters. According to this line of thought, if knowledge shows itself as being meaningful, then it cannot be without meaning.

After reading Levinas, however, something may well still happen to this meaning that previously has been allocated to, and more importantly, encountered in the sphere of knowledge. In the philosopher's case it is not unthinkable that the philosophy of Levinas would in fact make this meaning evaporate. Why is this so? The reason is that the meaning of ethics, which is meaning *par excellence*, overshadows all other meaning. With the face of the Other, the philosophical question of meaning is already answered, leaving no room for a realisation of the human as such in philosophical questioning itself. Meaning no longer consists in the quest for meaning; instead, the true site of meaning reveals this quest to be an illness which leads to death. The philosopher may paradoxically find himself in a situation where he no longer cares for knowledge, where he no longer is interested in posing the ever unanswerable question "Why?". In ethics there is no "why?". There is no time to ask this question. If you ask "why," you are removed from the faces of others. However, when the Other faces you, the commandment that is inscribed in the face makes you choke on your question. Ethics puts knowledge to shame. The glory of the infinite in the face of the Other outstrips knowledge and questioning of all its grandeur and dignity.

It seems then that our little investigation into the question "What is meaningful knowledge?" has led us to a conclusion that is the opposite of our starting point. Beginning with the question did not seem meaningful because knowledge in and of



itself was considered the measure of meaning. The meaningfulness of the question seemed accordingly to depend on calling into question the presumption that meaning and knowledge implicate each other. This calling into question of knowledge has, however, apparently led us to the conclusion that knowledge has no meaning at all. The vast field of knowledge and research would then be but a desert eclipsed by the face of the Other.

Nonetheless, is it possible that the entire philosophical tradition from the ancient Greeks up to today could be so wrong in holding knowledge in such high regard? The answer to this question is perhaps both yes and no. What is clear after reading Levinas is that knowledge can no longer be regarded as the essence of the human being. The essence of the human being is in fact not an essence at all – it is the undoing of essence, a peaceful resistance that awakens consciousness to a responsibility for the other. Obviously, there is also some truth to the Aristotelian notion that happiness is found in the use of the abilities that are distinctive to the human species. And we most certainly would have to count happiness as an instance of meaning, although Levinas flatly rejects the notion that the essence of the human being has anything to do with happiness.

Perhaps more importantly: When discussing Aristotle and the Greeks, we should also remember the emphasis that the Greeks put on public life and community. There is a big difference between a quest for knowledge that is disconnected from any human bond and inquiries that have already been highlighted by the human being. Not only are there contentions and arguments in the dialogues of Plato, but there are also faces. When Socrates and Theaetetus enquire into the essence of knowledge, it is not certain that they find themselves only within the realm of philosophy. The questions that Socrates poses to Theaetetus may well be an expression of Socrates' being-for-the-other.

We understand then that meaningful knowledge derives its meaning from the ethical. It is because the human being already has ascribed meaning to the scene that knowledge is made meaningful, and that every significant human activity is meaningful. Without the meaning of the ethical, no meaning could ever survive. From this perspective, however, the meaningfulness of knowledge would perhaps not be very different from that of the meaningfulness of play. But there is also a sense in which knowledge not only is meaningful but also crucial. We may recall that ethics

begins with the face of the Other, or with an I facing an other. But these two are not alone in the world. There is the third party, which troubles the infinite responsibility for the Other. With the third party we are not only concerned with ethics but also with justice and, consequently, politics. And in the realm of the political, knowledge and reason return to the heart of the human being. It is still true that knowledge and reason no longer characterise the essence of the human being, but they are nonetheless essentially bound to the undoing of essence, which *is* the essence of the human being. Reason and knowledge are not to be regarded as accidental traits of human beings, but rather as necessary for the never-ending realisation of ethics which occurs in politics. It is as if the philosophers were in fact correct in holding knowledge and reason in such high regard. They just did not see the real reason why they did so.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that in Levinas' writings, meaning is a fragile thing. The ethical cannot for obvious reasons be secured in knowledge. It is when the Other faces one that the meaning of the ethical is incontestable. When this happens, even the Cartesian *cogito* does not measure up in terms of certainty. But we are not always present in this relationship to the Other, and when this occurs, meaning may be entirely absent. There is then a risk with respect to meaning in Levinas, because he has destroyed all the idols that pretend to be a source of meaning while simultaneously pointing to a true site of meaning that is fragility itself when it comes to securing meaning. Meaning is never secure in Levinas. The face of the Other is not a constant, bright light, but rather a blinking star, which one may doubt ever blinked in the first place when the light is gone. The Cartesian question then comes to mind: Who will carry me between two sets of evidence? Who will carry meaning between faces? In Levinas the ambiguity of meaning is never clarified. However, ethics is dependent upon this clarification never taking place.

# **The Meaning of Knowledge in the Service of Justice**

*by Roger Burggraeve<sup>9</sup>*

## **Introduction**

In his ethical thought Levinas understands the relationship between justice and knowledge in two ways: first, on the level of the ethical relationship with the Other, where he develops the concept of justice in a broad sense. Secondly, it is understood on the level of the ethical relationship with the third ones, where justice is understood in a strict sense. To specify the originality of the Levinasian approach, we must first outline his critical view of the traditional western (Greek) concept of (reason as) knowledge.

## **I. The Greek Love of Wisdom**

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, western tradition has developed as one that regards science and insight as constituting the grounds and conditions for adequate and responsible action. Philosophy came to be known as an attempt to conquer ‘doxa’ or ‘opinion’ by means of reason (“heteronomous opinions”). Being as it is ‘the reasonable par excellence’, philosophy draws its entire nobility from this notion, whereby it has at the same time grown into the “solid basis of our old Europe.”

### **Reason as the Victory Over Multiplicity and Alterity**

According to Greek thought, multiplicity is the origin of ‘opinion’ (doxa) and irrationality as well as conflict and violence. Furthermore, both opinion and violence are inextricably linked to one another. Our daily experience constantly brings us into contact with a tremendous amount of multiplicity and diversity, creating an unmanageable number of contradictions in the eye of the perceiver. The multiplicity of opinions expressed by humans (and gods) gives rise to never-ending discussions and oppositions. This never-ending discussion becomes a continuous source of annoyance in which the relationships between people are not based on harmony but rather on resentment, tension, opposition and conflict. According to Greek thought, violence may be attributed solely to the realities of multiplicity and diversity, meaning that violence is the product of the separation and rupture in being between the Same (the one) and the Other. Since multiplicity and diversity are the first experiences to present themselves to our powers of observation, the point seems obvious that war is the father

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of all things: *'polemos patèr pantoon'*.

It is clear that this phenomenology of reality in its conflict-ridden multiplicity and diversity evokes a particular concept of peace and harmony. The only possibility of annulling the violence that flows forth from the One and the Other consists in reducing everything to the Same; in other words, to assimilate the Other into the Same. This is precisely what philosophy as 'love of wisdom' – which is what the word "philosophy" literally means – sees as being its task. Philosophy thinks it can fulfil this task only by knowing. Indeed, knowing here is understood in a certain manner, not as an acknowledgement of the Other over and against the same, nor as respect for separation and difference, but rather as understanding, grasping, or comprehension. From the very beginning, according to Levinas, western philosophy has understood itself as an attempt to determine the Other ('l'Autre') by means of the Same ('le Même') in order to tailor down the Other to the size of the Same, and to find in oneself the measure of the Other. Stated alternately, philosophy is engaged "in reducing to the Same all that is opposed to it as Other". Western philosophy presents itself mainly as the reduction of the Other to the Same.

The manner or mode in which this reduction of the other takes place is through knowledge, which applies itself to drawing in and understanding reality in its conflicting multiplicity and diversity. And thanks to this knowledge, a scientifically founded technology is then developed, which must enable people to become 'lord and master of the world' (Descartes). Knowing is characterised by absoluteness: it does not want to leave anything out or to chance; it wants to investigate and understand everything, so that all becomes 'manipulable,' which means accessible to our actions. All things become forms of identity, sameness, and totality.

### **The Logic of Essence: Identity and Totality**

From the beginning of his independent thought, as is apparent from the introduction to *De l'existence à l'existant* (1947), Levinas generally characterises the search for identity, sameness and totality, in other words the dynamics of identification and totalisation, with the Platonic term 'Essence.' He develops this concept more completely in his second major work *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974).

Levinas does not make use of the term ‘Essence’ in the usual significance of ‘eidos’, ‘quidditas’ or being-ness. To him, ‘Essence’ is the synonym for ‘being’, namely the Heideggerian *Sein* as distinct from the *Seiendes*, the Latin *esse* as distinct from the scholastic *ens*. In order to present the content of ‘Essence,’ Levinas refers to the history of language, where it has been demonstrated how the suffix ‘ance’ is derived from ‘antia’ or ‘entia.’ Since suffixes are endings of the participle, they indicate an action, giving rise to abstract ‘action nouns’ (*noms d'action*). The term ‘Essence’ should therefore be more clearly designated in this sense, just as Levinas obviously begins doing in his studies after *Autrement qu'être*.<sup>10</sup> From this linguistic clarification regarding the use of “Essence” (or “essance”) as an action noun, it is apparent that Levinas means the following with regard to the term Essence: “the event or the process of *esse*.” We need to understand the term ‘to be’ literally in its sense as a verb: ‘to be’ as dynamic, process, fulfilment, ‘*actus essendi*.’ In this sense, Levinas labels the verb ‘to be’ as ‘the verb of all verbs’ in contrast to its common superficial designation as ‘auxiliary verb’. After all, the Greeks did not hesitate to speak of the ‘pure act’ with regard to being. The verb ‘to be’ does not primarily indicate a real or ideal entity, but the very process of being of this entity. In line with Plato and Heidegger, in no way whatsoever does Levinas mean by using the term Essence ‘to be’ the plain or merely formal, factual ‘there is’, namely that something ‘exists’, but rather the self-revealing act of being. By doing so, he takes over the qualitative-dynamic meaning of the Heideggerian term ‘*Wesen*’ (or ‘being’ as verb).

Consequently, what is typical of ‘to be’ being understood thus is that it is universal and all-encompassing. As an event of being, it penetrates and bears all beings, and as such it comprises their unity. As the encompassing dynamism, it poses itself simply as *totality*: “the inescapable fate.” It leaves nothing outside of it, but draws all things into it so that, ultimately, nothing can escape. All that happens belongs to essence: “*la totalité de l'être serait l'essence même de l'Être*.” Nothing is foreign to it. Everything falls under its jurisdiction, or at least can be reclaimed under it. It is thereby Essence as restoration. In this regard essence is also a striving for an ‘ultimate totality,’ meaning that it is “*un Tout absolu*” made explicit as history, being, world, God, wherein

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<sup>10</sup>In *Autrement qu'être* Levinas writes that he does not dare make use of the term ‘essance’ because it is so uncommon. In later studies, however, he does so. For instance, he writes in *De la déficience sans souci au sens nouveau* (1976): “*Nous écrivons essance avec a pour désigner par ce mot le sens verbal du mot être: l'effectuation de l'être, le Sein distinct du Seiendes*”. A similar explicit reference may also be found in his studies of 1977: *Herméneutique et au delà* en *La révélation dans la tradition juive*. Afterwards, the use of “essance” becomes self-explanatory, as is apparent in his study *Philosophie et positivité*, wherein the term is used without any note or reference.

everything will ultimately be integrated and wherein all plurality and difference will be brought to rest.

Since Essence is a dynamic process of being, it implies, however, everything – not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. This leads us immediately to the second essential trait of Essence, namely *identity*. Indeed, nothing stands by itself independently or absolutely; something only appears as a mode of Essence wherein and whereby it unfolds itself. In spite of their diversity, all beings or data belong together. As modes of expression of Essence, they represent the same Order, that of being. Diversity counts only at first sight, since everything is ultimately a mode of realisation of Essence. In this regard, Essence not only encompasses everything but it also penetrates all things with its energy of being. It is totality because it reduces all things to sameness. As the all-penetrating and all-bearing foundation, being draws all things back to itself. However diverse and irreconcilable the data and events may seem at first sight, they have a common fate, namely the unfolding of Essence. That is why Levinas also speaks of the arrangement or conjunction of Essence. As the activity of being, it brings together (*‘con-jonction’*) all diversity into the encompassing unity that it is itself.

One other equally important aspect of Essence as the process of being is the revelation of being – which makes one think of the *‘Lichtung des Seins’* of Heidegger. Essence is not only the effective unfolding of being but also the manifestation of being, or rather unfolding of being *through* revelation of being. Both are inextricably linked with each other. The event of being shows and proclaims itself outwardly in everything that is done, thought and said. All truth, intelligibility and language are likewise always the truth of being, the understanding of being, and the articulation of being. In this regard, Essence is affirmative, self- manifesting and self- confirming – in its phenomenological structure.

In consequence, we can synthetically indicate the internal quality or nature of Essence (understood as adventure or epic) as being a conjunction of ‘interest’, literally ‘inter-esse’: ‘to be in between’. It is not static being but an attempt to be (*‘conatus essendi’*), for example work, effort and energy, striving for self-preservation and the invincible tenacity of being: “The adventure of essence, which consists in persisting in essence and unfolding immanence.” Its identity is a striving for identity, an inaccessible attempt to remain itself and become itself even more. It is essential, structural

immanence. It does not want to leave anything outside of itself that could disturb or threaten it; it literally does not want to leave anything to chance, but wants to have and keep everything in hand. In short, it wants to be the one in all things.

This means more precisely that Essence is anything but free of conflict. On the contrary, it fulfils itself precisely through these conflicts and clashes as a drama. The self-interest of being dramatises itself in and through individual selfishness competing with one another, the one against the other or all against all. Essence realises itself in and through the many forms of self-interest of beings, in this case of humans who, because of their mutual aggression, are at war with each other. War is the heroic deed of Essence itself. However, it does not remain in a condition of war. It immediately introduces reason into the situation in order to avoid or resolve the clashes between the beings. Reason invites them to make use of their intellect, to practise patience and desist from their mutual intolerance, entering in turn into an agreement of reasonable peace. This simply remains, however, an expression of the selfishness and tenacity of the being of Essence. Reasonable peace, as patience in struggle or postponement of violence, is calculation, intervention and politics, and thus also the organisation of a state. The struggle of all against all becomes exchange and trade. The clash in which all are with all because all are against all becomes mutual delimitation.

Notwithstanding this change, however, there remains in force an interest of being of Essence since one offers compensation for the part of the interest of being that one renounces in the compromise in exchange for other, possible future advantages, which must be in balance with the patiently and politically arranged current concessions. Nothing is free: *quid pro quo!*

Within the perspective of Essence, the sought-after peace merely remains a suppressed and constrained form of violence. Any peace achieved remains unstable; there is always the possibility of regressing into the war of all against all. Internally speaking, it is not protected against selfishness. Reasonable peace does not surpass the particular interests since it relies on these interests, which only imply mutual control and delimitation and no internal demolition or conversion. The achieved peace remains completely a product of Essence, notwithstanding the real difference that exists between the Essence in the time of war versus the Essence in the time of peace. The peace negotiated with each other remains in fact a war against the war, as is also apparent from the present-day arguments for ‘preventive war’ and ‘war on terrorism.’ Even when it concerns a ‘just war,’ which may be considered as an improvement with

regard to initial universal violence, it still remains a war. In this regard, war remains the ‘extreme *ratio*’ of politics. As a war against war, it accords us a clear conscience, but it does not desist from being conflict and war. The resistance against the initial violence testifies only to a primordial and wild humanity that is merely prepared to momentarily suspend and moderate its aversion towards others, and precisely for that reason – jealous as it is of its tenacity of being – surrounds itself with military accolades and virtues. The tough self-complacency of energetic self-affirmation, by means of which Essence is Essence, remains unaffected, or rather, realises itself in a new and higher manner through its reasonable and justified struggle against violence and war.

From this description of the drama of Essence, it becomes perfectly clear how the human ‘I’ is not only an exponent but at the same time an eminent expression of Essence. Since the ‘I’ is a return to oneself via self-consciousness, thought and language, Essence becomes, as it were, doubled. The ‘I’ is not only moved by the energy of being but also experiences and reveals it so that Essence arrives at a peak point or at fulfilment in the ‘I’. In this way, the ‘I’ is no mere coincidental given; on the contrary, it is an essential sublimation of Essence. As a conscious and free striving for identity, the ‘I’ is the indispensable *sacrament* of Essence.

It is clear that the thought of Thomas Hobbes on humans as being ‘*homo homini lupus*’ – out of which the fear of the other ensues, as well as the war of all against all, which can only be controlled by the state as a powerful and threatening Leviathan – is simply an expression of Essence and thus of the dominant current in western thought. Similarly, Nazism is according to Levinas no ‘*accident de parcours*’ in western history. He situates Nazism as the extension of Essence and the *conatus essendi*, even though it cannot be denied that it is a supreme and diabolical expression of Essence. This thesis regarding the content of being of Nazism is clearly apparent in the (brief) Postscript written by Levinas in the second publication (1977) of the article “Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l’hitlérisme” (1934). Racism, which is inherent in Hitlerism, is a possibility “*qui s’inscrit dans l’ontologie de l’Être, soucieux de l’être – de l’Être* ‘dem es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht’, *selon l’expression heideggerienne*”.



## «Comprehensive» Knowledge

A necessary condition for the possibility of this egocentric anthropocentrism – which in the West has become commonplace – is the "comprehending knowledge" which always tries to reduce the other to the immanence of the same; that is to say, it tries to reduce the other to oneself, as if the self is here and now the "master" of the world. Initially, the ego, free and happy in its enjoyment of the world, does not really reflect this. Enjoyment can only happen "unreflectively" as a living of one's own life in the all-embracing comfort of the cosmic womb of the elemental world. The necessity for reflection emerges when the ego feels itself threatened by the indeterminacy of the world and the uncertainty of its own future. Then it begins to feel concerned about itself, and to create some distance from itself in order to think about how it might respond to this threat to its happy effort of being.

Properly speaking, this reflection is not a kind of peaceful withdrawal in order to consider how one might solve this problem, then deciding to act by securing control over reality with a dwelling, material possessions and labor. On the contrary, the ego moves immediately from its sense of insecurity into action, and it is in this action that reflection emerges as a means to help it. In the ego's inexperience, it displays an aggressive effort at a total grasp of the world which has the character of blind groping before it becomes self-assured. Lacking any "worldly knowledge," practical totalisation feels amateurish, and this still too much the pawn of chance and fate. The ego therefore looks for better means to solidify its position. It therefore also turns to knowledge in order to pursue a more methodical and systematic course in its economic concerns in order that it may return to mastery. Even better, in its more self-assured searching, there unfolds a measured and sophisticated insight which develops progressively into mature and structured objective knowledge.

This inner combination of economic activity and objective knowledge flows from the fact that knowledge exhibits the same basic structure as does action – namely, the reduction of the Other to the Same. In the act of knowing, the ego tries to undo the objective unruliness of the world by surprising it in those facets where it is accessible through "in-sight." More specifically, this occurs through conceptualisation, categorisation, thematisation, systematisation and *representation*, which is also to be understood as representation of everything that had slipped away before, making it now available once more. The aim of all this is to "com-prehend" (also "con-cept"). By understanding the world – "grasping" it – the ego can place it in the service of its

own self-interested struggle to be, so that if it is at first dependent on the world, science and technology, as "grasping," this immediately reverses that condition into an ever greater independence and "infinite freedom." Quite naturally, knowledge moves out of itself toward the Other, but only with the aim of returning to itself "enriched" and stronger. The ego upholds itself precisely by "taking the Other in hand," and in "keeping it in hand" (*main-tenance*). Comprehensive knowledge aims finally at absoluteness (Hegel): it permits nothing to escape it, to remain outside it; it tries relentlessly and unsparingly to give everything a place, function or "meaning" within the world of its self-interest. Comprehensive knowing is thus far from being neutral and innocent, but is in fact a phenomenon of violence and power. It is a disrespectful and merciless "determination of the Other by the Same, without the Same being determined by the Other."

This comprehensive knowing expresses itself in language, speech and writing, through which the intended object may be absorbed into a story. Think, for example, of the encyclopedias and stories that are collected in our libraries, and through which we may thus read and understand both the present and the past as if masters of the world and its history. In this way, we in a certain sense qualify for the otherness of the object. The source of its barbarian wildness – unconquerable and threatening – is undone, neutralized to an element of the horizon of meaning for a self-centered, thinking ego.

## **II. The Wisdom of Love**

### **Knowledge As the Mother of All Temptations**

While in the Greek tradition the irrationality of the ‘doxa’ is the mother of all temptations, Levinas believes that knowledge as ‘understanding’ (‘savoir’) is the temptation of all temptations (“la tentation de la tentation”). Indeed, we should not turn a blind eye to the negative effects of knowing. The kinds of regulative thinking and technocracy that have ensued from the West’s approach to knowing demonstrate the need for critical questioning regarding knowing as understanding. Has our enthusiasm and lust for knowledge not been too overwhelming? Even today, isn’t it still overpowering in the extreme? Knowledge is not only power but also the abuse of power. An immediate consequence of human comportment to knowing as understanding is the fact that we have been burdened with tremendous social ills during the previous century—the need for understanding has led to technical externalisation and the underlying ideology of manufacturability. The most notable examples along these lines are nuclear armaments, environmental pollution, the current explosion of medical (or the so-called “reproductive”) technologies, the attempt to acquire absolute medical power over death and dying and, last but not least, ‘globalising’ neo-liberal economic technocracy. In this regard, a healthy suspicion of knowledge as understanding is indubitably in order, so long as we remain vigilant so as not to ignore its positive contributions, avoiding a possible relapse into a cheap cultural pessimism. To Levinas, knowing – as understanding - is characterised by absoluteness: it does not want to leave anything out or to chance; it wants to investigate and understand everything so that all becomes ‘manipulable’, in other words accessible to our actions. It therefore wants to keep sufficient distance from everything in order to be able to dispose of everything freely. In short, the temptation of knowledge is power or, stronger yet, omnipotence.

### **Justice Precedes Truth**

Levinas’ radical critique of ‘comprehensive knowledge’ does not mean that he wants to return to ‘doxa’ and the spontaneity of feelings (“élan vital”). He is looking for another way of thinking, namely a non-reductive, non-violent and respectful manner of thinking. This brings him to the idea of the ethical relationship with the Other as basis and condition of possibility for that kind of thought: “la vérité suppose la justice”, as he says paradoxically: “truth presupposes justice.” Here we must be aware that Levinas understands the word ‘justice’ in a larger sense, namely as the ethical work of

responsibility by and for the Other: “Justice, the uprightness of the welcome made to the face (of the Other)”. Moreover, this justice is the context, basis and condition for truth and objective knowledge: “The essence of reason consists not in securing for man a foundation and powers, but in calling him in question and inviting him to justice”. Levinas also speaks of the “wisdom of love” that sidesteps choosing between the fruitless, spontaneous naiveté of irrational opinion and the arrogant, selfishly appropriating form of knowing that wants to understand everything.

In order to show of what the unique wisdom of love consists, we must once again consult Emmanuel Levinas, who has explicitly reflected on this ‘thinking of love.’ His entire way of thought may perhaps be traced back to this notion. In his second major work, *Otherwise Than Being*, he discusses the compelling idea of “the wisdom of love at the service of love.” As involvement with the Other rather than with oneself, love is a very special attention for the Other, and this is expressed as a dedication ‘despite oneself’ to the fate of the Other. This turning towards the Other implies an openness, literally an ‘ac-know-ledge-ment’ towards the Other. This ethical attitude leads to the authentic knowing and confirming of the Other as Other. One should take note at this juncture that this knowledge is not added from the outside, but rather flows forth from the practice of love itself. As the highest form of non-indifference, love is simply the paying attention to an Other rather than to oneself. As regards respect, not only is it an honest manner of approach to the Other, but it is also an open and honest way of seeing (in the literal sense, thus meaning knowing).

Precisely for these reasons, the ethical relationship to the Other is not only the foundation of truth; it is the foundation of all human civilisation worthy of the name. The ‘longing for the Other rather than for oneself’ is like ‘thinking-of-the-Other’, the essence of love. That is why we call it an ‘other-wise’ love: a love that bears its own wisdom and also substantiates and displays itself as love in and through its execution. It gives rise to thought in a ‘self-willed’ way. The quite unique, irreducible meaning that reveals itself through its ‘lived life’ surpasses the love of wisdom, although it needs this wisdom in thinking in order to make itself accessible ‘in Greek’ with all its risks of misunderstanding and reduction. The tragedy of this obfuscation throughout its indispensable thinking necessitates in turn not only corrections and ‘re-vision’ but also an unending return, an endlessness that ‘makes itself endless’ – a humble return to the source, love itself, as the first and ultimate experience of ‘decisive’ truth and meaning.

## **The Other As My Master, My Teacher**

When I reflect on the meaning of meeting or encountering someone else, I start spontaneously from within myself. I only encounter the Other at the moment when I catch sight of the Other. When I approach the Other, I look at the Other. I observe the Other and thus I form for myself an image of the Other. On the basis of my sensory perception, I try to discover and map out all sorts of aspects and characteristics of the Other in order thus to arrive at a general impression. I see a nose, lips, mouth, forehead and facial expression, in short a physiognomy, and thus the Other becomes visible and recognisable to me, distinguishable from all others. However, aside from the physical appearance of the Other, one also has the Other's personality and social background, culture and milieu, by means of which the Other appears, or becomes, literally, an 'appearance' or a 'phenomenon.' We form for ourselves a psychological and sociological image of the Other whereby we are able to situate the Other within a larger whole. In short, the Other thus becomes visible.

'Seeing' the other also makes it possible for us to be able to assess and understand the Other. We provide ourselves with an access to the Other by means of concepts and categories. We categorise the Other by placing him or her in a category, an a-priori idea or 'being', whereby the question as to the 'what' ('quiddity') can be answered. This implies a specific conception of truth. A view can only be true if it corresponds adequately – or indeed as adequately as possible – with reality, namely with what is seen. By means of seeing and understanding things, I also acquire access to them, and I can also exercise power over them. They are 'given' and delivered unto me, whereby I also understand them in the sense that I grasp them. This also applies for the person whom I encounter observantly and deductively, as exploration and investigation. By means of getting to know the Other, we also get to know how to behave towards him or her and how to be able to approach the Other with a certain type of knowledge.

The consequence of this is that we reduce and affix the Other onto our own measurement, which is concisely expressed by Levinas as follows: "the reduction of the Other to the Same". The Other is reduced to its image and appearance, which precisely forms the core of what is understood in the Jewish tradition as idolatry. When I attempt to gain a view of the Other and, in so doing, try to know and to

understand, the other becomes a part of my horizon and world. Knowledge that rests on representation looks at the Other in such a way that the Other is rid of its uniqueness and alterity and becomes a part of my ordering integration and determination.

Indeed, it is a simple fact of our daily experience that the Other, on the basis of our observation, may be described and understood, but the 'face' of the Other according to Levinas consists precisely in that the Other cannot be reduced to its 'face', its expressive form, its image. Precisely for this reason, Levinas provocatively states that the Other is invisible. This does not mean that the Other would in fact not be visible, but rather that the Other is irreducible to its image. The Other can never coincide with its appearance nor with the representations which we are able to produce of the Other for ourselves. Even though it shows itself in its appearance, it shows itself by simultaneously withdrawing itself from this appearance. The Other is essentially 'anachoresis' or 'kenosis.' The Other appears by means of already ridding itself of its appearance in its appearing. Stated even more emphatically, the Other is not only that which in fact is not (yet) made known, but also that which is and remains in principle unknowable. In the evidence of its visible presence, the Other means at the same time the mystery of its absence. Or stated another way, in its appearance the Other reveals immediately the mystery of its disappearance, its falling-in-a-faint, its passing out, its inaccessibility. The image that the Other provides for us to see is marked by an essential failure, an essential iconoclasm, an unmistakable erasure of itself. And this, we must repeat, is not about a temporary but rather a definitive absence, an absence that can never be absence enough. In this regard, the Other will always be an adventure, an adventure of the future, and this in the most literal sense of the word. The Other appears as the ever-coming, literally as the one who still must come, which is evocatively expressed in French as 'à-venir' and in Latin as 'ad-ventus.' The Other is literally an unending future in the sense of 'coming-to-be': never simply the present, never simply here and now, never fully present, transparent, available, never completely accessible. In this regard, the Other is the 'extravagant', that which does not fit, that which is beyond all measure, utterly inadequate: unending disproportion and disparity, unable to be grasped or seized. The Other is essentially transcendent with regard to every possible image and every possible representation: inaccessible and unassailable, the 'foreign' par excellence. And that, according to Levinas, is precisely the alterity of the Other, or rather, it is precisely the way in which the alterity of the Other unfolds itself dynamically and unceasingly. The Other is the unending

enigma that leaves us time and again in confusion. This entails that we will try to understand and grasp the Other in a more forced and stubborn way, but in so doing will the unseizable alterity of the other simply become greater. This means that we (as long as we start from ourselves towards the Other – in other words, develop a view of the Other based on our own observation and representation) will continue committing violence against the Other.

That is why Levinas has resolutely opted for not only abandoning but also radically reversing the current perspective of the encounter with the Other. He no longer starts from an egocentric perspective based on the observing, representing and grasping I, but rather based on the perspective of the Other. We must allow that the encounter with the Other does not begin from ourselves, but rather from the Other.

The indestructible inaccessibility and ungraspability of the Other means that the initiative can no longer come from me, but will have to proceed from the Other. Well then, the manner in which the Other conducts itself towards me is not only a negative movement of ‘unending withdrawal’ but also a positive movement of ‘direct self-expression and turning towards,’ called by Levinas the ‘epiphany of the face.’ The Other not only withdraws itself from its appearance but also breaks through its appearance as the unique Other that immediately directs itself out of itself towards me. The way it breaks through its form – image and appearance – and presents itself is, according to Levinas, precisely the ‘face’ of the Other. The concrete manner in which the Other as face comes to me is with words. The Other turns towards me by means of speaking to me. The Other is literally ‘revelation’: the Other reveals itself by means of expressing itself. Moreover, this expression does not stand in and of itself, but takes place relationally: ‘face à face.’ The Other expresses itself by means of turning towards me, and the first content of this revelation is not ‘who’ or ‘what’, the content of the Other, but the fact of its otherness itself. It is not *what* the Other’s face says that is essential, but *the fact that* it speaks. The *fact* of its expression and revelation is the communication of its very presence, of its epiphany *as* the unique, irreducible Other. The Other comes directly towards me and addresses me without digressions, and by means of addressing me, the Other also enters into direct contact with me. Hence is the priority of the spoken word, or that which is expressed and addressed. The spoken word has a surplus over the written word, which makes the spoken word into a coalesced objectivity. When the Other speaks, it assists itself. The spoken word does

not stand in and of itself, but is inseparably bound to the one who speaks it. The speaking Other can through its utterances – its expressions – assist and defend itself by means of providing the necessary explanations and corrections. The written word can no longer review, nuance nor revise itself. Only the speaking Other can prevent its being reduced to its utterances. The spoken word thus realises a radical transcendence.

This leads Levinas to label the epiphany of the face as *teaching*. By means of speaking to me, the Other arouses in me something new. I do not discover something that was already slumbering within me beforehand, but I become – in spite of myself – confronted with the heteronomous fact of the otherness of the Other. In this regard the Other is my ‘teacher’ who, by means of speaking to me, brings me into contact with its non-extraditable alterity, which can only be acknowledged when it is respected. It is then no coincidence that Levinas qualifies the other in a Jewish way as being my ‘rabbi,’ my ‘master,’ who teaches me authoritatively. I cannot predict nor foresee the speaking – the revelation – of the Other, I do not have a handle on the Other, and that is precisely its alterity that ‘makes me wise.’

This means that my relationship towards the Other can only take place as a response, which Levinas calls (with an unmistakable play on words) ‘responsibility.’ What is crucial in this is that this response can no longer be based on observation and view, but on hearing and listening. To state it in a paradoxical manner: when I see the Other, I hear the (inaudibly whispered) word that breaks through the appearance of the Other and addresses me *and* calls me to acknowledge and do justice to the Other in its otherness. It becomes clear from all this how, in the encounter with the Other, seeing no longer is central, but hearing and listening to the word of the other is. The Other enters into a relationship with me by means of addressing me, and it is thus I become the addressee who literally needs to respond with a countering word. In the conversation that begins with the Other, I am no longer the first and the origin, the ‘archè’ or ‘principle’ to which everything refers; I am no longer the one who designs, but the one who receives, who listens and who – quite literally – needs to ‘obey.’

In other words, real dialogue does not rest on the reciprocity between two equals who, on the basis of a harmonious agreement, find themselves in the other. Authentic conversation rests on the asymmetry of two unequals, or rather of two irreducible Others, whereby the one speaks and the other responds. Through the word of the face,



I am put in my place and am questioned as to my self-complacency. I am called to let go of my representations, images and views of the Other so that space would come to exist in order to learn something new from the Other. It should be clear from now on that a real conversation does not begin from myself, as if I would be the first to address the Other and express myself, which the Other 'may' take up thereafter. The Other precedes me and is the first to speak to me. Everything I need to know about the Other I learn from and by means of the Other.

### **III. Social, Economic, Political Justice and Reason**

#### **From Plurality to Justice**

Not everything has been said about the responsibility by and for the Other. Levinas has extended the face-to-face to all Others, first hesitatingly in *Totality and Infinity*, and then even more explicitly starting from *Otherwise than Being*, but never in a separate treatment, rather more as a consequence of his ethical view. It is important to emphasise this, because all too often one remains focused solely on his views on interpersonal relationships, while his views on society and politics really elevates his ethics to the real level.<sup>11</sup>

The responsibility by and for the Other displays an infinite character, not only qualitatively but also quantitatively. It is not only the one Other, but also all Others who fall under my responsibility. The Other and I are not alone in the world. There are the many Others, both the near as well as the far, the present as well as the absent. Levinas indicates this synthetically as the fact of 'the third party' (*le tiers*). This implies that the responsibility for the Other must develop itself into a universal and encompassing responsibility.

Yet the question is how this responsibility for all may be realised. Its infinite character immediately poses a difficult problem. As long as the responsibility only runs from me to the one Other, it has a univocal sense. But from the moment of the entrance of the third party, the question arises: 'Who is most near to me? Who comes first: the neighbour or the third party?' This conflict in responsibility itself calls for the necessity to confront and to judge, to weigh and to consider, to classify, to make

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<sup>11</sup> See our systematic development of Levinas' social, economic and political thought in: *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love. Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 2002, 213 pp.

distinctions, to determine priorities and urgencies, in short to arrange and to organise. My universal responsibility obliges me 'to compare the incomparable'.

With the entrance of the third party, the construction of a just 'coexistence' thus becomes necessary, whereby the relationships are ordered according to a reasonable equality and fairness, meaning to say as justly as possible for everyone. The third party is the beginning of a sharing, social justice. Only thus can the initial (non-intentional) violence that is attached to the exclusive *face-to-face* be repaired. Whoever does everything for the one Other thereby does injustice inadvertently to the Others, more precisely by neglecting them or even excluding them. In this regard, goodness itself is marked by violence, at least when it is absolutely and completely sought after in itself.

### **Justice in the Strict Sense of the Word**

In this context of the third, the concept of justice receives a stricter clarification than it has in the context of the direct I-Other relationship, as Levinas himself admits: "The word 'justice' is indeed much more in order when it is a matter of 'moderation' rather than my 'subordination' to the Other. When moderation is necessary, there must also be comparison and identity. Consequently, the word 'justice' is more applicable to my relation with the third than to my relation with the Other". In the period of *Totality and Infinity* (1961), Levinas uses the word justice as a synonym for the ethical, for responsibility, for the rights of the Other in the broad sense. In his introduction to the German translation of that work (1987),<sup>12</sup> Levinas explicitly states that it is better to clearly distinguish between love of neighbor, mercy and justice, which is a matter of the third, and the implied need for reflection and arrival at some sort of balance. At the same time, he repeats that there is a close and forceful connection between these two emotions. This is expressed unmistakably in the universality of the Face, which points in its essential structure toward all others. The Face, Levinas has said, is the face of faces (*le visage des visages*). Hence is responsibility for the third, understood as justice in the strict sense of the word, a direct extension "original sociality," of the creatural responsibility-to-and-for-the-Other, understood as justice in the broad and inclusive sense of the word. In order to avoid confusing the two, we might therefore reserve for the domain of the third the expression "social justice." The third, Levinas has said, is the beginning of a relative and distributed justice. It is her entrance on the scene which

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<sup>12</sup> Reprinted in *Entre Nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Paris: Grasset, 1991, pp. 249-252.

makes necessary a "just co-existence" which regulates and structures, or perhaps better, orders a reasonable – a rationally mediated – equality and equanimity. From this it follows immediately that I cannot restrict my original responsibility for the Other solely to the alleviation of concrete need *hic et nunc*. On the contrary, the universal and all-encompassing character of my responsibility requires me to also take account of the structural context in which this need presents itself. It is possible that in the long run I can really do something for the Other only if I enter into the "system" in which her need presents itself or which in fact causes it. Charity must become structural justice if its ethical nature is to become truly effective.

Justice in the strict sense, however, means a continual correction and limitation of the ethical asymmetry between me and the Other. I, too, am an Other for the Other and for the third. The original inequality of my infinite responsibility for the unique Other is corrected in this sense of the word through the fact that I, too, fall under the responsibility of Others. Through the presence of a third, I am an Other like the Others, that is to say, their equal. Or better, we are fellows to one another. We stand equally before one another. It is as if we appear together only before a tribunal which judges us equally. With the appearance of the third, symmetry enters proximity, but without abolishing the difference, the ethical non-indifference. Equality constitutes our co-presence: we are "together-in-one-place," "as one" and without hierarchy. This makes reciprocity possible; equality must now be situated on the level of "social structure." The fact that we are on equal footing with one another means that the Face of the Other is undone from its transcendence and always withdrawing "invisibility." It is instead presented as a theme, or rather re-presented, situated in the order of the now, the present. We become objectively accessible to one another; we fall under one another's objectivating intentionality. Synchronised co-existence undoes the Face of its Face-ness: "*le Visage se dé-visage*". More specifically, this consists in withdrawing from the Other her irreducibility and incomparable unicity, defining her instead by her individuality, which can be considered as a single instance of a wider genre, hence comparable, susceptible to measurement and objectivation. While the Other is and remains unique, she is also, precisely due to her status as a third, part of a general type or sort. The Other as unique is pre-logical, not of "wild thinking," but that which escapes and evens precedes all thinking. But the third signifies the return of the logical, that is to say of conceptualising, comparing, categorising, apportioning, and ordering, in short generalising.

## The Social Meaning of Knowledge, Science, and Language

This implies the necessity of representation and objectivating thought, and in turn "theory." From the moment that we are three, there emerges a need to critically reflect and understand. This formation of theory is incarnated and further elaborated upon in philosophy and the sciences.

Of course, reflective thematisation is impossible without verbalisation. Concerning the third, there also emerges objective mediation via the system of language: "Were there only two of us on earth, there would be no words: one would not speak. Objective language begins only when there are three". Reflection on the coordination and ordering of responsibilities can take place concretely only through the means of a verbal communication no longer simply a "communication of communication itself" (as with the Face), but one that involves the objective announcement of messages and content. In order for this communication to proceed as smoothly as possible, one makes spontaneous recourse to written language – to objective reports, contracts, and contracts, reference books and "writings" (books, letters, pamphlets, articles, etc.), all of which Levinas characterises together as "the Said" (*le Dit*).

It is clear that this part of Levinas' analysis aims at reevaluating the negative evaluation placed on noetic totalisation, here to be conceived as a means of social ordering or organisation in line with responsibility-to-and-for-the-Other. He thus also takes the view that those of us who carry on that noetic and verbal totalisation flirt with nihilism, for the latter denies not only the worth of consciousness, thought, philosophy, and science, but also the very responsibility which require them to take shape and be achieved. Nonetheless, it is also necessary to constantly unmask, or "Unsay" (*dédit*), the objective Said of reflection, comparison, judgment, coordination and agreement, since the moment in which they make possible the achievement of universal responsibility is also a moment of betrayal, of confinement of the pre-original "Saying" (*le Dire*), one-to-the-Other, back into the totality of the Said. Furthermore, this ambiguous moment, in which the first word of responsibility, the "Here I am" which expresses the ego's responsibility-to-the-Other-and-for-the-Other, is simultaneously the moment of responsibility for the other Others. The "here I am" is at once a response to my neighbor and an opening to responsibility for all. In my responsibility as "one-for-the-Other," it is also necessary to take account of the rights of all third parties.

According to Levinas, it is precisely here that one finds all of the riches of Athens, with its love of wisdom, knowledge, and understanding. However, this love of wisdom, this *philos-sophia*, does not come first, but only after or in light of the rather different riches of Jerusalem, with its wisdom of love, with the "priority of the Other as command" (in the Torah), founding all thought and theory. While Greek wisdom therefore does not have priority, and even depends on Biblical wisdom in order to achieve its truth and justice, it is still, according to Levinas, indispensable to us. To the degree that it, too, is inspired by "extravagant love of the Other," it shares in the wisdom of love – or even better, it becomes the wisdom of love in the strictest sense of the word. Regarding content, it is not only the Greek heritage which stands in need of the Biblical tradition, but also Biblical wisdom which needs Greek wisdom.

### **A Social, Economic and Political Responsibility**

There still is more, however. Since we cannot reach immediately the absent third party, we must realise justice by means of ‘mediations’ (*Vermittlungen*). We can only substantiate concretely our care for the Others when we introduce between ourselves and the absent third parties ‘intermediate terms’ by means of which we do reach them indirectly, yet in a real way. These intermediate terms are all sorts of forms of social, economic, financial, legal, political structures, institutions, organisms, agencies and systems, both infra-national as well as national, international and global. The third party, in other words, obliges the development of social and political structures, meaning to say ‘states’ and ‘united states.’ In this sense, state and politics are for Levinas utterly positive and, ethically speaking, they count as an absolute obligation on condition, however, that they are inspired by the heteronomous responsibility of the one for the Other.

But there is a negative side to every socio-political design of our universal responsibility. However ethically necessary it may be, it can never have the last word. State and society constantly run the risk of deteriorating. Since they take shape in laws, structures, organisations and institutions, for instance in education, healthcare and social welfare or in the banking system, they inadvertently display an objective, distant and anonymous character. Their nameless objectivity is the very cause of why subjects are no longer treated as separate persons, but rather as elements that may be classified under a generalising term or totality according to their function, status, profession, studies, possessions and assets, etcetera. In this sense, the objective generalisation that

the socio-political societal order must carry out in order to guarantee its task of justice for everyone (also for the third parties) implies the constant threat of structural violence and tyranny, which rids individuals of their irreducible separateness and alterity. With this, we touch upon the drama of every socio-economic and politically organised justice that finds its origin, nonetheless, in the ethical appeal of the Face, namely the drama whereby it turns itself against this Face.

That is why no single socio-economic and political order gets the last word. A totalitarian regime is precisely such an order that raises itself to a definitive regime. In the twentieth century Stalinism has made it clear how pernicious such a regime can be, especially when it refers to the ethical care of the proletariat. In other words, Stalinism was the terror of the perversion of its own ethical involvement. It turned against its own original 'good will' precisely because it had made absolute its choice for the vulnerable Other into an final system of welfare.<sup>13</sup> This is the worst that can happen to ethics, namely that in the name of the Face one creates a socio-economic and political system and, furthermore, proclaims it as being the absolute good. The good is literally overturned into 'the evil of the good' and thus ends up in the 'terror of the good' whereby ethics itself is destroyed in the name of ethics.

That is why the socio-economic and political realisations must be questioned and improved on time and time again, first and foremost through an even better form of justice (*une justice toujours meilleure*). The options, priorities and achieved balances, that are established in the educational system, in healthcare and welfare, create ever new injustices. Hence an even better socio-economic and political justice is necessary, which very attentively attempts to identify, prevent or remedy – as a critical corrective – every degeneration of the structural socio-economic and political justice. This is only possible in a non-totalitarian, 'free' regime that proceeds from the principle that the justice achieved is always incomplete.

Alongside this 'permanent socio-economic and political disillusionment' Levinas also pleads for an 'ethical individualism.' By this he means the irreplaceable role the interpersonal responsibility of the 'one-for-the-Other' has to play in just structures and institutions. There are tears that no single functionary of a socio-economic and political system can see, namely the tears of the one, unique Other. Therefore, in order

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<sup>13</sup> Similar ideas can be found in the work of Tzvetan TODOROV, *Mémoire du mal, tentation du bien*, Paris, Laffont, 2000, 476 pp.

to make sure that structures and organisations work in a humane way, the singular responsibility of everyone, for everyone, before everyone is and remains – over and above every system – necessary. In every social, economic and political system individual consciences are necessary which, by their level of physical sensitivity, are in turn sensitive to the pain of singular Others, both near and far, and are unconditionally concerned with their fate. Only they are capable of seeing the violence that ensues from the proper functioning of social, economic and political rationality itself. In this regard, Levinas speaks about the ethical necessity of ‘the small goodness’ (*la petite bonté*). He calls it small because it runs from the unique ‘I’ to the unique ‘Other.’ It does what no single system is in a position to do, namely to face and meet the needs of the unique Other. This goodness is small also because it is anything but spectacular. It wants to be anything but total. It is about a modest, partial goodness, with no pretensions of solving everything once and for all and thus creating paradise on earth. It does what it can with full enthusiasm and dedication, without wanting to get everything in its grasp.

#### **IV. An Ethical Redefinition of the Subject**

Thus we arrive once again at the responsibility by and for the Other, which not only is – or rather should be and remain – the origin, inspiration and test of every social, economic and political order, but also surpasses it.

There still is one aspect of this responsibility which we have not yet illuminated until now. We have described the ‘wholly Other’ as Master and source or truth and, likewise, we have sufficiently set out the description of the ‘I’ as ‘responsibility for the Other’. What now remains for us to do is to explain the redefinition of the subject that is implied therein.

All that we have said till now about the Face of the Other that appeals to my responsibility is something we can only state when we correct the first description of the ‘I’ as ‘selfish attempt at being’. Upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent how the determining of the ‘I’ as attempt at being is literally superficial; in other words, it remains at the surface and does not do justice to what takes place, or rather what has already taken place, in the ‘depths’ – in the intimacy – of the ‘I.’

In order to clarify what we mean by this, we must return to our description of the ethical encounter with the Face of the Other. We have described this encounter as the heteronomous happening of being touched by the vulnerable and injured Face of the Other. We are literally ‘moved’ and affected by the epiphany of the Other, so much so even that we no longer can remain indifferent. In spite of ourselves, we are appealed to by the naked Face of the Other, literally called to responsibility. In order to be able to be touched by the fate and the suffering of the Other, we must be touchable. So that that which happens would be able to happen, namely the ‘hetero-affection’ by the Face, we must assume that we are ‘affectable.’ By this, we clearly move on from a phenomenological, descriptive level to a transcendental level in the Kantian sense of the term: in the depths of the phenomenon, we search for its condition of possibility. Even before I take up the responsibility for the Other, I must already *be* responsible. In this regard Levinas draws attention to the ending of the French term ‘*responsabilité*’: ‘*bilité*’ refers indeed to the possibility of giving an answer, to the being made capable of responding effectively to the Face of the Other. I am entrusted to the Other beyond my own initiative, and thereby I am capable of dedicating myself to the fate of the Other. In other words, in heteronomous responsibility I discover myself as already marked by an event that radically precedes me. In order to know my true ground, I must return to before or under ‘my-self’, to an immemorial past. The passive being affected by the fate of the Other is the very intrigue of my subjectivity: being moved in spite of myself, ‘animation’ and ‘inspiration’, in the sense of ‘being enraptured and enthused’ by the Other than myself. The responsibility by the naked face does not remain exterior to me, but fulfils itself in me, or rather has already fulfilled itself in me as ‘awakening’ (‘*éveil*’), stronger still as ‘already being awakened’ (‘*déjà être éveillé*’) to responsibility, which I myself naturally then must take up and substantiate.

This requires a redefinition of the ‘I’, which we initially – in the context of Essence – have characterised as ‘*conatus essendi*’, meaning to say as attempt and effort in order to be. This description of the ‘I’ as ‘being’ on the basis of what simply seems evident in our daily observation is too narrow in the sense that it concerns a half, and thus incorrect, truth (a half-truth is more dangerous than a whole lie since it is more misleading). On the basis of the transcendental question above regarding what makes possible the factual being touched by the Face, namely the affectability of the ‘I’, Levinas arrives at stating – especially in *Otherwise Than Being* – that the being of the ‘I’ is not simply ‘to be’, but in its ‘being’ is already ‘otherwise than being’. According to Levinas – and this is, in our opinion, the core of his thought – with the



characterisation of the 'I' as self-interest and attempt at being we have neglected something essential, namely 'something' that is already at work in the attempt at being itself. In the attempt at being itself, and not outside of it, there is a scruple at work that questions the *conatus essendi* from the inside out and breaks it open towards the Other rather than at itself. The word 'scruple' literally means a 'pebble in the shoe', whereby someone cannot remain standing but is 'moved' or 'prodded' to take the next step. Hence Levinas also speaks, not coincidentally, about "the Other in the Same." This scruple, which moves the attempt at being itself, comes to light by means of the encounter with the Face but is not introduced or created by this encounter. The scruple about oneself, that is at work in the *conatus essendi* itself from the inside out and through which the 'I' is already linked with the other than itself, manifests itself however as an ethical event. The involvement with the other than oneself is no 'natural necessity', just like indeed the attempt at being is no 'natural necessity' in the sense that the human person cannot do otherwise than choose for the Other or for themselves. The 'dedication in spite of myself to the Other than myself' fulfils itself precisely as a scruple, as a questioning, as an uneasiness of the attempt at being with itself. As *conatus essendi*, I am not at ease with my own dynamism of being. I realise that the obviousness of my perseverance of being and self-unfolding is not so obvious. In the exercise of my attempt at being, it dawns upon me that my attempt at being left to itself is brutal and leaves corpses behind it left and right. Even though there is a certain 'natural impulse or urge' in the *conatus* to think and to act according to its own interest, it is indeed not left at the mercy of itself as a mechanism that is unavoidable. Precisely because it is characterised by an internal scruple or restraint on itself, it is ethical, whereby it surpasses nature – understood as natural necessity. By means of the crisis that it bears within itself – '*la crise de l'être*' – it is not left to its own mercy as a fatality but it can surpass itself towards the Other further than itself. By means of the internal scruple, it is made capable of choosing for the self-interest, or of choosing for the 'otherwise than being', whereby it surpasses itself as 'involvement with the Other than itself'. It can choose simply to be and indulge in its self-interest at the cost of or in compromise with others, but it can also choose to substantiate its otherwise than being in caring responsibility for the Other, both in the singular – interpersonal – as well as in the plural – social, economic and political, national, international and worldwide. In this regard, the 'I' is an ethically 'equi-vocal' being: at the same time being and otherwise than being, without it being like a stone that unavoidably falls downward, it must fall in one or the other direction. In this manner the attempt at being in itself is likewise already marked and 'touched' by the 'otherwise than being' or 'the

Good above being’, not as a necessity but as a possibility and a capacity of being able to be appealed to. Levinas labels this as ‘the miracle of the human’: the Other in the Same, transcendence in immanence: the ethical motherhood of “having-the-other-in-one’s-skin”. In this regard the Good in my self reveals itself, not in the active consciousness of myself as ‘*intéressement*’, but deeper than this consciousness in my ‘soul’ wherein I ‘in spite of myself’ am inspired towards the Other.<sup>14</sup> With this we touch the soul of the ‘I’, namely the animation and inspiration by the radical Other. Furthermore, Levinas qualifies this ‘in spite of myself for the Other’ in even more radical terms as hostage and expiation, and as substitution – a central category in his thought on the subject. By substitution he does not mean in the active sense of the free ‘I’ itself taking the place of the Other, but rather in the passive sense of ‘being put in the place of the Other’, or stated even more emphatically, ‘being already put in the place of the Other.’ This implies that the ‘I’ no longer stands in the nominative but in the accusative, as it is literally apparent in the French expression: “*me voici.*” In contrast to the English expression “here I am,” whereby the ‘I’ stands in the active nominative, we find the ‘I’ in “*me voici*” in the passive accusative, meaning to say in a grammatical form for which no nominative form even exists. In spite of myself, I already stand – before every choice made by myself – before the demand of the Face, whereby I discover myself as the one who ‘from elsewhere’ has already been called. I am already a passive ‘me’ even before I can become an active ‘I’. That is precisely what we wanted to express in the title of our article: ‘The Other and *Me*’. Levinas also calls it the *createdness* of the ethical subject: we are created as ‘our brother’s keeper’ even before we ourselves are capable of having any idea, longing or intention of wanting to be such a keeper.

It is clearly apparent from all this how Levinas, who initially appeared to us as a thinker *à la* Hobbes, namely through his linking of the ‘I’ as *conatus essendi* with Essence, ultimately manifests himself as a radical anti-Hobbesian precisely through his thought about the Face and responsibility. As ‘being for the Other in spite of myself,’ in other words being responsible before every free act of choice, I am in my being marked by the otherwise than being. The mystery of my being is that in the depths of my being, something else has already taken place whereby I irreversibly stand turned towards the

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<sup>14</sup> According to Levinas, the idea of God as the Good in me reveals itself in here as well. In this regard, I am in my ‘spirit’ marked by God Himself, who entrusts to me the fate of the Other and calls me to unconditional responsibility. Considering the limitations of this article, we cannot enter further into this matter here, and must refer the reader to: *L’idée du Bien en moi. Penser-à-Dieu d’après Levinas*, in: F. COPPENS, *Variations sur Dieu. Langages, silences, pratiques*, Bruxelles, Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 2005, pp. 197-222.

Other. The being of my 'I' is at first sight a fear for my own being, but upon closer inspection this is already marked by a deeper fear, namely the fear for the Other, in the singular and in the plural, both near and far, today and in the future. The fate of the Other is the scruple in myself whereby my being is an intrigue, namely a sensibility by the Other in which I am already – in my being – attuned to the Other.