

Dis-possessed: How to remain silent ‘after’ Levinas *

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As we look back today to that obscure but for none of us insignificant period of (post) structuralism, it would seem that none of the slogans which at that time were intended to sweeten its message can still claim any credibility. Far from being dead and buried, like some purloined letter, the ‘author’ seems to have been with us all along, barely hidden by the folds of those quotations marks from where he was laughing behind our backs.¹ And far from taking over the place of the subject, ‘structure’ has, so to speak, only displaced it: much to our surprise, the ‘eccentric’ subject is still a subject – it is precisely its dependence on something which it did not itself institute or constitute that has prevented it from dying a peaceful death. Forcing the subject to abdicate from the center did not entail the subject’s destruction.² Quite to the contrary, this decentering has managed to revitalize the subject, and the unexpected result of its rejuvenation is simply that its accusers are now themselves accused: relieved of the heavy burden of a center where it stood constantly accused of falling short in its every endeavor, the subject seems to be thoroughly enjoying its new freedom to linger wherever it pleases, as long as it is not in the center, and to exploit its elusiveness to harass whoever came in its place with new, apparently insoluble questions and problems.³ Granted, discourse functions without a meaning-giving subject underlying all knowledge; but then what could it mean that *I* know? And, of course, knowledge evolves according to rules I have not made, and which continually escape me; but why would I not attempt to break into that archive and show the complex genealogy by which those rules came to be? To be sure, I go through life with a certain name – the name of my father, the name of my people – which precedes me and which obligates me; but isn’t it normal for me to try and know what this obligation asks of me and, failing to get an answer, can I be blamed for myself attempting to determine what this debt consists in?

Instead of sounding the death knell of the subject, decentering seems to have resulted in a new and different kind of subject: one that would like to

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know why it was not allowed to die and what the nature of its debt could be; a subject that must try to find its own way, having been denied a center that would provide all the answers. An explosive situation no doubt, for what could be more dangerous than a debt that is determined by the debtor himself? Is it not the echo of such explosions that recently gave cause for alarm: one need only think of the recent upsurge of nationalism? The difficulty seems to be that the subject is far from content with the ambivalent situation in which it finds itself after being decentered: what it cannot tolerate is not so much that it is excluded from the center, but that it cannot do away with that center, to which it is nonetheless denied access. Now that it has given up its claims, it fails to understand why it cannot die in peace. It fails to understand that whatever dispossessed it after all still obligates it. It thought it could disappear – we all remember: “a face in the sand . . .” – but now that it has sobered up, it discovers that the scenario for its voluntary retirement was really just an excuse to make it work even harder. In its old age the subject finds itself forced into discharging a debt it has nothing to do with, a debt to a center that it thought it had turned its back on and left behind. . . .

Decentering the subject, then, aimed at more than a mere change of position: at stake was an asymmetry in which the subject is obligated by “something”⁴ without ever having given its consent and without even being consulted in the matter. The position from which it finds itself being put under obligation is not a position that it could possibly occupy in its turn. The addressor and the addressee of “obligation” belong to non-substitutable and non-simultaneous positions: the reason why the subject cannot disappear – and perhaps one must define the subject today as a “not-able-to-disappear” – is to be found precisely in its decentering. The subject did not just happen to arrive too late to take up its place in the center; it is itself the effect of this originary delay. It is that which cannot be where it would like to be. It is not without a center, but caught in the unbreakable spell of something from which it derives its singularity. Accordingly, what is most “proper” to the subject, what lies at the basis of its irreplaceability, of its non-interchangeable singularity – in short of its being “itself” – has nothing to do with some secret property or some hidden capacity, but results from a lack of resources on its part, from its ineliminable poverty, its incapacity: the subject is something that has missed an appointment, and it would never have even existed without that break, rent or gap through which it gains, rather than loses, its intimacy, or without that non-simultaneousness or that “retardation” *vis-a-vis* itself through which, if we are to believe Levinas, it can fall into time and be “related” to the Other without being absorbed into them.⁵ Even before it is able, the subject is a “not-able,” and whatever it can do, it can only do on the basis of and within the horizon opened by the “not-able.”

No doubt this is why, instead of seeing in the subject an active principle, contemporary philosophy prefers to emphasize the receptivity that must precede this activity. The subject is no longer thought as an auto-affection, but as an affectedness by the other. And contemporary thought seems to expect a kind of salvation from this passivity or passibility (Lyotard) which, as the expression goes, precedes all opposition between activity and passivity. The anaesthesia of a completely technical world in which there is a system that controls not only its own output but also its own input,⁶ this nightmare which, since Heidegger, has emerged on our horizon, could only have its inexorable advance arrested by a renewed attention for this affectedness or this “aesthesia” which involves the subject in a past that is absolute and irrevocable: a past that has never been present nor ever will be present; a past which, precisely by withdrawing, leaves behind a being who must find salvation in his helplessness.

One might wonder if such commonplaces bring us any further. They are, no doubt, too suggestive to be precise. But perhaps for that very reason they are able to invoke something of our strange climate of thought which might best be defined by a certain impatience with all those (supposed) attempts to eliminate the subject, and by the desire to know how things stand with it and what will come after it, assuming its place has been vacated. Questions that seem of utmost importance, and that have led – or misled, as some would argue – such a notable philosopher as Habermas to the conclusion that what is at stake in the attempt to find a way out of the philosophy of the subject is the heritage of modernity itself. But the paradigm shift that Habermas represents – a turning from subjectivity to intersubjectivity⁷ – has, to put it mildly, not been greeted with universal enthusiasm. And since the opposition that is marshalled in the name of a certain postmodernity seems to be concerned precisely with this emphasis on the receptivity of a subject who finds himself in an irrevocably asymmetric position, I thought it not unwise to drop anchor for a moment in these murky waters to which the pilots of modernity and postmodernity have towed the Kantian ship. Or into which, Levinas will suggest, that ship has towed them. This suggestion seems to me to merit consideration: it ought to allow us to appreciate the uncompromising position that Levinas occupies in the contemporary crisis of post-Kantian ethics. This is more or less the program for my first half: an attempt, let us say, to not underestimate the “opponent.” And what an opponent! For how could one even begin to think about the problems under consideration here without first having spent some time – and perhaps a very long time⁸ – wandering through the incredibly rich heritage Levinas has bequeathed us? Wasn't he one of the first to have insisted on the absoluteness of a past that is too much past to ever become present, and to have linked this absoluteness with all of those themes so dear

to us, and for which we use his own words: asymmetry, hetero-affection, passivity older than every opposition between activity and passivity? Wasn't it Levinas who taught us to define the subject as something that does not have the choice of disappearing, and who related the subject to an outside that is so much outside that it can allow itself to go to the very heart of the subject without running the risk of becoming a part of it or being absorbed by it? Are we not quoting Levinas when we speak of the "other in the self," and do we not share his *own* suspicion when we attempt to think the subject on the basis of a "dispossession" that would be more originary than every form of possession? All of this is undoubtedly true and we ought to be grateful. But Levinas, whose entire philosophy attempts to dispel even the tiniest hint of ek-stasis, would surely agree that gratitude should be cool-headed, and should maintain an awareness of the distance separating the one who teaches from the one who is taught. Keeping this distance is the program for my second half: as we shall see, it is a matter of a single, but not insignificant, word. It is, for Levinas, the first word, a word that passes our lips, nowadays, none too easily, a word that we tend to mention rather than use. Which is why the significance and function of this word in Levinas fascinate me, and why I would like to know what happens when this word is dropped, or rather – since it is a word that we have wanted for a long time to drop – I would be interested to know how much damage resulted from leaving this word behind. Perhaps I ought to apologize for such curiosity. It will take up much of our time, but that is just the time needed in order to answer the question that this article was meant to address: the question whether "subjectivity implies a certain closedness that seems difficult to reconcile with the desire for openness and receptivity so prevalent these days".⁹ There is, in my opinion, nothing to be said about this closedness so long as one avoids confronting this first word of Levinas. I have not yet said *what* word, but it will not keep us waiting long – for it is only by introducing the word "God"¹⁰ that Levinas can avoid being drawn into the maelstrom where Habermas and Lyotard attempt to keep their boats afloat. But not to panic: we will maintain, as mentioned already, a safe distance.

Levinas in the crisis of post-Kantian ethics

Defending the logic of obligation against the moderns

It is well known that, for Kant, practical reason is both legislation and efficient causality. In order to bring autonomy into ethics, Kant had to show that reason contains within itself both a *principium diiudicationis bonitatis* and a *principium executionis bonitatis*.¹¹ Reason should be capable of showing us

what has to be done, without having recourse to any considerations other than those that follow from the structure of reason itself (first principle). Yet reason should also have the power to execute the actions that are proposed because they comply with reason (second principle). The first principle led Kant to the discovery of the categorical imperative, while the second led – much later – to what became known as the doctrine of the “fact of reason.” Only by bringing these two principles together could Kant reach the conclusion that the law is obligatory *because* it is universal, where, as Lyotard has shown,¹² the “because” operates like an “iff.” Accordingly, Kant’s first formulation of the categorical imperative lends itself to a double reading: not only “if the norm of such-and-such an action is a universally obligatory norm, then you must perform this action”, but also “if you must accomplish such-and-such an action, then the maxim of your will is a universally obligatory norm.” Both “if p then q” (if reason then will), and “if q then p” (if will then reason, i.e. universality); in other words, “p iff q.”

In support of his claim that the underlying transformation of an obligation into a norm is valid, Kant had to introduce an extremely elaborate conceptual architectonics. Since it is precisely this architectonics that was so vigorously assailed by Kant’s immediate followers,¹³ it should come as no surprise that it is on this exact point that contemporary Continental philosophy appears to have become deadlocked. Take, for instance, Habermas’s attempt to reformulate the categorical imperative, giving it the intersubjective spin of a discursive ethics organized around the so-called “D-principle:” “only those norms may claim to be valid that could meet with the consent of all affected in their role as participants in a practical discourse”.¹⁴ As a consequence, the categorical imperative would be freed from its bondage to a “monologic” reason and readapted to function as a rule of argumentation in practical discourses: “for a norm to be valid, the consequences and side effects of its general observance for the satisfaction of each person’s particular interests must be acceptable to all” (*ibid.*). But Habermas’s critics reply that this only holds for the logic of norms and, moreover, already presupposes what is to be shown: that the transition from obligations to norms is unproblematic. Thus Lyotard’s objection that the whole question of the lawfulness of the law – of its obligatory character – is not even raised here. Lyotard insists that one cannot understand why an ethical law holds if one remains caught in this alternative: either *convincing* (hence reasonable) or else *constraining* (hence unreasonable).¹⁵ For a law does not hold because it convinces, nor because it constrains, but because it *obligates*. It takes the form of a prescription that places the addressee in the asymmetric position of a “Thou” to whom the prescription is directed. Such a prescription obligates whether or not the addressee is convinced of its correctness. Its prescriptive force does not depend on such a

deliberation; indeed, to make it so depend would mean abandoning the logic of obligation and transforming the law into a commentary on the law, thus replacing *prescription* with *description*. And of course, for Lyotard, who has made it his task to “testify to the Differend,” this is an unjustified move. The prescriptive clause “it is an order that p” is transformed into the descriptive clause “someone has said that p must be done (by me).” And it is precisely this transformation that Habermas carries out in order to determine what “valid norms” are: the maxim which says that p must be done will only be a valid norm if, in Habermas’s formulation, it can count on the agreement of all those concerned. But this whole procedure necessarily presupposes that instead of remaining in the asymmetric position of one who is obligated by a prescription, each participant in such a practical discourse can freely occupy the position from which the prescription is addressed. A norm is valid only if the addressees of the prescription could “at the same time” regard themselves, without coercion, as its addressors. Which is to say that a norm is valid only if it could *convince* all those concerned. But of course, like Kant, Habermas also wants to make the reverse claim: if one is convinced by a (moral) validity claim, then one is committed to defending it, and the result of such a defence must be such that it satisfies the conditions for a valid norm.¹⁶ Just as with Kant, “p if and only if q.”

Both Lyotard and Levinas would protest here, though not for the same reasons. I will come back to this point later. For the moment, let us concentrate on their rather curious alliance against humanism, or at least against a certain version of humanism.¹⁷ For both Lyotard and Levinas, it is a humanism that still believes in the possibility of doing away with an *Unmündigkeit* (the famous “immaturity” in Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?”) that one owes only to oneself. And yet, Lyotard wonders,¹⁸ might there not be a different *Unmündigkeit* than the one Habermas has in mind, and is *this Unmündigkeit* not excluded *a priori* whenever one substitutes the logic of norms (“either convincing or else constraining”) for the logic of obligation? Is there not in obligation another, more deeply buried *Unmündigkeit*, an inability to speak and – *a fortiori* – to argue, an “in-fantia” that one cannot and should not render communicatively transparent, for to do so would mean destroying “something” (something which Lyotard calls “the inhuman”) that belongs to the very condition of our humanity? An “inhuman” that, far from being a simple denial of our humanity, constitutes its very tissue, to the point that Lyotard can even refer to it as our “soul:” that other in me to whom I owe a vague debt, but which is precisely *inhuman* because it left me this debt without telling me what I must do in order to pay it off. The result of this emphasis on the passivity (or “passibility”) of the subject is that the human subject’s humanity is tied to a “mancipium”¹⁹ from which it cannot e-mancipate itself.

There is some “Thing” that obligates it without it ever being able to abandon the position it is forced to take as a result of this (quasi) obligation. The subject is de-centered, not because it lacks a center but because, in its singularity, it gravitates around a center it can neither have access to nor simply leave behind. Given this position, one can well imagine why Lyotard remains sceptical about the hopes that Habermas has invested in the operative power of practical discourse. For in terms of the above discussion, it seems that the Habermasian transformation of values into valid norms would require participants who not only argue *from* a center that has them in its grasp (the values “have” them), but who also have managed to break *into* that center and exercise argumentative control over it (they “have” the values). Failing such ideal participants, practical discourse could not consist only of those reactions to validity claims allowed by Habermas’s model: affirmation (“yes”), negation (“no”), or suspension (a future “yes” or “no”).²⁰ If one of the participants were to say, for example, “and yet these are my values; I have them simply because I have them,” then *according to this model* the discussion would only come to a temporary end, since the reason given is actually not a reason at all. There is only an incapacity for argument, an “infantia” which, for Habermas, is only the temporary absence of something still to come (or which should already have come). Such a subject – in opposition to Lyotard and Levinas – is only temporarily *unmündig*. Its lack of *Mündigkeit* would not point to its de-centering but would need to be seen as deriving from its being only stalled halfway in its attempt to break into a center to which it already had right of access, and the ensuing dissociation between the participants would need to be regarded as a *dissensus* that emerges against the background of a possible *consensus*. Not that Habermas would go so far as to say that one could (or should) in principle reach a consensus; his point is only that, if one enters into argument, then one is already committed to a possible “yes” or “no,” and the “no” which claims that things are like this simply because things are like this is not really a “no.” It is rather a kind of silence that derives its status from the order it has withdrawn from. That it could derive this status from an order opposed to the argumentative order that Habermas has in mind; that it could point to an obligation that obligates without the addressee knowing the reasons for the obligation; that it could be a silence which concerns something more and something other than simply the factual absence of future speech, the silence of a dissensus that cannot be forced into an argumentative “yes” or “no” – this possibility is ruled out from the start by the assumptions from which Habermas explicitly begins: there is no “silence” that does not already point to an imminent “yes” or “no.” In the end, “validity” will rule over “meaning.” Consequently, the dispute over the possibility of what Lyotard calls the “differend” is itself at the root

of the “differend” separating Habermas and Lyotard.²¹ The hiatus between prescription (“you must”) and description (“something obligates me to do this or that”) cannot be traversed by argument, for that would presuppose that one has access to the “something” that obligates, and that one could assent to its reasons for obligating – which means that the hiatus must already have been bridged before it can be bridged.

But, of course, if one denies Kant or his followers the transition from prescription to description, then one replaces autonomy with heteronomy. As a consequence, the law is no longer obligatory because (iff) it is universal; it is now obligatory because it is obligatory.²² In doing this, however, one would seem to have thrown away Kant’s first principle (*diudicatio bonitatis*) and thus to have surrendered ethics to what Lyotard calls “the anxiety of idiolect.”²³ For if it is only the fact of obligation that allows me to recognize the ethical law, and if I am the only one who finds himself in the asymmetric position of the law’s addressee (hence *idio*-lect), and if there is no possibility of trading or even comparing my responsibility with that of others (cf. “is my maxim universalizable?”), then how can I ever know if the appeal that obligates me is an *ethical* one? How will I even know that there is an appeal? Both Abraham and President Schreber heard the voice of God, and they each heard a voice that spoke only to them (i.e. *idiolect*). Did they *both* hear the voice of God? And did they both hear the voice *of God*? Can a voice that commands me to kill my own son be the voice of God? Did I not just imagine hearing a voice, when in fact it was only my own infanticidal urges? Does it even really matter which voice I heard, as long as there is obligation? Instead of trying to escape these problems, Lyotard seems satisfied with simply acknowledging them. Suggesting a *rapprochement* with Levinas, he seems content to summarize them in the statement that “obligation should be described as a scandal for the one who is obligated” (D nr. 170). And on this point the alliance falls apart. Levinas’s position may not be modern, but neither is it postmodern.²⁴ As we shall see, it is – and I use the term in a neutral sense – anti-modern.²⁵

Specifying the logic of obligation against the postmoderns

Although Levinas would side with Lyotard in stressing the importance of the asymmetric position of the one obligated by the ethical law, he would also want to protest against Lyotard’s pagan appropriation of some of his major concepts. Their disagreement has to do with the identity of what Lyotard calls the addressor. Contrary to Lyotard, Levinas is not content to characterize the ethical law solely by the fact that whoever is put under obligation finds himself “placed in the position of addressee for a prescription” (D nr. 163) and then to simply call this a scandal. Levinas would like to say a word about the

addressor as well. Though he will emphasize that responsibility “precedes freedom” (OB 197 n 27) and that values “‘weigh’ on the subject,” thus pointing to a fundamental passivity “which cannot assume what it receives, but which, in spite of itself, becomes responsible for it” (OB 198 n 28), what he wants to emphasize above all else is that this “antecedence of responsibility to freedom” signifies “the *Goodness of the Good*: the necessity that *the Good* choose me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice” (OB 122). To be sure, ethics has to do with an absolute appeal, as Lyotard also admits, but this appeal is precisely an *ethical* appeal because its addressor is the Good. Neglecting this difference and mistaking what is only a necessary condition (obligation) for a sufficient one, inevitably leads to the problems that Lyotard has signalled under the heading “anxiety of idiolect.” But for Levinas, these problems are only a consequence of the pagan *quid pro quo* that makes values depend on drives, instead of *vice versa*. “From the Good to me there is assignation: a relation that survives the ‘death of God.’ The death of God perhaps signifies only the possibility to reduce every value arousing an impulse to an impulse arousing a value” (OB 123). Accordingly, Lyotard’s brand of postmodernism is for Levinas only the return of the sacred, a return that becomes inevitable when, along with the idea of the Good, the idea of the holy is lost as well. For the holy is not the sacred, but the only thing that can prevent it from overwhelming us.

If one misses this distinction between the sacred and the holy, one will have missed the structure of Levinasian ethics. To be sure, ethics for Levinas is a matter of “something” that “has chosen me before I have chosen it” (OB 11) and he, too, will consider the ethical subject as carrying an “other-in-himself” that he will explicitly designate as the “soul” (OB 191 n 3). But what thus “penetrates” the subject “with its rays unbeknownst to itself (*a l’insu*)”²⁶ (OB 11) is not simply that inhuman “Thing” around which we gravitate without ever reaching it, as Lyotard thinks in the wake of Lacan. It is not something which attracts us but which we can never reach, since the condition for its “fatal attraction”²⁷ is that we have always already lost it and that we derive our singularity from this loss since it is only through this loss that we are who we are. To be sure, ethics for Levinas too is about an absolute past and refers back to a trauma that is too great to be taken up. But, unlike for Lacan²⁸ or Lyotard, the problem for Levinas is not that of a “tragic ethics” which says that we should not “give way on our desire” and at the same time shows us the terrible consequences of not giving way on our desire. The problem is not how we should relate to the “Thing” that makes us non-interchangeable nor how, at the same time, that opaque attachment must be interrupted by another dimension (Lacan’s “law of the signifier,” Lyotard’s “norms”) so that we can maintain enough distance from that point where we would, as it were,

become so singular that we would suffocate in our own singularity. The Good for Levinas is not good because it attracts us, but because it interrupts such an attraction: “The fact that in its goodness the Good *declines the desire it arouses while inclining it* toward responsibility for the neighbor, *preserves difference* in the non-indifference of the Good, which chooses me before I welcome it” (OB 123, my emphasis). One does not “gravitate” *around* the Good. The Good is only good because it breaks that sacred spell – that desire to touch what we have always already lost and which, by that very fact, attracts us – and reorients the course of the dynamic thus awakened, inclining it toward the others. This makes all the difference between the heteronomy Lyotard supports and the special kind of heteronomy found in Levinas.

The Good would be no different from Lyotard’s “inhuman” if it were only to place us in the position of an addressee of a (quasi) obligation, leaving us “disoriented” with regard to that “vague debt” we do not know how to deal with. It would obligate us without itself feeling the least obligation to us, thus surrendering us to the whims of that capricious and opaque “law without law” that Lacan calls “the Thing.” There would be “something” in us that would, in Levinas’s words, “reign *in its own way*” (OB 194 n 2). A classical heteronomy, where the law is given by an authority outside the law, an “*Hors-la-loi*”²⁹ that also behaves as an out-law. But such is not the heteronomy of Levinas; it is rather the sort of heteronomy one gets when the link between the absolute and the Good is severed, as Lacan and Freud have done³⁰ – a heritage that, as we have seen, Lyotard has no hesitation in accepting. But Levinas not only refuses to sever that link, he likewise refuses to see the Good as that authority which precedes the law and arrogates to itself the power to make the law, as is the case in an ordinary ethics of heteronomy. For Levinas, there can only be an ethical law because the Good renounces such a power, because it abdicates and *refuses to “reign”* (OB 194 n 4): “an-archy” of the Good which “chooses” us, but refuses to subject us, thereby making us free. No one, says Levinas, “is enslaved to the Good” (OB 11). We would have been condemned to slavery had the Good manifested itself to us in its full splendor, for then we would have had no chance to avert our gaze. But because the Good is good – i.e. holy and not sacred, “not numinous” (TI 77) – it has given us that chance. And, as is well-known, Levinas “deformalizes” this by pointing us to the trace of something that refuses to present itself, the trace of a transcendence that already “effaced” itself before it could be “assembled” (e.g. OB 161; TI 104). This trace is, of course, the face of the Other: an appeal directed to us, but which is defenceless against our refusal, lacking the means to exact what it asks. The face of the Other is not sacred; it is holy. It is not the object of a taboo, not something whose separation attracts me and, despite the prohibition, arouses in me the desire to touch it. The face is holy because

it speaks, and speech for Levinas means establishing a distance. Speech is a prohibition of the contact that would bridge the distance thus established. According to Levinas, the one who speaks to me does not arouse in me the desire to touch him, but accuses me of that desire, transforming it into a desire to serve and give.

Yet the word of the Other would not have this force, were it not the echo of a word that preceded it, were it not the descendant of that first word: "God." The Other can only deflect my urges and escape my attempts at appropriation because he is more than what I see of him. The face is not a phenomenon. In the words of Levinas, "the face breaks through the form that nevertheless delimits it" (TI 198; CPP 96). The Other can only be other because he finds his light in himself, and bears his meaning within. He is, therefore, *kath'auto*: more than what I can know and comprehend – not unknown but unknowable. So the alterity of the Other is absolute and this absoluteness comes to me under the form of a prohibition, in the face: "Thou shalt not kill me." To kill the Other is to extinguish his light, to reduce him to his form – in other words, to make of him a phenomenon, to reduce his meaning to what I can see of him. And since the Other is not only face, but also form, not only a speaking to me, but also a spoken that I hear, the possibility to "kill" him, to reduce him to what I see and hear of him, will always remain open. Without this possibility, there would be neither ethics nor responsibility. Nor could there be ethics or responsibility if this choice I have to make would be indifferent, if it were not qualified. The Other must be not only outside me, but *above me*. To kill him must signify: his *murder*.³¹ To reduce him to his form must signify: to commit an injustice, to rob him of his ethical dignity. *And the Other does not owe this ethical dignity to himself*. The Other is face, a *surplus* over his form; he is a face that is *too large* for his form, and the Other owes this infinity to the fact that he is in the trace of the Infinite. Consequently, the Other for Levinas, *pace* Sartre, is "not simply another freedom: to give me knowledge of injustice, his gaze must come to me from a dimension of the ideal. The Other must be closer to God than I" (CPP 55–56). This elevation of the Other which Levinas calls face would not have been possible without the abdication of the Good that lends his ethics a special sort of heteronomy. By coming in the trace of the Good – or of *the* Infinite, as Levinas so often calls it – the face of the Other is invested with a value that I must and at the same time do not have to respect. The appeal comes from above, but it is an order that implores. I am free to respond to it or not, but whatever I do, I cannot keep *silent*: "I cannot evade *by silence* the discourse which the epiphany that occurs as a face opens, as Thrasymachus, irritated, tries to do, in the first book of the *Republic* (. . .) Before the hunger of men responsibility is measured only 'objectively;' it is irrecusable. The face opens the primordial discourse

whose *first word* is obligation, *which no 'interiority'* permits avoiding. It is that discourse that obliges the entering into discourse, the commencement of discourse rationalism prays for, a 'force' that convinces even 'the people who do not wish to listen' and thus founds *the true universality of reason*" (TI 201).

Hence the program for my second half: what to think of a philosophy that tells us that we cannot be silent, that grants us our interiority but then seems to make this interiority fully signifiable through ethics? What to think of an ethics that *precisely for that reason* – as I shall explain – has made sacrifice "the norm and criterion of the approach" of the Infinite?³² What if it has come too late? What if, apart from this ethical dispossession (TI 172) or decentering that Levinas speaks of, there is still another dispossession that he will not or cannot think, in order to be able to think as he does? At stake then, is but a word, but for Levinas it is the "first word:" "monotheism, the word of the one and only God, is precisely the word that one cannot help but hear, and cannot help but answer. It is the word that obliges us to enter into discourse. It is because the monotheists have enabled the world to hear the word of the one and only God that Greek universalism can work in humanity and slowly unify that humanity" (DF 178, translation corrected). The death of Parmenides?³³ Or ethical henology?

How to keep silent after Levinas

An ethical resignification of silence

There would be no silence, then, that could evade "the discourse which the epiphany that occurs as a face opens" (TI 201). Of course Levinas is not denying the obvious here, as if, when confronted with the face of the Other, one would not be able to hold one's tongue and refuse to speak. He means that any refusal to respond to the appeal of the face, and thereby to enter "ethical discourse" should be seen as a silence which receives its meaning from that appeal and within that discourse: "silence" is already a falling short of what is demanded. Not only literal silence of course; every attempt to evade the appeal of the Other, every excuse made, is a kind of silence – even if it is announced out loud. For this "true universalism," there is no interiority that can avoid the ethical obligation. We can try to outwit God, like Jonah; we can hide from him, taking refuge in a ship's hold and falling asleep in the midst of a storm. But then we take to sleep the very thing we were trying to avoid,³⁴ thus affirming what we wanted to deny: it may be that there are some responsibilities that we cannot handle, but this does not mean that we do not

have them, and once we have them, there can no longer be anything like the sleep of the innocent. *All* sleep is now a lack of wakefulness.

One might find this somewhat exaggerated, but in that case one must ask oneself just what it is about Levinas's ethics that leads to such exaggeration. Better still: one must ask why it is founded upon this exaggeration and cannot get around it. For according to Levinas, ethics begins by "penetrating"³⁵ the armour of my interiority. It is this interiority that is thrown into question by the face: the face does not accuse me of having neglected to do something, nor of doing something which I should not have done. Such is not the responsibility the face confronts me with. Rather, it blames me for something that was out of my hands, for a guilt without fault, or a "fault" that I am not guilty of, but that I am nonetheless responsible for. This "fault" is my existence itself: just by "being there," by taking up a place, by breathing and eating, by all those processes in which I arbitrarily appropriate things, I *inevitably* and unwittingly make a claim on something to which I have no right. And the fact that I have no right to it is not something that Levinas just postulates; he tries to find a phenomenological basis for it in his description of what exactly happens when I am confronted with the appeal of the Other. It is to this description that one must refer if one maintains that Levinas is doing a phenomenological ethics, or an ethical phenomenology – a characterization that should be kept separate from the role played by the notion of the "face" in this ethics since, as we have seen, the face is not a phenomenon. Indeed, according to Levinas it is precisely because the face is *not* a phenomenon – precisely because it does not *show* itself to me, but rather *addresses* me and *appeals* to me – that it manages to embarrass me. The appeal of the Other does something to me that no phenomenon could ever do: it disconcerts me and gives me a conscience that is primarily and necessarily a *bad* conscience since it questions and casts in doubt something which, until then, I would not have been able to question: "what is most natural becomes the most problematic. Do I have the right to be? Is being in the world not taking the place of someone?"³⁶ "Does not my existence, in its peacefulness and with the good conscience of its *conatus*, mean that I let the other person die?" (DQI 248). The Other puts my very existence in question: my place on this earth suddenly appears as a usurpation, for which I am ashamed. And this shame forms the phenomenological cornerstone on which Levinas's ethics rests. Place this in question, and one places all the rest in question.

Nevertheless, it is a question that can hardly be avoided. For is it indeed the case that my reaction to the appeal of the Other is one of shame? Do I then suffer the bad conscience of one who realizes that he has no right to his rights nor even to his existence, and for whom that existence, formerly so evident, suddenly appears in all its "hatefulness" (DQI 248), "imperialism"

(OB 110, 121) and “egoism” (TRO 353)? Is it true that in the confrontation with the face of the Other, I not only see my naturalness put into question, but that in the same move I also experience it as something which, for me to keep it, will henceforth require me to make an unnatural (for ethically qualified) move? Levinas seems to think so, and it is perhaps unsurprising that in order to buttress this assertion – or this description – he resorts to a vocabulary deriving from Sartre: the ethical appeal, one reads in *Otherwise Than Being*, turns me into a *pour autrui* (AE 81/(OB 64)). I cease to be *pour soi* (AE 67/(OB 52)) and become a hostage of the Other without ever coinciding with him; I am “turned inside out,” “denucleated,” “dispossessed,” “uprooted” and, strangely enough, it is this “abdication” that takes place “despite myself”,³⁷ this abandoning of my spontaneous naturalness that, for Levinas, frees me (TI 88), humanizes me, and summons me to my “final essence” (TI 179). In order to be, to be “there,” to be “someone,” being – as it were – had to be enclosed within my person, and not by choice but by necessity; the alternative would mean that I as a person would disappear in the anonymous night of what Levinas calls the *il y a*. And yet, it is exactly this *conatus*, this “closedness” (TI 148) in Being that is thrown into “crisis” by the gaze of the Other (DQI 248). A crisis which, for Levinas, summons this interiority “from the outside” (OB 150) and exposes a level deeper than my “closedness” where I am first of all an “openness” (OB 115), an inability to “remain in [my]self” (CPP 149), an “inability to shut myself up” (CPP 150), and yet a “self” that is not interchangeable with that of others, because it is *this* self that is responsible for those others, and it has this responsibility to thank for the dispossession which singularizes it and makes it a self. It is with regard to this level that Levinas calls ethics a *religion*: *religare* which binds me *with others* (*noué*, AE 96/OB 76) and devotes me to them (*voué*, DQI 249) even before I am bound to myself. And it is from this point of view that henceforth *every* attempt – albeit only momentary – to escape this appeal, the least remainder of concern for myself, will be seen as a closure of a pre-existing opening. It will be seen as a refusal of the orientation to which the Good has invited us, without compelling us since, as we have seen, the Good is only good because it does not take possession of us, because it “inspires” (OB 140ff) us without becoming our master. And it is in order to safeguard this distinction between the holiness of the Good that liberates us and the *ecstatic* obsession of the sacred that strips us of our position, our *stasis*, that Levinas must simultaneously recognize and deny the possibility of keeping silent: “The will is free to assume this responsibility in whatever sense it likes; it is not free to refuse this responsibility itself; it is not free to ignore the meaningful world into which the face of the Other has introduced it” (TI 218–219). To be able to keep silent means: to be able to disregard the appeal, to not have to

take it up. But, as Levinas will insist, this presupposes that it has already been heard: “The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – *without my being able to be deaf to that appeal*” (TI 200). It is from this hearing before one has chosen to listen, from this “unconditioned ‘Yes’ of submission” (OB 122), that Levinas will derive his “true universality” – a universality that has its origin in an asymmetry *and therefore* in a hierarchy between Good and Evil. For there can be little doubt that what is at stake here, for Levinas, is this hierarchy. From the moment there is an appeal, “silence,” interiority and closure have an *ethical* significance: it is the “claim” of “*Evil*” to be “the contemporary, the equal, the twin, of the Good” (CPP 138).

This is a strong thesis, but one which is, for Levinas, unavoidable. It is the idea that my naturalness, my spontaneous and involuntary self-concern cannot *appear* without thereby immediately losing this naturalness and becoming the object of my free choice. Ethics is the *complete* submission of nature to the order of good and evil which breaks into that nature *from without*. This is why Levinas says, and tirelessly repeats, that ethics is a *liberation*. The face of the Other liberates me because it confronts me with the possibility of choosing something which, left to myself, I could never have chosen. One only becomes human when one’s existence is no longer *conatus*, no longer something working behind one’s back, but choice, in other words, “morality”: true humanization comes from the Other, i e. from the invitation to place, above my own existence, something else – the existence of the Other. Hence, for Levinas, what defines the humanity of man is his ability to sacrifice. Man is the sort of being who can reject his being, “reverse” his *conatus* (OB 70) and sacrifice himself: “To discover in the I such an orientation is to identify the I and morality” (TrO 353).

Such an identification is only possible for Levinas if he can refer to something that would bring into the I, from the outside, this orientation against naturalness, against *conatus essendi*. And this outside which is so much outside that it can enter the I without becoming part of it – and which owes its *orientational power* precisely to this refusal to participate in the I or to let the I participate in it – this outside is the Good, or the idea of the Infinite, whose trace is the face of the Other. By being a trace of this idea, the face of the Other can make an appeal to me that I cannot take possession of (since the face overflows the form lying within my reach) but which *dispossesses* me, because I cannot not hear it and because, from the moment I have heard it, the naturalness of my being shows up only to immediately “take its leave.” The face effects a phenomenological reduction that does not add a dimension to my being, but takes one away. The feeling of shame with which I react to the gaze of the Other does not concern the fact that, with this gaze, I receive a

nature and with the purity of my *pour soi* lose the absoluteness of my freedom. According to Levinas, and contrary to Sartre,³⁸ I am ashamed not so much of the nature that I become, but of the nature that I was. The gaze of the Other does not enslave; it liberates. And it liberates because there is no way for me to transcend it without already submitting to it. Keeping silent is merely a refusal to speak. It is merely the expression of a *im-passibility* that Levinas can only treat as a shortcoming, and hence as “egoism or Evil” (CPP 137) – but this link can only be made if one can rely on a universe which is also an *univers de discours* that has ascribed *all possible* discourse a place within it. And for Levinas, there is such a universe. For there is a word that “one cannot not hear, to which one cannot not answer” (*supra*). It is through the operation of this word – “God” – that the ethical situation becomes, for Levinas, a religious situation: “a situation in which the subject finds it impossible to hide,” “an exceptional situation in which one is always before the face of the Other” and, let us note, “*where there is nothing private*”.³⁹ I would like for a moment to consider, in concluding, what would happen if one would put this word out of operation. I would even go so far as to start from one place – but it is a central one – where Levinas unexpectedly seems to have put this word out of operation himself, although apparently without realizing it and without drawing the necessary consequences. And it is perhaps not without importance that, at the very moment when he was offered the opportunity to free himself from Sartre, he let it pass.

The ethical dignity of the Other

But why should Levinas have taken such an opportunity? Did he still need it? Have we not just seen that the simple introduction of an ethical factor had enabled Levinas to exorcise the entire Sartrean universe? For if the Other is not only outside me, but also above me, then he is not just “another freedom,” irreconcilable with mine, who need only look at me to transcend my freedom and make me an object in the world, just as I, in turn, can make him an object in the world by looking at him and transcending his transcendence. This whole endless aporia which turns Sartre’s description of intersubjective relations into that hell where “love” boils down to a choice between sadism (the Other is an object) or masochism (I am an object for the Other) seems to fall apart from the moment one realizes that “the Other is not transcendent because he would be free as I am” (TI 87), but that this transcendence points to a “superiority” (*ibid.*) which makes his gaze “incomparable” (TI 86) to mine, allowing him to give me the “bad conscience” of a freedom that is not just transcended but qualified, a freedom that is ashamed of being still too much nature, the freedom of “a tree that grows without regard for everything it suppresses and breaks, grabbing all the nourishment, air and sun” (DF 100).

It is shame – shame for the “arbitrariness” and “injustice” of a freedom that was mere *conatus* – which chastens me, turns me into a moral being and, according to Levinas, gives me the possibility of carrying out that *metanoia* which, it is true, Sartre mentioned,⁴⁰ but conspicuously failed to articulate.

In order for this chastening to occur, there must be a “disproportion”⁴¹ between the Other and me, a disproportion referred to by Levinas when he says that the Other is “closer to God than I” (*supra*): “for me to feel myself to be unjust I must measure myself against the infinite” (CPP 58). But that infinite which provides me with a measure does not, as we know, show itself to me directly. It comes to me in the face of the Other which appeals to me, and it lends that face the force needed for an “*ethical* resistance:” to ignore the imperative of that face means, as was pointed out above, to let oneself be judged by it. This is why it is crucial for Levinas to maintain a distinction between the face of the Other and what I can see of the Other. Only if the Other is *more* than this form that I see, only if there is something about him by which he finds his meaning in himself and can thus always question the meaning I give to him, can there be any talk of an ethical resistance and an injustice that I commit against him by reducing his face to its form. And in the course of making this crucial distinction, Levinas takes the *further* crucial decision to link that “surplus” of the face over its form – that “something extra” by which the face can break through the form which manifests it – with the idea of the infinite: “The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the form of a relation with the face. And the idea of infinity alone maintains the exteriority of the other with respect to the same, despite this relation” (TI 196). While, for Levinas, the form is only an exteriority that turns toward me, thereby becoming involved with my interiority, the exteriority of the face is, through the idea of infinity, absolute: “a face is the unique openness in which the signifyingness of the transcendent does not nullify the transcendence and make it enter into an immanent order” (CPP 103). In order to have this status, then, the face must be *completely independent* of form; although it manifests itself in form, this form can in no way affect or “touch” it. Hence the face, even before entering into the form that manifests it, must already have withdrawn from it: a “supreme anachronism” that Levinas calls “trace,” yet which he notes is not “simply a word,” but “the proximity of God in the face of my neighbor”.⁴² Without this proximity of a “God who passed” (CPP 106), i.e. without this “abdication” of the Good that has always already withdrawn from the desire which it awakens and which orients that desire toward my neighbor(s), the face would not be independent of form: “The supreme presence of a face is inseparable from this supreme and irreversible absence” which Levinas calls “God” or “He”

or “*illeity* of the third person” (CPP 104). A “face, wholly open, can at the same time be in itself because it is in the trace of *illeity*” (CPP 106).

Without this independence of the face with respect to form – without this autarky – the otherness of the Other could not be absolute. And without this absolute foreignness that the face has by virtue of its being in the trace of the *illeity* of a God who passed, it could not impose its rights on me nor put up any (ethical) resistance against my attempt to brush aside its appeal. But *if the ethical value of the Other is to be situated in the face*, if, in other words, the face is not dependent on “the form” or “the context” in order to be what it “is,” if it is “*signification without a context*” (TI 23), manifestation “over and beyond form” (TI 66), “*not disclosure but revelation*” (TI 65–66), then how can Levinas at the same time call this autarky of the face, this “infinity of the Other,” a “destitution” (TI 213)? How can something which “is not of the world” (TI 198), and which enters the world without ever becoming a part of it, at the same time *suffer* under “its absence from this world into which it enters” (TI 75)? How can Levinas call this absence from form, which is also called supreme presence and the condition for the alterity of the Other, an “exiling” (*ibid.*)? How can this strangeness that guarantees the alterity of the Other be, at the same time, “strangeness-destitution,” “his condition of being stranger, destitute or proletarian” (*ibid.*)? Why does the nakedness of the face – which is naked because it exceeds form and whose status requires independence from form – why does this *glorious* nakedness extend “into the nakedness of the body that is cold” (*ibid.*)? How can Levinas say that the face is naked because it “breaks into the order of the world,” that it is without context because it is “wrested from the context of the world”⁴³ and, at the same time, call this nakedness “a distress” (CPP 96)? Does this mean that, contrary to what was suggested, the distress of the Other does have some “relation” to “the context” or “the form” from which his face was supposed to be independent? But can we then keep situating the ethical dignity of the Other in his face? Could it be that it is less independent from form than the analysis of the face that Levinas himself has given us might have led us to suspect?

Levinas, of course, could easily make room for this objection by pointing out that it is precisely through form that this ethical dignity is *ethical* – a dignity that *makes an appeal to me* – because it is through form that the Other is vulnerable. In order to keep his dignity, the other is dependent on my help; after all, I retain the possibility of reducing his face to its form – I can murder him – and it is this possibility that makes the “ethical resistance” of his face an ethical, not a real resistance.⁴⁴ The *dignity* of the Other, then, has to do with his face, but because that face cannot circumvent the form, from which it is nevertheless independent, this dignity is, *in concreto*, an *ethical* dignity.

And yet, this answer is hardly satisfying and passes over the problem I want to pose. For if Levinas calls the face “naked” and sees in this nakedness the “destitution” of the Other – in other words, the fact that he is not only “above me” but also “beneath me,” that he not only commands but supplicates – he is alluding not only to the fact that the Other, as a concrete person, remains vulnerable in that form from which his face becomes detached in the very moment the form shines forth (CPP 96). For Levinas, this nakedness also alludes to *a lack of form*: “Stripped of its very form, a face is frozen in its nudity. It is a distress” (*ibid.*)⁴⁵ The nakedness Levinas has in mind *here* is precisely what the word says: a lack of clothing, in other words, a need for “form” or “context.” But, once again, how can this face – which for Levinas is “living” because it “undoes the form” which would make it “adequate to the Same” and would “betray” and “alienate” its “exteriority” (TI 66) – how can this face which is a “bareness *without any cultural ornament*” suffer because of the absence of something from which it *already* withdrew, even *before* entering? And yet this is what Levinas suggests when he sees the nakedness of the Other as his destitution, calls the Other “fatherless,” “stranger,” “uprooted,” and contrasts this lack of roots, home and a fatherland with my own situation: “To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself [to know the “form” of this destitution – R. V.], but is to posit oneself as responsible, *both as more and as less than the being that presents itself in the face*. Less, for the face . . . judges me . . . [and] comes from a dimension of height . . . More, for my position as *I* consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who *dominates* me in his transcendence is thus the stranger . . . to whom I am obligated” (TI 215). To take up the appeal of that stranger, or even already to receive that appeal (and, as we have seen, one cannot not hear it) means to be ashamed of one’s own wealth, to experience one’s own existence as a usurpation, to lose one’s titles – in short, to be oneself uprooted and *dispossessed* by the appeal of the other who is uprooted, to cease being *pour soi* and to become completely *pour l’autre*, for the “altruism” in question here is “total.”⁴⁶ One will no doubt recall: “nothing private.” “The I in relationship with the infinite is an impossibility of stopping its forward march . . . it is, *literally*, not to have time to turn back. It is to be not able to escape responsibility, to not have a hiding place of interiority where one comes back into oneself, to march forward *without concern for oneself*” (CPP 98). Ethics is “without calculation, *for going on to infinity*” (CPP 72). Sacrifice becomes the norm and criterion for the approach of the Other.

A “conclusion” that both presupposes and implies that for Levinas the nature and definition of ethics do not *ultimately* depend upon the “destitution”

of the Other, but upon what Levinas calls his “height” (i.e. the infinity of his face). The Other’s destitution is infinite, thus asking an infinite sacrifice from me, *since this destitution comes from the face* – a face which Levinas has defined as always already being stripped of a form it has no need of and in which it cannot be at home precisely because of the infinity of being a face. Strange as it may sound, it seems that, by its very definition, there is nothing I can do to prevent such a face from being “frozen” for it lacks and will always lack that clothing or context or form that I apparently possess. Which is why, for Levinas, the essential uprootedness of the Other cannot but have my uprootedness as a consequence. Since the Other (by definition) “lacks” roots, in other words, something which, according to Levinas, I possess, he can never become rooted like me. Rather, I will have to become like he is by giving up in an *infinite* sacrifice the roots he does not have. And in that process, I will asymptotically approach my true humanity, for that ground to which I am attached, that attachment itself is, for Levinas, only a sign of my naturalness. Humanity, after all, “is not a forest” and the individual “is not a tree” (DF 23). Being uprooted is a humanization, a leaving nature behind. True universality: community of the uprooted.⁴⁷

But is one a stranger only when one has no roots? Is uprootedness always a “lack” of roots? – this strange lack which for Levinas, as we have seen, cannot really be a lack since it results from his definition of the face, which is infinite and therefore cannot really be in need of a form that is too small, too finite, to contain it. *But what if what Levinas insists on treating as a “lack” of roots were really an “excess”?* Might there not also be an uprootedness that comes from an excess of roots, an excess that is yet *not enough* to be rooted like a tree? Does the difference between a man and a tree lie in the absence or presence of roots, as Levinas suggests, *or in the nature of the rootedness itself?* What is the cold that makes the face freeze? What, finally, is the destitution of the Other?

The nakedness that makes a difference

Let me try to make these questions and this suggestion of an alternative somewhat more concrete by coming back to the opposition which regulates all of Levinas’s thought and which, *in the final analysis*, amounts to an ethicization of Sartre’s dualism. Levinas does not deny that the Other has a “form” by which I can “perceive” him, nor that I can encounter him in a context where he fulfills a certain role and is situated by this role, the context of a culture for example. What he opposes is that the Other would be reduced to this form, context or culture, for then he would lose his alterity and be swallowed up by something which I can know, which “appears” to me. If the Other is only “in a cultural whole and is illuminated by this

whole, as a text by its context,” then understanding the Other would be “a hermeneutics and an exegesis” (CPP 95). To avoid this, Levinas wants the Other *also* to have its “own meaning” that would not depend on “this meaning received from the world” (*ibid*) but that would disrupt it. To avoid what he perceives as the danger of contextualism – be it in the guise of relativism or of culturalism – the worldly (mundane) meaning of the Other must be thrown off balance by “another presence that is abstract (or, more exactly, absolute) and not integrated into the world” (*ibid*). This other meaning – which, both for Sartre and Levinas, comes from “*au-dela du monde*,” and which both call “infinite” – is for Levinas the face, a face which he calls “ab-stract” because it “disturbs immanence without settling into the horizons of the world” (CPP 102). Because the face is *independent* of world, context and culture, because it comes from an “elsewhere . . . into which it already withdraws” (*ibid*) even before it arrives, Levinas sees in it a guarantee that the Other is more than a “cultural meaning” who approaches me from out of his cultural whole. Ethics, therefore, must *precede* culture: as face, the Other is an “*abstract man*,” in the sense of someone “disengaged *from all culture*” (CPP 101).

But doesn't this ethics begin too late? Isn't there something that precedes it, something that it wanted to suppress but that ultimately returns and disrupts its analysis? What seems to be taken for granted in this entire discussion is precisely the opposition between infinite and finite, face and form, transcendent and immanent, uprootedness and rootedness, an opposition that seems to undergo slippage when Levinas states that the face, “stripped of its form,” and hence in all its nakedness, is “frozen” (*supra*). Has the shivering of this nakedness, this destitution, really been understood when one forces it into the above oppositions and clings to the alternative: “either swallowed up by context like a thing, or without context, hence a person”? In other words: either *en soi* or *pour soi*, either mundane or transcendent, either visible form or “invisible” face – oppositions all of which Sartre made already and which, despite all his criticism of Sartre, seem also to govern Levinas's definition of the Other. But does the Other's destitution allow itself to be forced into these oppositions? What if this destitution would consist of the Other being stuck with something that he can neither get free of nor dissolve into? Isn't that, for example, the relation one has with one's “ground,” in its literal or metaphorical sense – the ground, for instance, of one's history, or of one's culture or one's personal life? Wasn't it Levinas himself who said that “the great ‘experiences’ of our life have properly speaking never been lived [*vécu*]” (CPP 68), and isn't it exactly this inability to fully live these moments that gives them, for every one of us, a surplus of meaning? Isn't it precisely this inability to work through moments which for others perhaps were insignificant, since they could work through them; isn't it precisely this inability to

forget, this recollection *despite ourselves*, that singularizes us? Isn't it this, this unassimilable strangeness, that makes us different from trees and from things, but also from one another?

What I am suggesting, then, is that there is a nakedness that cannot be thought if one adheres to the opposition between face and form, finite and infinite. The nakedness of a being which is attached to "something" that *it cannot do away with nor even less have access to*.⁴⁸ Such a being is naked in the double sense of having not enough "form" to clothe itself in, and yet too much "form" not to notice its nakedness. Of course, Levinas is correct when he draws our attention to the violence involved in fully clothing a person with that "form" that he presents to us, and he deserves praise for warning us of the temptation to let the Other be absorbed and determined by the functional, everyday context in which we meet him. But in averting this danger, he seems to have made an overcorrection, one that consists in fully detaching the person's dignity from this "form" or context and hence reducing his nakedness to only the first of the two senses mentioned above. To make the dignity of the Other depend on this "visitation" or on this "revelation of the other . . . in the gaze of man aiming at a man precisely as abstract man, *disengaged from all culture*" (CPP 101) means perhaps that one ascribes, unwittingly and with the best of intentions, a dignity to the Other that ignores his true destitution, and the full extent of his nakedness. Might it not be that the true nakedness of the Other has less to do with his being disengaged from all culture, all context, all form, and more to do with his being engaged in it in such a way that the engagement never renders its secret to him? Isn't the Other not only an Other to me, but also someone who owes his "own" alterity to some "Thing" which remains "other" to him and yet singularizes him at the same time?

In other words, perhaps the Other is, *like myself*, primarily a "stranger" not because he is without those roots that I possess, but because we are both attached to "something" which is too close to leave us indifferent, but not close enough to be called our possession. Isn't it this structure that makes us similar to one another at the very moment when it distinguishes us? But the Other would then be decentered *like me*. And yet he would be an Other precisely because that vague debt which he must discharge is still not "vague" enough to let it coincide with mine. And isn't that the reason he "bears" a name – in the sense which connotes an *effort* – that is different from mine? Where is the Other more naked than in his name – a name that he does not possess, but has received; a name that he does not coincide with, but that can neither leave him indifferent; a name that summons him to life, but that will also survive him? In other words, what I am suggesting here, and will have to further develop elsewhere, is that one misconstrues the Other's ethical dignity

when one thinks of it in terms of the opposition between a face that is a “living present” and a form that sucks the life out of that present and “congeals” it (TI 66). The dignity and destitution of the Other do not have to be thought on the basis of that face that speaks and in which “the revealer” “coincides” with “the revealed” (TI 67). The destitution of the Other seems rather to reside in the fact that he is neither that presence of the face nor that absence of form, but someone caught in a tension between face and form that must be thought of in such a way that they *precede* this opposition – which, ultimately, is the opposition between exteriority and interiority, infinity and totality.

To work this out would require, among other things, a different ontology than the one with which Levinas is arguing, whose traces, despite all the criticism, he still carries with him. And perhaps the problem of the name could point the way to this new ontology. For a being who bears a name cannot be grasped in the categories of *pour soi*, *en soi* and *pour autrui* that Levinas provides with an ethical meaning. The name to which someone is attached *without the meaning of this attachment ever being clear to the person* might itself be an example of that tension that seems to precede the opposition between face and form. To have a name is to be-in-the-world by being, first and foremost, “present” to “something” in the world – a certain sound, a privileged signifier – which is nearby but, at the same time, at a distance. To have a name is, in this way, an example of all those forms of *en soi pour soi* where the subject is already attached to something even before it could have chosen it, and which, for that reason, precedes the opposition between *en soi* and *pour soi*.⁴⁹ But this is a privileged example because the name, like the Good for Levinas, is not sacred but holy. There is something about the name which, like the Good, turns me away from itself and directs me toward others. And ethics must be about this turning away, this *metanoia*. Yet there is also something about the name that escapes this turning and cannot be consoled by it: that which escapes discourse, punctuating it with a silence that no word can break. I think it is not only a mistake to try and force that silence by naming it with a word that one cannot not hear and – important qualification – by making that word do ethical work. I think it is also dangerous because one will then run the risk of closing off the only source from which we could draw in an attempt to extinguish the flames of that fire which is slowly but steadily burning away everything in us that points to the possibility of a common humanity that would not need to pay the price of universality in order to avoid the folly of blind particularity.

Notes

1. This is an ironical reference to a Dutch book I published in 1990 on Foucault's use of quotation marks (such as in "human 'sciences'"), and which was recently translated as: *Michel Foucault: Genealogy as Critique*, London, 1995. On Heidegger's quotation marks, see: J. Derrida, *De l'esprit: Heidegger et la question*, Paris, 1987.
2. Cf. J. Lacan's intervention in the discussion following Foucault's "What is an Author?": "structuralism or not, it seems to me it is nowhere a question, in the field vaguely determined by that label, of the negation of the subject. It is a question of the dependence of the subject, which is quite different . . ." (*Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie*, 1969 (64), p. 104).
3. For both of the following questions which were inspired by Foucault's work, and which have to do with the transition from an "archaeological" to a "genealogical" approach, see my: "Fascination with Foucault: Object and Desire of an Archaeology of Our Knowledge," *Angelaki*, 1994(1: 3 – Reconsidering the Political), pp. 113–118, in which I turn the idea of decentering elaborated here against a rather common fascination for Foucault's work.
4. An expression which comes up regularly in Lyotard's more recent work (cf. the references in my: "Dissensus Communis: How to remain silent after Lyotard," in P. Van Haute and P. Birmingham (eds). *Dissensus Communis: Between Ethics and Politics*, Kampen (The Netherlands), 1995, pp. 7–30. The considerations about "silence" that follow are intended as a provisional development of the problematic presented there).
5. For example: E. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, (trans. R.A. Cohen), Pittsburgh PA, 1987; ID., *Existence and Existents*, (trans. A. Lingis), The Hague, 1978.
6. J.-F. Lyotard, "Grundlagenkrise," *Neue Hefte für Philosophie*, 1986, pp. 1–33.
7. Cf. the title of the penultimate chapter of his controversial *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, Cambridge, 1990: "An Alternative Way out of the Philosophy of the Subject: Communicative versus Subject-Centred Reason."
8. In any case, much longer than is possible here – a promissory note that, I hope, will incur the clemency of those who will object, with some irritation, that many of the important Levinasian themes (the *il y a*, the third person, justice, etc.) are not discussed here. One must begin somewhere.
9. I am citing the brochure for the symposium, "Interpretaties van subjectiviteit" (= "Interpretations of Subjectivity"), where this text was first presented (University of Amsterdam, April 1995).
10. Levinas calls the word "God" the "first word" in, among other places, "Language and Proximity," in ID., *Collected Philosophical Papers*, (trans. A. Lingis), Dordrecht etc., 1987, pp. 125–126. I shall be referring to this work by CPP. Levinas's other texts will be quoted as follows, using the English translations when available: DF: *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, (trans. S. Hand), Baltimore, 1990; DQI: *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Paris, 1992 (édition de poche); TI: *Totality and Infinity*, (trans. A. Lingis), Dordrecht etc., 1991; TrO: "The Trace of the Other," in M.C. Taylor (ed.) *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, Chicago/London, 1986, pp. 345–59. On some occasions I also refer by AE to the French original of OB: *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Dordrecht etc., 1988. All italics are my own.
11. On this distinction, cf. Dieter Henrich's brilliant piece: "Ethik der Autonomie," in ID., *Selbstverhältnisse*, Stuttgart, 1982, p. 14 and *passim*.
12. J.-F. Lyotard, "Levinas' Logic," in ID., *The Lyotard Reader*, (ed. A. Benjamin), Oxford, 1989, p. 297.
13. For a perspicuous overview, cf. D. Henrich, *art. cit.*
14. J. Habermas, "Morality and Ethical Life," in ID., *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 197 and cf. p. 66.
15. J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Manchester U.P., 1988, nr. 176 (I will henceforth refer to this work as "D", followed by the number of the paragraph being cited). Habermas is not mentioned in this passage, but he is clearly the target.

16. J. Habermas, *op. cit.*, pp. 197–8. Habermas sees here a possibility of working Kant's *Faktum der Vernunft* into communicative theory – clearly this implies a distancing from Kant that does not contradict the symmetry noted here, but qualifies it to a significant extent.
17. Cf. the very title of Levinas's collection *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (=Humanism of the Other Man), Paris, 1972; cf. also OB 128 (ordinary humanism is "not human enough"). For his part, Lyotard discusses humanism in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Cambridge, 1991.
18. Besides the work just mentioned, cf. especially *Lectures d'enfance*, Paris, 1991 (specifically the exordium on the idea of "infancy"), and *Moralités postmodernes*, Paris, 1993.
19. J.-F. Lyotard, "The Grip," in ID., *Political Writings*, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 148–58. Lyotard refers here to the etymological origin of "mancipium:" "Manceps is the person who takes hold, in the sense of possession or appropriation. And *mancipium* refers to this gesture of taking hold . . . we are held by the grasp of others since childhood, yet our childhood does not cease to exercise its *mancipium* even when we imagine ourselves to be emancipated . . . we are born before we are born to ourselves. And thus we are born of others, but also born to others . . . subjected to their *mancipium* which they themselves do not comprehend. For they are themselves children . . ." (pp. 148–49 *partim*).
20. I have tried elsewhere to explain the price of this restriction and why, in this way, one makes it too easy on oneself, overlooking the real problem of the so-called relativism of Habermas' opponents (Foucault, Heidegger, etc.): "Habermas on Heidegger and Foucault: Meaning and Validity in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*," *Radical Philosophy*, 1992 (61), pp. 15–22; "Transcultural Vibrations," *Ethical Perspectives*, 1994(1: 2), pp. 89–100, esp. 94–95.
21. For Lyotard, a differend, as explained elsewhere ("Dissensus Communis," *supra* note 4), is a dispute between two parties that cannot be settled for lack of a common idiom or, I would add in light of Lyotard's recent writings, for lack of any idiom *at all* – a lack of which the assertion "it is like this because it is like this" seems to be a symptom.
22. J.-F. Lyotard, "Levinas' Logic," *art. cit.*, p. 307.
23. D, nr. 206 (cf. nrs. 144, 145, 162, 164 . . .)
24. The characterization of Levinas's ethics as "postmodern," introduced by Marc-Alain Ouaknin in his *Méditations Erotiques. Essai sur Emmanuel Levinas*, (Paris, 1992) and taken over by Z. Bauman in his *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford, 1995, e.g. p. 84) is, I believe, profoundly misleading. Surely one is doing an injustice by painting black perhaps the only cow that stands out in the night of our present time.
25. Levinas would have no problem with this qualification – cf. for instance TI 210: "In positing the relation with the Other as ethical, one surmounts a difficulty that would be inevitable if, *contrary to Descartes*, philosophy started from a *cogito* that would posit itself absolutely independently of the Other. For the Cartesian *cogito* is discovered, at the end of the Third Meditation, to be supported on the certitude of the divine existence *qua infinite*, *by relation to which the finitude of the cogito, or the doubt, is posited and conceivable*. This finitude could not be determined without recourse to the infinite, *as is the case in the moderns . . .*" Cf. also Derrida: "But by the force of a movement proper to Levinas, he accepts this extreme 'modern' audacity only to redirect it toward an infinitism that this audacity itself must suppose, according to himself; and the form of this infinitism is often quite classical, pre-Kantian rather than Hegelian" (*Writing and Difference*, London, 1978, p. 104).
26. An expression that crops up regularly in OB and that, interestingly enough, also gives the title to a brief article in Lyotard's *Moralités postmodernes* (chap. 12).
27. P. Van Haute, "'Fatal Attraction': Jean Laplanche on Sexuality, Subjectivity and Singularity in the Work of Sigmund Freud," in *Radical Philosophy*, 1995 (nr. 73), pp. 5–12. In his conclusion the author adopts the terminology from the article mentioned in note 3, and thus indirectly poses the problem of whether it is correct to consider his analysis as an ontic filling of an ontological base structure (e.g. note 19 above). But even if he would not

- object to his analyses being used as support for an ontological base structure *that Levinas never takes account of*, one might still expect Levinas to ask if every enigma refers back to the sexual/erotic enigma described by Van Haute, and if there isn't an asymmetry between that register and the register of the Infinite which provokes metaphysical Desire.
28. In this and the following sentence, I refer to a number of ideas from Lacan's important seventh seminar: *L'éthique de la psychanalyse* (1959–1960) (Paris, 1986, esp. p. 361 – “tragique” – and *passim*). What Lacan means by “*ne pas céder sur son désir*” is explained, although with other (not insignificant) accents, in: R. Bernet, “Le sujet devant la loi (Lacan et Kant),” and P. Moyaert, “Sur la sublimation chez Lacan: Quelques remarques,” both in S.G. Lofts and P. Moyaert (eds). *La pensée de Jacques Lacan: Questions historiques, Problèmes théoriques*, Louvain/Paris, 1994. In this seminar Lacan repeatedly uses words such as *graviter* or *tourner autour de* (“gravitate around”) to indicate our (decentered) position with respect to *das Ding* (*op. cit.*, pp. 72, 77 . . .).
 29. For this expression, see Jacob Rogozinski's excellent “Vers une éthique du différend,” in H. Kunneman and H. De Vries (eds). *Enlightenments: Encounters between Critical Theory and Contemporary French Thought*, Kampen (The Netherlands), 1993, pp. 92–119, esp. p. 102.
 30. For a lucid presentation of the way this link is severed in Lacan and Freud: P. Moyaert, *Ethiek en sublimatie: Over de ethiek van de psychoanalyse van Jacques Lacan*, Nijmegen, 1994.
 31. TI 198: “The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill.”
 32. CPP 72: “To the idea of the infinite only an extravagant response is possible. There has to be a ‘thought’ that understands more than it understands . . . a ‘thought’ which, in this sense, could go beyond its death . . . To go beyond one's death is to sacrifice oneself. The response to the enigma's summons is the generosity of sacrifice outside the known and the unknown, *without calculation, for going on to infinity* . . . I approach the infinite *by sacrificing myself. Sacrifice is the norm and the criterion of the approach*” – a train of thought which is rigorously taken up in OB (1974) but, in light of the previous citation, in a way that is not completely foreign to the framework of TI (1961). But the readers of Levinas who see a *caesura* between TI and OB will, of course, disagree. They should, perhaps, reconsider.
 33. It is the hesitation before this murder that, for Levinas, has hindered the development of a pluralistic ontology. But killing Parmenides means primarily the overthrow of ontology as *prima philosophia*, and henceforth deriving it from ethics. This is the very project of TI, which thus can be read as “totality or infinity:” Only the exteriority of infinity can bring a pluralism into being and prevent it from closing into the totality which, for Levinas, it would become if left to the devices of ontology. For this reason, one might use the following adage to describe Levinas's metaphysics: “*bonum et dispersum convertuntur*” (cf. e.g. “The social relation engenders this surplus of the Good over being, multiplicity over the One” (TI 292)).
 34. OB 128: “The impossibility of escaping God, the adventure of Jonas [sic], indicates that God is at least here not a value among values (. . .) The impossibility of escaping God lies in the depths of myself as a self, as an absolute passivity (. . .) [as] the impossibility of slipping away (. . .) the birth (. . .) of a ‘being able to die’ *subject to sacrifice*”. The reader will perhaps recall the quote in note 32.
 35. Ethics, for Levinas, is a penetration (OB 49: “one-penetrated-by-the-other”) but, according to his recurrent formula, “*before eros*” (e.g. OB 192 n 27). A penetration, then, without the consolation nor even the fantasm of union, whose consequence is that the subject penetrated becomes an ever wider “opening” (“*ouverture*”) which can never contain or encompass what is always already inside without being absorbed by it, an opening which seems rather to be a hole through which interiority continually discharges itself: “It is always to empty oneself anew of oneself, to absolve oneself, like in a hemophiliac's hemorrhage” (OB 92) – a “hemorrhage” which already shows that Levinas, as we shall

indicate later, is ethicizing the Sartrean universe all the while using Sartre's own concepts and metaphors.

36. E. Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Némo*, (trans. R.A. Cohen), Pittsburgh, 1985, p. 121.
37. These terms are standard vocabulary in OB. They can be found on almost any page.
38. J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, New York, esp. Part 3: "Being-for-Others."
39. E. Levinas, "Transcendance et Hauteur," *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*, 1962 (54: 3), p. 110.
40. *op. cit.*, p. 412n: "These considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. But this can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we cannot discuss here." OB should be read as one long description of this process of conversion whose central – and never argued – premise would not have satisfied Sartre: the idea that the wound which the Other's appeal not so much brands me with, but burns me with again, has a chastening effect.
41. E. Levinas, "Signature," in ID., *Difficile Liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme*, Paris, 1963¹, p. 326. (This version of "Signature" is not included in DF).
42. E. Levinas, "Un Dieu Homme?," in ID., *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à l'autre*, Paris, 1991, p. 73.
43. *Ibid.*
44. On the distinction between an ethical and a real resistance: E. Levinas, "Freedom and Command," CPP 15–23; and TI e.g. 199; OB 198n2.
45. Here I have altered the English translation which reads "paralyzed" for "*transi dans sa nudité*" (*Humanisme de l'autre homme*, o.c., p. 52). In preferring "frozen" to "paralyzed," I am following Adriaan Peperzak in his annotated Dutch translation of *Humanisme (Humanisme van de andere mens*, Kampen/Kapellen, 1990, p. 78, which paraphrases "*transi*" as "shivering with cold"). The change is not unimportant given the point I shall be making.
46. "Transcendance et Hauteur," *art. cit.*, p. 97.
47. Note that, according to Levinas, Christianity can for essential reasons only make an incomplete contribution to this universality: "If Europe had been spiritually uprooted by Christianity, as Simone Weil complains, the evil would not be great. And it is not always the idylls that have been destroyed by Europe's penetration of the world . . . but is Europe's unhappiness not due to the fact that Christianity did not sufficiently uproot it?" (DF 137). Though I hope to have made it clear from which standpoint I am myself arguing – but isn't it a surprising alliance? – in light of this quote (which is in no sense a *hapax*) one can only wonder at the success with which Levinas's ethics has been assimilated by certain moral theologians from the *Catholic* world (for a noteworthy exception: U. Dhondt, "Ethics, History, Religion: The Limits of the Philosophy of Levinas," in P.J.M. Van Tongeren, et al. (eds). *Eros and Eris: Contributions to a Hermeneutical Phenomenology. Liber Amicorum for Adriaan Peperzak*, Dordrecht, 1992, pp. 273–80).
48. Cf. the introduction to this article, where these two moments were used in defining the concept "decentering." As soon as one of these moments is relinquished, problems arise. Nationalism, for instance, rests on a misrecognition of this *double* structure of "decentering" in that it claims to *have access* to that "something" to which a nation is irrevocably "attached." In other words, the mistake is that it purports to be able to specify what I called in this article's introduction the "vague" debt. Nationalism pretends to know what "our" debt to the nation consists in. On the other hand, the stress on the *two* moments in decentering allows one, in principle, to steer away from an extreme cosmopolitan/universalistic correction to the mistake of nationalism/particularism, an overcorrection that consists of the claim that there is no singular attachment as such (and hence gives up decentering, "in-fantia" as such). In other words, "decentering" seems to point the way to an alternative position which is neither universalistic nor particularistic in the traditional sense. I shall leave it for another occasion to spell out the political consequences of this "third" way.

49. The endo-ontology which Merleau-Ponty was working on in *The Visible and the Invisible* can provide scant inspiration here. It is insensitive to the problem of singularity which we have indicated in the preceding lines. The thought of the chiasm and of the polymorphism of vertical Being (“*I’être brut*”) can explain why we don’t live in a *different* world, but seems able to conclude from this only that we live in the *same* world because it turns in the direction of an asubjective phenomenology, for which “the I-other problem is a *Western* problem” (*op. cit.*, Paris, 1964, p. 274). Cf. my article: “The Untouchable: Merleau-Ponty’s last subject,” forthcoming in *Epoché. A Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 1977(5:1).