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## **Moving beyond identity: reading the Zhuangzi and Levinas as resources for comparative philosophy**

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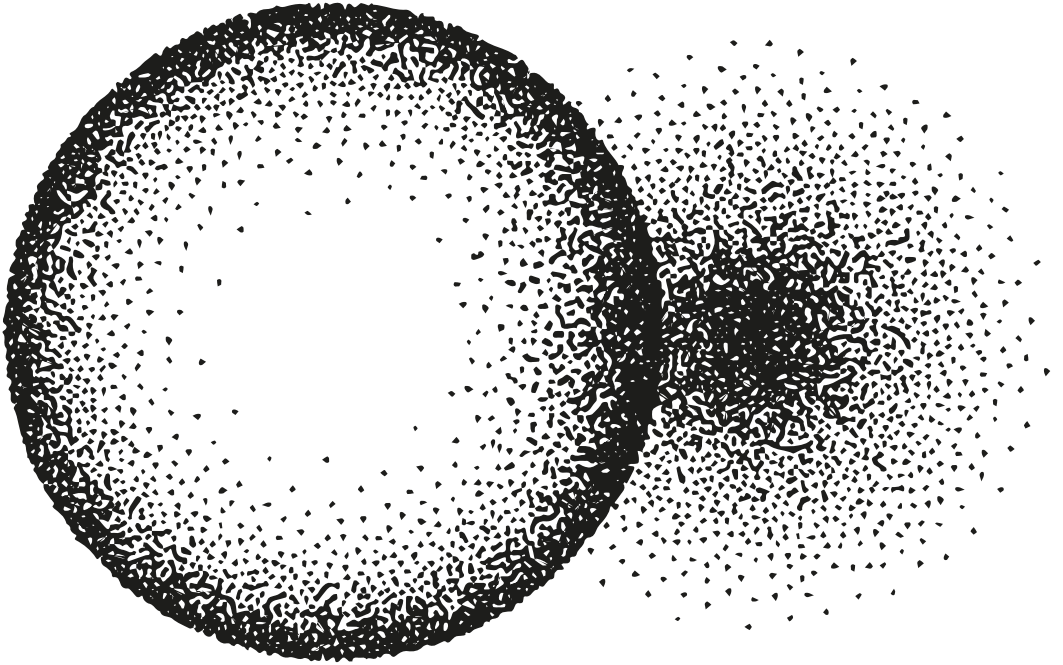
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Chapter 3

**Rethinking the Relation to the  
Other: Levinas on Culture,  
Immanence and Transcendence**

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The main aim of this present study is to highlight the need for ethical competence for practicing comparative philosophy. Comparative philosophy should actively contribute to the decolonization of philosophy and should initiate a cross-cultural dialogue based on a critical-transformational discourse that helps comparative philosophers to approach the cultural other in an open way. The question is how comparative philosophers can approach the cultural other in its particularity while at the same time bringing this other under their own familiar philosophical concepts. While comparative philosophers have to assume a common ground to initiate the comparative encounter, they should at the same time be sensitive to the otherness of the cultural other.

In this chapter I introduce Levinas as the thinker who can show us why comparative philosophy needs to reflect on the ethical nature of the self-other relation and needs to recognize the close connection between knowledge and imperialism. To shed light on this connection, I will investigate Levinas' thoughts on culture and how these thoughts relate to his conception of transcendence as the necessary surplus for a wholly immanent worldview. From this, I will move on to a more general discussion on Levinas' troublesome political statements and the way Levinas expands his general critique of Western metaphysics to the political structures derived from them. Scholars such as Sikka (1998), Caygill (2002) and McGettigan (2006) and Drabinski (2011) argue that Levinas' troublesome political claims agree with his phenomenology and exclude the cultural other.

The difference I am putting forward is that scholars who argue that Levinas privileges the Judaic and Greek tradition as the essence of Western civilization are in some way right, but fail to ask the question of what this privilege consists of in. In analysing Levinas' changing conception of transcendence throughout his work, I will show how Levinas' main critique on other cultural traditions as well as the Western tradition originates from his belief that a wholly immanent worldview is a form of primitivism that cannot attune to radical alterity. With the help of Derrida's reflections on Europe in which he relies on Levinas' later notion of transcendence as "transcendence-in-immanence", I hope to articulate a valuable approach for engaging with other cultural philosophical traditions in which I localize the main task of European comparative philosophy as the infinite attempt to move beyond identity.

## **Part I: Escaping Primitivism: Transcendence as Paternal Fecundity**

### **§3.1 Levinas' Critique on the Western tradition and the Metaphysics of "Vision"**

Before investigating the relation between Levinas' thinking on the formation of cultures and the relation to the cultural other, I will first provide the necessary background and context of Levinas' thinking. This helps us to understand and clarify important steps in Levinas' thinking and how his thinking is inspired by but also tries to break with the Western philosophical tradition. I will focus on Levinas' conviction that a wholly immanent philosophy cannot provide the ethical orientation that is needed to evaluate and do justice to the cultural other. A philosophy without the notion of transcendence leads to violence and neglect of that what is radically other and is as such a "pagan culture". Levinas privileges the Monotheistic tradition because it sees persons as free and responsible unrestrained by time and history. Levinas contrasts this with the "pagan view" of man as determined and restricted by time and history, a view that is for Levinas a form of "primitivism" as the unethical acceptance of the natural order.

First, I want to clarify Levinas' notion of the "absolutely Other" (*autrui*), the other (*l'autre*). In this chapter I will take the other (*l'autre*) as the cultural other, which can refer to a text, concept, or person from another cultural philosophical tradition. In Levinas' thinking, the relation to the other is always marked by the logic of economy and non-economy or radical alterity. The economical relation to the cultural other is here the relation in which I am able to understand and grasp the cultural other and can access another cultural philosophical tradition (a text, concepts) by identifying what Ma and van Brakel call "quasi-universals." The economic relation to the cultural other rests upon the logic of the same and is motivated by the self's need (the comparative philosopher) to compare that what is incomparable (another cultural philosophical tradition, see figure 1). Levinas however argues that the cultural other (*l'autre*) always exceeds our comprehension, because the cultural other always already refers to that what is Other (*Autrui*). The radical alterity of the cultural other is in Levinas' thinking related to the nakedness of the Face and its relation and ethics as movement to radical transcendence. I will elaborate more profoundly on these themes throughout this chapter.

Emmanuel Levinas was born in Kaunas, Lithuania and began to study philosophy in 1923 at Strasbourg University. In 1928 Levinas went to Freiburg to study phenomenology under Edmund Husserl. Husserl's methodological disclosure of how meaning is constituted became the starting point of the phenomenological movement. The phenomenological method allows consciousness to understand its own activities from the horizon of intentionality; a philosophical turn in which human beings were no longer understood theoretically, but existentially. During Levinas' time in Freiburg, he became acquainted with the work of Martin Heidegger, whose thinking about human beings as *Dasein*, who are always *in-the-world*, would have a lasting influence on Levinas' own thinking.

Levinas' phenomenology, - his philosophical work as well as his Talmudic work -, is a response to thinkers such as Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger, but primarily needs to be seen as a response to the political situation of the twentieth century. Levinas' fundamental critique on Western metaphysics, a tradition that he associates with violence, is an answer to the question of how philosophy allowed the Holocaust to happen. For Levinas, the entire metaphysical tradition centres on the egocentric subject that brings the phenomena to light. Western philosophy is an ontology of the free, thinking subject that, in representing and recollecting the outside world, reduces everything that is other to the same. Levinas relates violence multiple times to primitivism<sup>79</sup>, which is defined by Levinas as a philosophy that concentrates on instincts and immersion and is as such anti-Platonic and Pagan. In *Le lieu et l'utopie* (1950)<sup>80</sup> Levinas defines paganism as a philosophy that seeks the satisfaction of the self before the other, a philosophy of sameness and immanence.

Levinas' entire thinking is motivated by the desire to overcome the violence of the same in which the particular is only approached in its correspondence to a universal, neutral term. The philosophy of the same is for Levinas a "totalitarianism" and imperialism, a philosophy that conceptualizes and neutralizes the self's relation to other human beings. More specifically, Levinas

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<sup>79</sup> In *The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture*, Levinas defines the Greco-Roman Western culture as "an intention to remove the *otherness* of Nature"; a tendency which he in *God and Philosophy* describes as "the destruction of transcendence" (CCP, 154). In this essay, he introduces transcendence as the surplus to "the intelligibility of immanence," (Ibid., 155). In his essay "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism", Levinas claims that Hitlerism originates in a primitivism that is related to a wholly immanent worldview. In *Entre Nous*, Levinas argues that a Pagan world is a world that cannot attest to the relation to Infinity as the face-to-face relation (EN:48).

<sup>80</sup> DF:99; DL:133

argues that philosophy approaches the other as an *alter ego* of the self and not as a unique singular person who has his or her own significance independent from the self. From the very beginning, Western philosophy is concerned with being that can be represented, thematized and grasped. For Levinas, Hegel's philosophy, a watershed in modern reflection, is the very prototype of the totalizing tendency to reduce everything that is other to the same. Truth for Hegel is not a semantic concept but is a metaphysical notion (*Idea*) of all reality. For Levinas, the Hegelian system represents the philosophy that revolves around "presence" and "being" and the "same."<sup>81</sup>

Western philosophy is a systematization of the intelligible which is a bringing into agreement between thought and being, a tendency that Levinas calls "vision."<sup>82</sup> Vision is grounded in the agreeableness of sensibility and is motivated by a "contentment with the finite," which opens upon a "perspective, upon a horizon."<sup>83</sup> Vision makes the world *worldly*, it allows consciousness to grasp, master and possess the phenomena that have been given to him. Vision is the "sphere of intelligibility" in which everyday life as well as philosophy and science maintains themselves, it is also for Levinas the domain of the Heideggerian holistic understanding of *being-in-the-world*, the assumption that *Dasein* is always already familiar with the world.<sup>84</sup> Philosophy as "vision" or "light" centres around the autonomous, thinking subject that perseveres in its being and "weaves among incomparables a common fate; it puts them in conjunction,"<sup>85</sup> a tendency in which all that is exterior is reduced to or returns to the immanence of subjectivity.<sup>86</sup>

Levinas criticizes the Western metaphysical tradition and gives a novel description of human life which he derives from his Jewish religious heritage and the heritage of Greek philosophy. In rethinking the Cartesian idea of the infinite, Levinas finds an opening to pure exteriority, a transcendence that remains exterior to the thinking subject which exposes the subject to a thinking that thinks *more* than itself. In the articulation of this relation to infinity that Levinas describes as a relation to the Other, Levinas discovers in his early work the possibility of the self to have a genuine future as the time as eschatology. The time as eschatology is a personal, paternal relation that enables the self to

<sup>81</sup> EN':71; EN: 88/89

<sup>82</sup> EN':112; EN:47

<sup>83</sup> TI:191; Tel: 208

<sup>84</sup> TO:97; EN:165

<sup>85</sup> OTB:4; AE:14/15

<sup>86</sup> EN': 123; EN: 147

transcend its own individual and biological existence which affirms that being is essentially plurality and not unity.

In his early work and in his important work *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas articulates transcendence in terms of the temporal as the sensuous, which is in his early work presented as the promise of fecundity.<sup>87</sup> Transcendence gives a surplus of meaning that cannot be thematized; a meaning that as such does not come from the self but from what is Other (*Autrui*). The surplus of meaning refers in Levinas' work to ethical subjectivity; a subjectivity that is neither rational, nor instinctual, but is a vulnerability and hospitality to the Other. In the next section, I will shortly outline how Levinas seeks to reconfigure the self in order to overcome a wholly immanent, primitive, and pagan world.

### §3.2 The Embodied Self as Transcendent and Immanent

In this part I will primarily focus on how Levinas' phenomenological analysis of indolence, shame, insomnia, and enjoyment reveals the desire of the self to escape being, but also reveals the failure of a genuine evasion of being and the desire for transcendence. In Levinas' early works *De l'Évasion* (1935) and *De l'Existence à l'Existant* (1947), Levinas began to outline an ontological elucidation of the becoming of the subject in which beings can be thought separately from Being. Levinas shows that we phenomenologically can gain access to Being without beings through analysing the experience of insomnia. The genesis of the existent, argues Levinas, is a break with pure being (*il y a*), an event in which the existent takes up his existence as a mastery over anonymous existence.

Levinas calls the event in which an existent assumes its own existence, an event prior to *Dasein's being-in-the-world*, "hypostasis." Hypostasis marks the mystery of "creation," a creation that originates from the existent's ipseity.<sup>88</sup> Hypostasis is the pre-intentional and pre-cognitive event that describes how an existent emerges from anonymous being, an event that affirms the independence and solitude and *me*-ness of the self. Levinas describes hypostasis as a contract, taking a *stance* against anonymous Being (*il y a*) by positing myself as a separate existent; a being affected by existence, as a "situation where an existent is put

<sup>87</sup> Bergo, B. (2005). "Ontology, Transcendence, and Immanence in Emmanuel Levinas" *Research in Phenomenology*, 35, 141-180.

<sup>88</sup> ELP:206



in touch with its existing.”<sup>89</sup> In hypostasis the *I* takes a position, referring to the body as the first act, - the act par excellence-, of privatization. A privatization produced by the resting of the body, a resting on a base, of standing.<sup>90</sup>

In our everyday *being-in-the-world* we can gain access to this pre-ontological event of hypostasis by analysing insomnia. The liminal experience of insomnia reveals the impossibility of the subject to take charge of its own being. The terror of not being able to fall asleep is the confrontation of the horror of the night, a confrontation with the anonymous rustling of the *there is (il y a)*, in which the self no longer has mastery over being but experiences the darkness of the pure presence of Being. The phenomenological analysis of insomnia reveals that consciousness is a modality of wakefulness (*veille*). In wakefulness the self loses its mastery over the *there is* and loses *itself*: it is not *my* vigilance in the night but “a vigilance without refuge in unconsciousness, without the possibility of withdrawing into sleep, into a private domain.”<sup>91</sup> Insomnia reveals that the self sometimes loses its mastery over being and is “held by Being, held to be.”<sup>92</sup>

The hermeneutical-phenomenological analysis of insomnia reveals that the self does not primarily flee from its own death but tries to escape from the rustling of pure Being. The becoming of the subject is a drama of being, it is the effort of overcoming the *there is*; a continuous effort of taking a position against it. This taking charge of existence, which is tied to getting one’s fatigued body out of bed to begin the day, is a taking charge of existence that is utterly *mine*. The positing of the body is the privatization of the subject; it is the emergence of *mineness*.

The subject is the being that constantly has to assume its own existing and has to take a stance against pure Being. This repetitive conquest reveals the fundamental ambiguity of the activity of the subject as both a mastering of being and the burden of being chained to itself. This tension between mastery and hesitation produces the internal dialectic of the instant that is “free with respect to the past, but a captive of itself, breathes the gravity of being in which it is caught up.”<sup>93</sup> The existent has transcended anonymous being but at the price that it always must be chained to itself in its *having-to-be*. Transcendence is here tied to the weight of the physical body and is conceived as the desire to escape Being.

<sup>89</sup> TO:51; TA:31

<sup>90</sup> CC:179

<sup>91</sup> TO:49; TA:28

<sup>92</sup> EE:61; DEE:86

<sup>93</sup> EE:78; DEE:135

Levinas argues that the self suffers from being chained to his physical body, because in its perpetual *having-to-be*, the self fatigues himself.<sup>94</sup> In fatigue, the subject is physically exhausted; fatigue is a "slackening," in which one's muscles are strained. The *I*'s investment in its embodied self is a demand in each instant to "take up oneself newly."<sup>95</sup> Fatigue creates a delay with respect to the instant, but also creates a delay with respect to being oneself. Fatigue is not only a hesitation to take a stance against being, - a hesitation to begin-, but it also is a hesitation to take up *my* existing once again.

Closely related to fatigue is indolence or dilatoriness ( *paresse*), which is the reluctance to effectuate a beginning. Indolence is the impossibility of beginning and the weariness of getting up and taking one's strained body out of bed.<sup>96</sup> Fatigue and indolence reveal the burden of the personal self which everyday has to assume his own existing. Beginning as a hesitation is taking a risk, because there is always something to lose; "if only the instant itself."<sup>97</sup> Indolence reveals the burden of existence as a joyless repetition of anonymous, unique, and separate instants, revealing the solitude of the existent that is not able to synthesize past, present, and future. This observation already precludes the possibility that time can come from the self but comes from the Other.

Fatigue and indolence reveal the weariness of being; a weariness "of everything and everyone, and above all a weariness of oneself."<sup>98</sup> Weariness is the suffering of the self as an excess of being and a need to escape one's corporeity, a need to escape the identity between the *moi* and the *soi*. Levinas argues that shame originates from the "solidarity of our being, which obliges us to claim responsibility for ourselves."<sup>99</sup> In contrast to Sartre, who relates shame to the existence of other human beings, Levinas interprets the feeling of shame as something that originates from the structure of the subject. Shame, writes Levinas, reveals a being ashamed of one's existence, an existence that is *my existence*. This "being ashamed of oneself," reveals the proximity of the *I* and its physical body, - a relation between self and other, which is nevertheless a relation of self-referencing.

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<sup>94</sup> EE:11; DEE:32

<sup>95</sup> EE:76; DEE:133

<sup>96</sup> EE:13; DEE:34

<sup>97</sup> EE:14; DEE:36

<sup>98</sup> EE:11; DEE:32

<sup>99</sup> OE:63; EV:85

Llewelyn (1995) argues that shame reveals that the nakedness of the self is not the result of doing something wrong but originates from the existential need of an *apologia* for one's existence.<sup>100</sup> Although I do think that this interpretation is correct, shame is more than a mere need for an *apologia*; it primarily reveals the metaphysical desire for the beyond being. The need to escape oneself calls for a desire to start afresh, a desire for transcendence; a transcendence in which the *I* is saved but is no longer chained to its physical body. Shame, which reveals the desire for transcendence, is for Levinas the self's "very need for time as for a miraculous fecundity in the instant itself, by which it recommences as other."<sup>101</sup>

In Levinas' early work, it is everyday affectivity that offers Levinas a way to think transcendence as something beyond being. Bergo (2005) argues that without Levinas' analysis of subjective life as a continuum from consciousness to unconsciousness, his later conception of transcendence as "transcendence-in-immanence" would have been impossible.<sup>102</sup> In his more mature work *Autrement qu'être*, we will see that the self is always already a *being-there-for-the-Other* as a *being-for-itself*. In this study I will show how Levinas argues that an immanent world needs transcendence to overcome the violence of being. We see in his early work that existence as effort is a suffering that reveals my embodied vulnerability and passivity, a suffering that opens the desire to escape being. Transcendence, argues Levinas, does not originate from a need to unite with a higher being, but is the desire to break with being, which Levinas interprets as a desire for the Good:

*It signifies that the movement which leads an existent toward the Good is not a transcendence by which the existent raises itself up to a higher existence, but a departure from Being and from the categories which describe it: an excendence. But excendence and the Good necessarily have a foothold in being, and that is why Being is better than non-being.*<sup>103</sup>

Transcendence is a sensual vulnerability that arises from the solipsist dualism of the self; the *I* is in its solitary, unique existence riveted to its own time and will long for an escape from Being. In Levinas' later work *Totalité et Infini*, transcendence is accomplished through eros and fecundity and is described

<sup>100</sup>Llewelyn, J. (1995). *The Geneology of Ethics*. Routledge, 18

<sup>101</sup>EE:96; DEE:164

<sup>102</sup>Bergo, *Ontology, Transcendence*, 144.

<sup>103</sup>EE: xxvii; DEE:9

as the birth of the son who is both *same-and-other* and whose birth opens a genuine new future as the “time of the Other”.

Levinas shows that transcendence as the son who is both same and other gives us a genuine future in which we can overcome our egological confined perspective and can move towards the other without becoming one with the other. In his later work, Levinas describes the encounter with the Other (*Autrui*) as the accomplishment of transcendence, as it is only the epiphany of the Face that interrupts and transcends the self’s egological culture. Only the epiphany of the Face interrupts human egocentric spontaneity without limiting or destroying it. The tension between the Other and the self’s freedom and possessions stands at the basis of Levinas’ understanding of ethical subjectivity. The tension is also present in the relation between the cultural other and is also important to address when we want to understand Levinas’ understanding of culture. Culture and nature are in Levinas’ work egological, but as we will see in the next section, this egological culture is a necessary precondition for the ethical encounter.

### **§3.3 Preconditions of Responsibility: Enjoyment, Dwelling, Labour, and Possession**

The main aim of the first part of this chapter is to understand how in *Totalité et Infini* Levinas frames transcendence in light of the self, Being and fecundity. Fecundity and the opening of a sacred history, which is the history of the Monotheistic religion of God, transcendence, the infinite and the Holy, are the most important themes that have led scholars to conclude that Levinas’ thinking is Eurocentric, as it takes the Western monotheistic tradition and grants universality to it. In this chapter I will shed a new light on Levinas’ alleged Eurocentrism by outlining how his Eurocentrism originates in his belief that a wholly immanent worldview leads to a culture of identity that is hostile and oblivious toward radical alterity.

In this present section we gain more insight in the most fundamental categories of the self as *being-in-the-world*. The phenomenological analysis of enjoyment, dwelling, labour, and possession do not only serve as an analysis of everyday human life but are in Levinas also interpreted as fundamental preconditions for the infinite responsibility to the Other.

### §3.3.1 Enjoyment

Existence as effort creates the need for pleasure, in which pleasure is the affectivity of an attempt to break with being.<sup>104</sup> Levinas argues that the world is not primarily encountered as an equipmental whole but is encountered as elements that the self enjoys. We do not use things like soup and bread, but we live from them.<sup>105</sup> Nourishment as living from the elemental world turns “that which is other into the same,” it turns the element into an *aliment*.

Levinas beautifully describes enjoyment as “the love of life,” a love that is not concerned with mere Being, but “loves the happiness of being.”<sup>106</sup> Enjoyment is the escape from effort, a positive affirmation of the self who masters his existence. Levinas defines enjoyment not as a mode of being, but as a sensibility (*psychism*) that constitutes the very egoism of the *I*. The ego is as “joyous force which moves.”<sup>107</sup> Enjoyment is however a finite affectivity that is a holding on to the instant, a mastering of existing that is not recaptured until the moment when enjoyment is broken. Enjoyment as sensibility is always broken off due to the volatility of the elemental world and offers as such only a temporarily escape from being.

Enjoyment is to Levinas an essential event in the constitution of subjectivity that cannot be seen as an event of “inauthenticity,” or “alienation.” It affirms that the self is not only a separate being, but also a being that is *at-home-in-the-world*, a being that lacks nothing. Human beings enjoy having needs and this happiness of enjoyment constitutes their independence and separation from the world. The self that enjoys the world appears here as a conscious being, an ego that sees its *being-in-the-world* as a *being-there-for-him or her*. The world is there for *me* but in this mastery or possession of the world is already a vulnerability present that threatens this *being-there-for-me*. The sun can warm me but can also burn my skin; my existence is enjoyment threatened by suffering and death. This is why Levinas sees dwelling, labour, and possession as ways to endure my enjoyment of the world and to protect myself from harm.

### §3.3.2 Dwelling

The reclusion of the self who tries to secure enjoyment is what Levinas calls the *being-at-home-with-oneself* as “dwelling.” Dwelling is synonymous with the

<sup>104</sup>EV:60; DEE:81

<sup>105</sup>TI:110; Tel:112

<sup>106</sup>TI:115; Tel:118

<sup>107</sup>Levinas, E. “Signature” Transl. A. Peperzak, *Research in Phenomenology* 8, (1978):183

home, - with inhabitation -, the self is in its corporeity at home with itself and is the self's protection against the threats of the elemental world and grounds the base from which the self can master the elemental world through labour.<sup>108</sup>

Dwelling completes the separation between the subject and the outside world, in which the interiority of the self is now absolutely separated from the external world. At the same time, dwelling is also the moment in which the self can encounter that which is other. But as Derrida points out, this encounter is not an encounter with absolute resistance, - which is the Face of the Other-, but an encounter with something other that already gives itself.<sup>109</sup> Dwelling is an encounter with something that is other which is already brought to light. The light of Being is the brightness of intelligibility itself and is the encounter with exteriority in its meaningful context: "light makes objects into a world, that is, makes them belong to us."<sup>110</sup> Consciousness brings objects to light by its intentional structure that announces representation, recollection, and knowledge.

Dwelling as habitation marks the break between the separated existent and its natural being, the phenomenological moment in which naïve enjoyment turns into care. Habitation is associated with warmth and intimacy, it *being-with-oneself* as a withdrawal from the elemental world in which one's habitat is the limit of interiority and exteriority.<sup>111</sup> Dwelling also makes labour and possession possible and is at the same time the moment in which the self becomes open to the feminine Other.

### §3.3.3 Labour and Possession

Labour as the intentional activity of the commencement in action, is the activity in which the subject interrupts time and marks the "now" as the beginning. The "now" as beginning allows for the grasping and possession of the world and affirms the self-mastery of the subject that can start over.

The economic self that can master the outside world through labour and possession and rules over its household (*oikonomos*). The economic self is defined by physical needs and seeks to overcome the volatile and hostile world. Need is defined as a dependency on "living from" what is other. The relation

<sup>108</sup>TI:158; Tel:131

<sup>109</sup>Derrida, J. (1967). *Writing and Difference*. Transl. A. Bass. Routledge, 116

<sup>110</sup>EE:40; DEE:51

<sup>111</sup>TI:161;Tel: 135

between the self and other in need is a relation characterized by mastery in its dependency, a tension between pleasure and pain.<sup>112</sup> Labour and possession suspend immediate naïve enjoyment and enables the self to turn goods into something that affirm my egocentric enjoyment. Dwelling as the possibility for labour and possession give rise to an autonomous existence and a common economical culture of consumption and production and creates the distinction between the private and public realm.

### §3.3.4 Egological Economical Culture

Enjoyment, dwelling, labour, and possession give rise to a common culture and are therefore phenomena that help us to understand how Levinas sees cultures and the relation to the cultural other (*l'autre*). Enjoyment, dwelling, labour, and possession affirm the identity of the *I* in its egoism, an egoism that is positively marked by the self's mastery and responsibility of his or her own life. The subject as egological economical culture is free; it is not passively at the mercy of the volatile elemental world, but actively takes charge of his or her own well-being and encounter the other as the same, as an alter ego that can be known and grasped. Levinas writes in *Totalité and Infini* that only a self that fully takes charge of his or her own social and material perseverance can become responsible for the Other, which indicates that Levinas does not want to change or reject the egological economical culture but does argue that it needs the surplus of the ethical relation to the Other.

## §3.4 The Encounter with the Other

### §3.4.1 The Welcoming of the Feminine

In the last section I have discussed enjoyment, dwelling, labour, and possession as important phenomenological structures of the self that are simultaneously the necessary preconditions for ethical responsibility. Dwelling as the withdrawal from the elemental world and the separation of the subject is always already a wandering that is always hospitable to the Other:

*No human or interhuman relationship can be enacted outside of economy; no face can be approached with empty hands and closed home. Recollection in a home open to the Other – hospitality – is the concrete and initial fact of human recollection and separation; it coincides with the Desire for the Other absolutely transcendent.*

<sup>112</sup>Tl:145; Tel:113

*The chosen home is the very opposite of root. It indicates a disengagement, a wandering [errance] which has made it possible, which is not a less with respect to installation, but the surplus of the relationship with the Other, metaphysics.*<sup>113</sup>

The welcoming of the Other is a welcoming, - a celebration-, of radical alterity, a welcoming of the feminine that is encountered in the intimacy of one's home. More specifically, dwelling as the completion of the thinking subject is the constitutive moment in which the subject not only emerges as a solitary existent, but also finds itself as already a host of the Other. The welcoming structure of the Other is the structure of the feminine, the feminine Other who creates a home for the masculine self in which he is able to be at home with himself.<sup>114</sup>

Levinas draws upon traditional stereotypes of women and describes the feminine as a "gentle" and "hospitable" structure that is encountered in the *oikos*, - the home-, of the subject. It is the woman in the home who, even in the absence of an individual woman, as Levinas is eager to point out, opens up the dimension of masculine interiority. The feminine Other is however different from the ontological thematization of the (feminine) other, as the welcoming of the feminine Other signifies the Other who cannot be reduced to the intentionality of the subject but who nevertheless affects the subject on a sensuous level.

The feminine face is the first welcome that gives dwelling its specific orientation. The welcoming of the feminine makes the home inhabitable by enabling recollection. The feminine Other opens the masculine self to the meaningful world, as the feminine Face is the first welcome. The feminine Face does however not speak, which is why Levinas argues that this is not yet the revelation of the Face of the Other who accuses me of murder. Nevertheless, the feminine Face as pure hospitality will become important for the ethical relation when the subject finds itself both as host as well as hostage. Only a being that is hospitable to the Other and is susceptible to him can substitute himself for the Other. As we have seen, the self is hospitable to the Other despite the fact that it has taken his or her place in his or her home. To be more precise, the moment that the self becomes a homeowner is also the moment that the self becomes hospitable to the feminine Other. The self's sense of identity is as such also the moment that this identity can be interrupted by the otherness of the Other.

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<sup>113</sup>TI:172; Tel:189

<sup>114</sup>TI:158; Tel:



### §3.4.2 The Face of the Other

In this section I will trace how the Face of the Other and the ethical relation are related to transcendence. Levinas seeks to formulate a transcendental philosophy against paganism of immanence and the anti-Platonism of contemporary philosophy.<sup>115</sup> Transcendence as the relation to infinity and ethics as the way to transcendence are the themes that need to be clarified in order to understand how Levinas sees the relation to the cultural other and to investigate Levinas' understanding of cultural formation. These themes will also be important to understand Levinas' alleged Eurocentrism.

Levinas' aim is to show that ontology or the realm of being needs the surplus of transcendence which Levinas interprets as the relation to infinite goodness. Ontology as egological culture is a joyful dependency and mastery of the world, the possibility to fulfil one's needs for the sake of enjoyment. Enjoyment is the fundamental structure of the self, a sensibility that is prior to consciousness and the subject-object relation and is independent from any particular need. In Levinas' thinking, ontology or everyday life is seen as the primitive situation in which that what is Other is objectified and incorporated in the self's egological activities. The self that values and gives meaning to what is other is however also affected by that what is other, which gives rise to an inquiry in the signification of the Face. The Face is not a phenomenon, is not vision, but is the first ethical gesture.

The radical alterity of the Other is for Levinas something more than the mere experience of the way the other differs to us; the Other has a Face. The Face does not refer to what we can perceive; it is more than his nose, eyes, mouth, and facial expression. The radical alterity of the Face refers to his look, his expression, and his holiness. The face as pure expression of the Other is what stays most naked, is most destitute, and what affects the self immediately on a sensuous affective level. The face-to-face encounter with the Other is a relation in which the Other looks at me and addresses me; his Face *speaks* to me, and I respond to him. The self is sensible to the radical otherness of the Other, it is vulnerable to being affected by the Face who addresses the self on a personal level. The Face of the Other reveals the self's passiveness, its inability not to be affected by the Other and forces the self to respond, a responsiveness that is not chosen nor willed.

<sup>115</sup>CPP:83; Levinas, E. (1964). "La Signification et le Sens" *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 69 N°2, 137.

The holiness of Face is for Levinas transcendence as the beyond being and gives ecological culture an essential ethical orientation. The self-other relation in its primal form is for Levinas discourse, an ethical discourse that summons the self to responsibility. The first teaching of the Other is the Face that speaks to me, revealing the epiphany or Height of the Face. The pure exteriority as first teaching is a moment in which the self is in contact with someone who is exterior to its being, a teaching of radical exteriority that cannot be reduced to something *for-the self*. In contrast to the feminine Other whose speaking is "silent," the speaking of the Face of the Other is a call to take the Other into account. The Face of the Other is not silent but accuses me of usurping the world and questions my egocentric spontaneity.

The epiphany of the Face gives resistance to the egocentric spontaneity of the self but does not limit or negate it. The Face is an invitation, or better a temptation, to abuse the other for the self's own egocentric needs, or in its utmost limit, a temptation to kill the other. But the moment that the self realizes that it can kill the other is also the very moment in which the self realizes that what it can do, it should not do. Transcendence thus gives the self a teaching that affects its very subjectivity. As Levinas says in a conversation with Richard A. Cohen, the encounter with the Face of the Other breaks with the autonomous, active, and thinking subject and transforms the subject into a conscience who is responsible to the vulnerability of the Other:

*I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other. The celebrated 'right to existence' that Spinoza called conatus essendi and defined as the basic principle of all intelligibility is challenged by the relation to the face. Accordingly, my duty to respond to the other suspends my natural right to self-survival, le droit vitale.<sup>116</sup>*

The Face resists my egocentric joyous spontaneity, not by destroying it or restricting it, but by questioning it. It is in this particular sense that Levinas argues that the "pagan" egological culture needs transcendence. For Levinas, transcendence is a personal relation to the Other in which the self is guilty prior to its own activities. In the face-to-face encounter the self is no longer a happy spontaneity, but finds itself capable of murder.

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<sup>116</sup>Cohen, R. E. (2001). *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy. Interpretation after Levinas*. Cambridge University Press, 24

The encounter with another human being is a transformative experience that liberates the self from its egocentric concerns and gives the self the surplus of infinite goodness. The Face is always the encounter in which I am the wealthy man who has everything, and the Other is the widow, the stranger, and the orphan.<sup>117</sup> Being human signifies more than persevering in one's being, being human also means to go to extraordinary means for the other. The relation between the Other and the self is an asymmetrical relation in which the Other questions me and disturbs my egocentric spontaneity prior to my intentions, I am forever and always responsive to the Face, a responsiveness as an infinite openness to the Other.

Levinas' notion of transcendence as the resistance of the Face originates in Jewish religion. The height and the holiness of the Face of the Other is his hunger, the hunger of the Other marks the "holiness of the holy" and is the quintessential experience of the ethical relation. Sacredness, argues Levinas in *Carnets de Captivité*, is the domain where the natural categories are no longer valid,<sup>118</sup> a sacredness of infinite giving to the Other, a giving that strikes me in what is most personal to me, a giving of my food and water.<sup>119</sup> The Face is thus in Levinas' work the interruption of primitivism, a moment in which the pagan world receives the gift of sacredness or holiness.

The call for responsibility is a command inscribed in the Face of the Other that is not contracted but is the origin of the self before the self is at home with himself. This means that the self is never a being who is rooted in his place but is a self that is always disturbed in his taking up of its place. The Face of the Other haunts the subject who wants to be at home with itself and constantly puts the self, in its *me-ness* of taking a position, in accusation.

### §3.5 Transcendence and the Birth of the Son

In the previous section, I have shown that Levinas' entire phenomenological project is motivated by the desire to rethink genuine transcendence in order to overcome primitivism. Levinas argues that a wholly immanent world is a despiritualized world and that only the relation to infinity as the face-to-face

<sup>117</sup>TI:245; Tel:271

<sup>118</sup>CC:54

<sup>119</sup>NTR: 98; DSS 17

relation can bring genuine peace.<sup>120</sup> Levinas sees the self not as a being that is defined by needs, but as a being that longs for the beyond being. Levinas is well aware that he is breaking with a long philosophical tradition by privileging difference over unity. Levinas firmly criticizes the tradition that never has been able to aptly think transcendence:

*As classically conceived, the idea of transcendence is self-contradictory. The subject that transcends is swept away in its transcendence; it does not transcend itself. If, instead of reducing itself to a change of properties, climate, or level, transcendence would involve the very identity of the subject, we would witness the death of substance.*<sup>121</sup>

The problem of the Western metaphysical tradition is that it has concentrated on cognitive and intentional relations of the thinking cogito and has concentrated on political and social structures to articulate a universalism that has violated everything that is other. Rethinking transcendence is for Levinas not a mere metaphysical project, but aims at reformulating the relationship between history, philosophy, politics, universalism, and particularism.

Levinas' notion of transcendence seeks to give significance to the self (*moi*) beyond death and attests to a relation in which self and other remain absolutely separated, yet are asymmetrically involved. Levinas describes the relation to the other which transcends the evidence of time and history as made possible by the father-son relation. The concretion of transcendence is accomplished in the birth of the son who is both self and Other. Fecundity and the birth of the son embody the evasion of the burden of being and reveal that desire for otherness is the gift of time. The birth of the son is the genuine recommencement of time and is at the same time the "birth of the Face" that summons the self to take the Other into account.

The birth of the son is the event in which the self is liberated from its materiality but in which the *I* is not annihilated. Levinas finds in the birth of the son an "ethics of heteronomy" that offers "an awakening predestinating identity to transcendent purity."<sup>122</sup> The self who becomes a father transforms commencement in *re*-commencement, a recommencement of the time of the

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<sup>120</sup> EN:49; EN:74

<sup>121</sup> TI:274; Tel:306

<sup>122</sup> OS:121/122; HS: 149

Other.<sup>123</sup> The father recognizes himself in his son, but the son is also radically separated from him, as Levinas writes: "Je suis mon fils, sans être soi-même."<sup>124</sup> The son is the *I as otherwise-than-being*, a relation of transcendence beyond the self's own death. The son is not the father's *alter ego*; his time is not the father's time, yet the father is invested in his son's future; invested in a future that is beyond his own existence.

Levinas' rethinks everyday family life, - need, desire, and paternal love-, in their 'excess of meaning,' in the way these relationships transcend ordinary "biological life," as an attempt to break with primitivism. Biological (animal) or ontological life is for Levinas the will to power, the perseverance in being that is synonymous with the life of the "same" (*le même*). For Levinas, humans are endowed with the ability to transcend being, to be in a disinterested relation that breaks with "this for that" logic.

Paternity is a metaphor for such a disinterested relation and gives us some important insights on the fundamental characteristics of the ethical relation. Paternal love is first of all a radical personal relation; it is the bond between two unique human beings. Paternity shows us that before we can generalize to objective terms such as "parents," "mothers," and "fathers," we are first in a personal relation.<sup>125</sup> Secondly, paternity reveals how the relation to the child is not a relation that is caused or willed by the father. Metaphysical transcendence is for Levinas a passive vulnerability. We can long for a child, but we cannot deliberately "make" a child, not can we "will" the child; the birth of a child is a passive reception of the Other who is radically exterior to the parents.

Thirdly, the birth of the son gives the father the surplus of conscience. Consciousness becomes "sincere" in the birth of the son, it the moment when, facing one's child for the very first time, one feels the weight of infinite responsibility for this fragile, vulnerable tiny human being. Infinite responsibility to the child is a disinterested, asymmetrical relation in which I am responsible for my children's existence, their actions and even their own responsibility, it is an infinite responsiveness to the needs of my child. Paternity transforms the egoistic self into a giving self, a self that despite himself keeps responding to the child's needs. The relation to the son is an ethical relation, not an ethics that is

<sup>123</sup>TI:86: Tel:85

<sup>124</sup>CC:282

<sup>125</sup>QEV:96

derived from rational norms or standards, but from a pre-original, pre-rational (non-rational) sensibility.

The fourth characteristic of transcendence conceived as the father-son relation is that the child individualizes the self and opens the self up to future generations to come as "time of the Other". The relation to the son is able to open a deeper layer, a spiritual layer as it opens the idea of fraternity and the sacred history of humanity. The birth of the son is an "ever recommencing alterity," an event in which the father is *elected* as the one called to infinite responsibility, he alone is the father of the son, and he alone bears the infinite responsibility for his son. Paternity realizes a pluralistic existence in which the self becomes other through the son.<sup>126</sup> Levinas calls this transcendence "transubstantiation," a creation of the discontinuous time of the *I as Other* that makes recommencement possible. The son gives the father a future beyond the father's projects and possibilities.

Paternity is for Levinas a metaphor for human history, a history that is not a repetition of the same, but which is a constant renewal of youthfulness, an infinite time of pardon and hope in which the particularity of each *I* lives through the future sons. Hope is awaiting a new future, a future that radically breaks with the identification of the *I* and its materiality. Hope is the desire for renewing, for fecundity as pardon and a desire for time. True temporality, argues Levinas "presupposes the possibility not of grasping again all that one might have been, but of no longer regretting the lost occasions before the unlimited infinite of the future."<sup>127</sup>

The birth of the son is also the birth of a face, the face of the Other that summons me, the elected one, to infinite responsibility for each and every human being. Transcendence as the birth of the Face of the Other is a paternal relation of responsibility that enables the self to move beyond being. The ethical relation is not identical to transcendence, but is an attestation of transcendence, which I will discuss in the next section.

### §3.6 The Relation to the Other as the Attestation of Transcendence

Levinas shows that the relation of responsibility to the Other is revealed in human thinking itself, as the Cartesian idea of the Infinite. Levinas returns to

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<sup>126</sup>TO:92; TA:87

<sup>127</sup>TI:282; Tel:314

Descartes' *Meditations* to formally analyse the idea of the infinite itself, an idea that is not correlative to infinity. The subject who thinks the idea of the infinite and infinity can never form a totality; the *ideatum* surpasses the idea. For Levinas, the relation to the infinite reveals a dia-chrony, reveals a relation of pure exteriority:

*The idea of the Infinite must be thought independently from consciousness, not according to the negative concept of the unconscious, but according to the perhaps most profoundly thought thought, that of dis-interestedness, which is a relation without hold on a being, or anticipation of being, but pure patience.*<sup>128</sup>

The idea of the infinite, as Descartes analyses, cannot come from a finite substance but has to originate from God as the perfected Being. The observation that a finite substance cannot be the source of the idea of the infinite led Descartes to the proof of God's existence. Levinas seeks to correct this negative relation by reinterpreting the relation to the infinite as a surplus, as the *otherwise-than-being*.

In *La Philosophie et l'Idée de l'Infini* (1957), Levinas argues that Western philosophy has failed to pay attention to the idea of the Infinite that is present in human thinking, an idea that never can correlate with Infinity and reveals a relation to pure exteriority. To think the infinite is already being open to radical alterity, an openness that is characterized by a transcendence of the subject's being.<sup>129</sup> Instead of searching for a synthesis between the immanent subject and the objectivity of transcendence, Levinas emphasizes the dis-correlation between the idea of the Infinite as ontological proof of the relation to the Other.

The idea of the infinite bears a trace of the encounter with the wholly Other, a relation that breaks through the ontological sphere and must be seen as a relation to transcendence. Levinas draws on Plato's description of the Good beyond Being, as this relation breaks with seeing being as an all encompassing unity. The relation to the Good is for Levinas beyond any need, a beyond the totality and beyond history, yet which is reflected within human experience.<sup>130</sup> What makes a human *human* is that it can be *otherwise-than-being*, that it can

<sup>128</sup>TO:135; Levinas, E. (1982). "L'Ancien et le Nouveau" In : J. Dore. *L'Ancien et le Nouveau*, Cerf, 23-37.

<sup>129</sup>DEHH :239; CPP:47

<sup>130</sup>DEHH :243; CPP:51

suspend its joyous spontaneity and give to the Other, a giving that cannot be rationalized or justified by relying on the “selfish gene,” or the desire to keep one’s next of kin alive.

The relation to the Infinite as transcendence that bears a trace of God and is Holy, saves thus humanity from primitivism as the inversion of the self’s *conatus essendi*, an inversion that does not destroy the self, but opens the relation to Goodness.<sup>131</sup> For Levinas, the Good is as Plato says on “the hither side of good and evil;” the good is good in itself and is a luxury with respect to needs (*besoins*).<sup>132</sup> In *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas sees the relation to Infinity as the relation that attests to the time beyond death. The temporal structure of consciousness results from “an elementary gesture of being that refuses totalization,”<sup>133</sup> a time that exceeds my own finite time. The relation to Infinity as the relation of pure goodness gives the egological culture of the same the surplus of the *otherwise-than-being*. In the next part of this chapter, I will outline why Levinas thinks that this surplus of transcendence is necessary.

## **Part II: Levinas on Cultures and the Cultural Other**

In this section I will concentrate on Levinas’ conception of culture and how he argues that culture is essentially egological and therefore primitivist. Levinas argues that the ethical relation is the “higher culture” needed to give culture its ethical orientation. The ethical orientation allows us to approach the cultural other “without context,” without assuming a common ground.

In this section, I will outline Levinas’ conception of culture. I will concentrate on two texts in which Levinas explicitly writes about culture: an essay entitled *La Signification et le Sens* (1972) and *Détermination Philosophique de l’Idée de culture* (1986). After the discussion of these texts, I will address the problem of Eurocentrism in Levinas’ thinking by clarifying the relation between transcendence and sacred history as the Monotheistic religion of transcendence, God, the infinite and the Holy, and by entering into a dialogue with scholars who have accused Levinas of Eurocentrism.

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<sup>131</sup> TI:102/103; Tel:105

<sup>132</sup> TI:211; Tel:233

<sup>133</sup> TI:281; Tel:313



### §3.7 Meaning and Sense

Derrida noted that Levinas' entire thought is inspired by the priority of the Other: the other (*l'autre*) is other (*l'autre*) only if its alterity is absolutely irreducible; only when its alterity is infinitely irreducible.<sup>134</sup> It is the absolute alterity of the Other (*Autrui*) that gives the Face its ethical weight; the Face is thus the attestation of transcendence. In *Totalité et Infini*, Levinas appeals to the notion of transcendence that relates yet also fundamentally separates human beings. The encounter with the other (*l'autre*) accomplishes (*résoudre*) the transcending self's openness without being entirely contained by it. The relation to the Other is a non-maieutic teaching, a surplus or gift in which the first teaching is offered that conditions language. The Face that speaks to the self, forces the self into discourse, it is forced to respond to the Other as interlocutor. It is in this context that we need to understand the text *La Signification et le Sens* in which Levinas tries to show that meaning is conditioned by ethical discourse (*sens*). Sense is absolute and transcendent and precedes all possible meaning, including cultural expressions.

In *La Signification et le Sens*, Levinas articulates his account of meaning in which meaning is conditioned by the ethical surplus of the relation to the Other. The dense essay argues for the necessity of a primary orientation (*sens*) that undergirds all meaning and which provides the inspiration for approaching and judging other cultures and the cultural other. Sense originates thus in the encounter with the Other as the attestation of the infinite and is the ethical discourse that calls the self's egological being into question. In order to understand the need for sense as the necessary precondition for meaning, we first have to address Levinas' distinction between meaning and sense.

Levinas makes a distinction between the contents given to receptivity in experience and the constitution of meaning. He sees the origin of meaning as the move beyond the given, a conclusion he draws from the function of the metaphor as "the reference to absence," which "belongs to an order quite different from pure receptivity."<sup>135</sup> The question that Levinas tries to address is if this definition of meaning as moving beyond the given as the reference to absence is a potential content or that it is an absence irreducible to any potential content. Levinas rejects this first theory that he calls "intellectualism," and argues that there must be already meaning before receptivity, because only in this case would

<sup>134</sup> Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and Difference*, Transl. A. Bass, Routledge Classics, 154.

<sup>135</sup> CCP:77; Levinas, *La Signification et le Sens*, 127.

it be possible to transcend that what is received. "Words," writes Levinas "do not refer to contents which they would designate, but first, laterally, to other words."<sup>136</sup> In line with Heidegger, Levinas argues that the world is structured by culture and language as the horizon in which meaning arises.

Levinas argues that the world as totality can neither be entirely the "free and creative arrangement" of the subject, nor can it be entirely objective, as it is the activity of the subject in which meaning is constituted. By drawing upon the work of Merleau-Ponty, Levinas claims that the embodied subject welcomes beings, but this subject is embedded within a cultural horizon that extensively re-arranges the world as a plural unified totality. Important to notice is that Levinas defines cultural objects such as poetry and painting as incarnate expressions of being that Levinas interprets as "the active modes of this celebration or of the original incarnation of the Same and the Other," and contrasts with the objective. Nevertheless, culture as expressions of art remains a culture of dwelling and thus immanent.<sup>137</sup> The cultural domain is the intersubjective domain that is constituted by the public sphere of expressions of a specific community and because the multiple ways in which expression can re-arrange the world, there are different cultures. Levinas not only affirms cultural diversity, but also sees these cultures as heterogeneous, as cultures themselves are produced by a variety of expressions.<sup>138</sup>

The most important section of this essay is §3 *The Antiplatonism of the Contemporary Philosophy of Meaning*, in which he criticizes modern movement of thought that see the truth not as transcendental but as historical. Levinas particularly focuses on philosophies of meaning of his time such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and de Saussure, which were influenced by the structural and phenomenological tradition. Levinas particularly rejects the idea that meaning is a self-sufficient entity, meaning entirely derived from the sensory given, a view of meaning that is wholly immanent:

*Whether it be of Hegelian, Bergsonian, or phenomenological origin, the contemporary philosophy of meaning is thus opposed to Plato at an essential point: the intelligible is not conceivable outside of the becoming which suggests it.*<sup>139</sup>

<sup>136</sup> CPP:78; 129

<sup>137</sup> EN::165; EN:189/190

<sup>138</sup> EN:164/165; EN:189/190

<sup>139</sup> CPP:83; Levinas, *La Signification et le Sens*, 133

In the first part of this chapter, we have seen that Levinas ultimately reconfigured the subject from the experience of a revolt that the weight of Being inspired; a need for evasion as an attempt to move beyond Being. Levinas' critique on contemporary theories of meaning is precisely their inability to pay attention to this "transcendence in immanence" of the self. These contemporary theories that celebrate multiculturalism despiritualize meaning and reduce meaning to the same, something that Levinas sees as a form of violence.

For Levinas, only transcendence as the disinterested ethical relation can provide immanence with the language of peace, as it gives the ethical surplus that orients language towards goodness. Anti-Platonism is a denial of the possibility of this higher culture of pure goodness, the neglect of a higher culture that serves to inspire and judge cultures. The problem for Levinas is not the existence of different cultures, but is more the way contemporary theories of meaning place all cultures on the same plane, which for Levinas leads to a primitive immanent world that is "[an] essential disorientation" and is "the modern expression of atheism."<sup>140</sup> A purely immanent world is for Levinas a pagan world in which the multiplicity of meanings is reduced to the self's needs, a world in which everything is reduced to something that can be grasped and understood by the self's joyful activity.

The main problem of this immanent view of meaning is that it leads to violence because there is no judgment, no language of peace that orients meaning. Levinas finds the necessary precondition that produces and interrupts cultures in the ethical relation; a relation that preserves the dignity and equality of each individual irrespective of any racial, sexual or religious affiliation. The ethical meaning or "sense" is thus a supplement that interrupts the lateral traversal and translation between cultures and makes communication between cultures possible. Sense moves beyond the self-identical ego, moves beyond the Same in which Being is not relieved of its alterity but infinitely interrupted and put into question.

In *La Signification et le Sens* we thus find Levinas' critique of paganism, a philosophy that seeks to eradicate all otherness and seeks the satisfaction of the self before the Other. The main problem for Levinas is that philosophy is anti-Platonic and aims for a complete and self-conscious understanding of the world. This despiritualized world lacks any ethical orientation and will result

<sup>140</sup>CPP:86; Levinas, *La Signification et le Sens*, 136

in a violence in which "speech refers to war,"<sup>141</sup> an indifference to that what is absolute Other and radically different.

Sense as the unifying higher culture that makes judgment between cultures possible is the infinite movement beyond the identical. Levinas sees sense as a "liturgical orientation of a work" which cannot be thought in terms of the activity of the self but which is "a movement of the Same towards the Other which never returns to the Same."<sup>142</sup> Liturgical work prepares the self for work that cannot be reduced to the needs of the self, a work that is without any expectation of achievement and aims for the "time of the Other."

In §8 *Before Culture*, Levinas argues that all culture and all meaning presupposes the ethical surplus of responsibility. The ethical relation to the Other does not belong to culture but gives culture its ethical orientation and weight. The encounter with the cultural other, the encounter with a concrete human being, is an encounter in which we approach the other through our cultural gestures. Nevertheless, this encounter is made possible, or is produced, by the ethical encounter with the Other, an ethical encounter that disrupts the totalities of meaning of the world. The ethical relation is an unmediated relation, a distressing relation that precedes culture and can in no way be represented, but nevertheless "signifies as a trace."<sup>143</sup> This trace appeals to the beyond being of the third person, which Levinas calls *illeity*. This articulation of the trace that refers to *illeity* will become the focus of section 3.9 in which I will discuss the alleged Eurocentrism. I will first discuss another important text that gives us insight in how Levinas sees cultures and the cultural other: the essay *Détermination philosophique de l'Idée de culture* (1986). In this paper, Levinas gives a more positive conception of culture by articulating an "ethical culture". This paper will help us to show how the ethical relation or transcendence as "the higher culture," gives cultures the surplus of an ethical orientation that enables us to evaluate the cultural other.

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<sup>141</sup> CPP:89; Levinas, *La Signification et le Sens*, 138-139

<sup>142</sup> CPP:91; Levinas, *La Signification et le Sens*, 140

<sup>143</sup> CPP"103; Levinas, *La Signification et le Sens*, 151

### §3.8 The Philosophical Determination of the Idea of Culture

The essay *Détermination Philosophique de l'Idée de Culture* is an adapted version of a speech given by Levinas at a conference in Montréal on "Philosophy and Culture." Levinas analyses in this essay the relation between culture and nature and between culture and ethics. For Levinas, nature is the weight of being, the horror of the *il y a* that is overcome by the existent that assumes in each moment its existence. We will see that Levinas associates culture with the natural domain that revolves around the self that approaches the other as the same, or from a common identity. We will however also see that Levinas associates culture with art, which sheds light on why culture can lead to a neglect of social relations.

As we have seen in §3.3, Levinas sees dwelling that makes labour and possession possible as the creative moment of a common culture. Human labour and possession make it possible for humankind to secure the enjoyment of the elemental world and to create a "culture of human autonomy," which Levinas classifies as a form of atheism. Atheism is for Levinas a necessary precondition for infinite responsibility: the culture of egocentric enjoyment; a culture of human freedom and autonomy makes it possible to give to the Other.

Culture as the overcoming of crude Being, as the overcoming of nature, is defined by Levinas as "a breach made by humanness in the barbarism of being,"<sup>144</sup> a breach that is nevertheless incomplete as culture still bears traces of barbarism or primitivism. Culture is driven by the recognition of identity, a cultural identity that is in the West based on human freedom and autonomy. This cultural identity originates in "the culture of knowledge," in which human thought equalizes and interiorizes that what is other in universalizing expressions. In this essay, as throughout his work, Levinas emphasizes that a culture of immanence in which everything is reducible to representation and knowledge, is a culture in which multiplicity would be eradicated either by the unity of knowledge or by force. A culture, writes Levinas, "in which the subject in his identity persists without the *other* being able to challenge or unsettle him."<sup>145</sup> Levinas wants to show that the other is not only the participant in the creation and expression of culture, but is also the interlocutor who summons me to responsibility and infinitely unsettles my egocentric enjoyment of the world.

<sup>144</sup>EN':168; EN:193/194

<sup>145</sup>EN':163; EN:188

Through the ethical encounter not only is the freedom of the self invested, but it is simultaneously given the ethical purpose of being oriented to the good. Culture is in need of transcendence as an argument against the primacy of the Same and the unquestioned unity of culture, and a way to put the freedom of representation and knowledge into question. We can idolize culture, as culture is closely associated with expressions of art. "Art," writes Levinas "does not know a particular type of reality; it contrasts with knowledge. It is the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow."<sup>146</sup> Cultural consciousness is not only marked by technology and knowledge and bringing phenomena to light, it also is a mode of art that obscures reality. The metaphor of shadow and the relation to culture seems to be related to culture's tendency to become wholly particularistic and "exotic." In *La Réalité et son Ombre* (1948) Levinas draws attention to art's tendency to withdraw into itself which Levinas sees as the tendency to withdraw from social life. Cultural expressions can become irresponsible idols of identity and unity that are used as standards to assess who is a member of a particular community and who is the stranger. It is thus the exclusion of the other based on the neutral standard of identity.

Levinas calls for the need to move beyond identity and appeals to a culture "that challenges that very identity, its unlimited freedom and its power, without making it lose its meaning of *uniqueness*."<sup>147</sup> This culture that precedes and produces the variety of cultural expressions finds Levinas in the idea of sacred history that refers to transcendence, God, the Holy and the infinite, notions that are articulated in the Western monotheistic tradition. I will first clarify how Levinas appeals to sacred history to give cultures, which are immanent and are totalizing unities, a surplus of ethical meaning that makes orientation possible. After, I will discuss the problem of Eurocentrism inherent in Levinas' work.

### §3.9 History and Paternal Brotherhood

The aim of this part of the chapter is to answer the question of how Levinas sees cultures and how Levinas conceives the relation to the cultural other. We have seen that the cultural other can be thematized, but also has a Face that signifies more than the self can express and questions the self in its egocentric spontaneity. The Face expresses first discourse, revealing that the infinity of sense and its transcendence is produced amidst the ethical relation. The call to

<sup>146</sup>CPP:3; Levinas, E. (1948). "La Réalité et son Ombre" *Temps Modernes*, 38, 786.

<sup>147</sup>CPP:168; Levinas, E. (1975). "Dieu et la Philosophie" *Le Nouveau Commerce*, 30-31, 97-128.

responsibility is a break with immanence that draws attention to ethics as prior to culturally embedded language.

We have seen that for Levinas, cultures arise out of man's withdrawal from the elemental world and the safety of habitation that makes possession and labour possible. Man's freedom and autonomy to secure one's enjoyment of the world gives rise to cultural expressions. Cultural expressions are driven by the desire for knowledge, grasping and bringing to light. Levinas argues that cultures need transcendence to overcome the violence of the same. Transcendence as the higher, holy culture interrupts the immanent world of hegemonic, exotic, and Same-based cultures without destroying cultures or negating them.

In a time of decolonisation and the confrontation with the diversity of cultures and the relativity of values, we need a shared ethical orientation to evaluate and judge the cultural other that originates in a personal vocation rather than in hegemonic universal standards. Levinas calls for the need for an ethical surplus that can orient cultures, a language of peace that enables us to approach cultural others not only lateral, but also from the Height of their Otherness. Levinas argues that this ethical relation can challenge the very identity of cultures, without making it lose its meaning of uniqueness. In order to understand this claim, we have to outline Levinas' notion of sacred history and fraternity. Key to understand the relation between culture and the surplus of transcendence is the fact that the Face of the Other is a peaceful opposition, a peaceful discourse that suspends all war, because it transforms me into my brother's keeper and makes genuine freedom and autonomy possible.

Levinas' conception of humanity in terms of fraternity and paternity arises from Levinas' conviction that the Jewish religion can serve as a necessary surplus for the Greek, egological tradition as the universal culture that reduces everything other to the Same. For Levinas, fraternity is the pre-original commonality between all persons, a fraternity based upon the infinite responsibility to the Other which they have in common without the need to rely on a genus. Justice is a personal vocation, a vocation that affirms my unique responsibility, a responsibility for each and every person, a unique vocation nevertheless that each person has and is as such universal.

It is here important to notice that the Other does not refer to a particular Other but is neutral in the sense that it can refer to any person, the Other refers to anyone. The Face of the Other individualizes the self, but the Other remains

outside of the relation. The question that arises is how the self can recognize the other as unique person when the Other does not refer to this particular unique other. This is an important issue when we want to approach the other in its uniqueness while at the same time affirming our own uniqueness and bringing the other under our own categories. Jean-Luc Marion raises the problem of the neutrality of the Other in his article *From the Other to the Individual* (2005):

*In this way, however, we enter into an exemplary hermeneutic circle: only the Other can challenge the anonymity of existence, but the Other becomes accessible to an I who has already extricated himself from this anonymity by undergoing the ordeal of this same other.*"<sup>148</sup>

While the Face of the Other is able to individualize the self, the Face does not individualize the Other, but remains anonymous. The face, argues Marion "appears as no other person."<sup>149</sup> The Face expresses the divine command, but is characterized by Levinas as "the stranger, the widow and the orphan," abstract biblical terms that do not refer to the particular Other. Marion suggests that in order to approach the Other as Other, this Other must have to be individualized more than I individualize myself."<sup>150</sup>

Marion's critique addresses the problem between the relation of the Other, the Face and the personal other to whom the self bears infinite responsibility. It seems that the Face is not anonymous but has religious significance; the Face bears a trace of the *illeity* of God. Only because of the Face's trace of *illeity* can the personal encounter with the other be recognized as an *il*. To tackle this problem in detail, it is first necessary to draw attention to two events of individualization that can be distinguished in Levinas' work. First there is the ontological individualization of the *I* that is produced when the *I* assumes his own existence. This individualization as creation ex nihilo is auto-affection, the emergence of the subject from anonymous pure being (the *il y a*). Ontology is thus defined by a plurality of unique individuals who in each instant have to assume their own existence. Levinas however qualifies these unique selves as beings capable of bearing a name, a name that is *given* to them. The ontological singularization is thus for Levinas a preparatory event that makes the self susceptible to passively participate in the relation to the Infinite, it is also the event that makes it possible for the self to refuse the call of the Other.

<sup>148</sup> Marion, J.L. "From the Other to the Individual." in *Levinas Studies* 1, (2005):103.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 107

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 111



I will try to show that the Face is not anonymous but bears a trace of God, because God gives each human being a name. The self-other relation in Levinas is not a relation of difference but is dependent upon the transcendence of the Other that originates in Monotheism. By relying on William Large's paper on *The Name of God* (2013), which I will interpret somewhat differently than Large in favour of my own purpose, I will show how the personal encounter with the other (*l'autre*) is dependent upon the transcendence of the Other (*Autre*). I will then argue that the name of God is a rigid designator whose sacredness has to be performed. Levinas argues that God cannot and should not be named, but only "shows" Himself in the Face of one's neighbour. In my understanding, this suggests that transcendent uniqueness is the event in which God baptizes the unique person, a naming that precedes the ontological individualization of the *I*.

In his paper, William Large draws an interesting relation between Saul Kripke's theory of names as "rigid designators," and Levinas' thinking regarding how to talk about the word "God." Kripke argues that proper names such as "Donald Trump" do not refer to a set of characteristics but refers to one particular person "in all possible worlds." This implies that, even though we can imagine a world in which Donald Trump did not win the 2016 elections, he would still be Donald Trump in that particular world.<sup>151</sup> Kripke argued that, after the "initial baptism" in which a person receives his name from other(s), the name is passed down from one speaker to the next with whom there is "some historical connection."<sup>152</sup>

Kripke assumes that a name only has a unique reference because a community of speakers uses names in that way. For Levinas, it is not the community of speakers that is the origin of the name as rigid designator, but the trace of God that reveals itself in the Face. As Large argues, the sacredness of the name is not derived from the relation between a signifier and a signified, but "of the materiality of the word."<sup>153</sup> While Large does not relate the sacredness of the name that has to be performed to the encounter with the Face, I think Large's analysis shows that God's name is materialized in the proper name of each unique individual. The Other who is in closest proximity of God is individualized more than me because the Face materializes the sacredness of God's name. This aligns with Derrida's tentative suggestion that Levinas might subscribe to

<sup>151</sup>For this particular example, I'm indebted to Jan Sleutels, who in his *Metafysica Tutoring Syllabus* used this particular example to teach Kripke's theory of rigid designators to first-year students.

<sup>152</sup>Large, W. "The Name of God: Kripke, Lévinas and Rosenzweig on Proper Names" in *Journal of The British Society for Phenomenology*, 44 N° 3, (2013):327.

<sup>153</sup>*Ibid.*, 329

the ambiguous sentence from the *Book of Questions* by Edmond Jabès in which Jabès writes: "All Faces are His; this is why HE has no face."<sup>154</sup> The diachronical relation is ethical because it bears witness to the proper name of each and every other, a bearing witness of the Face as the materializing event of God's name.

This entails that non-in-difference to the Other originates from the revelation of the idea of divine goodness, in which the Face of the Other expresses the proper name of each one of my brothers. Election means being singled out by the Good, it means being the preferred son of God. Being me, argues Levinas, is "excluding others from the paternal heritage," an exclusion that, as election, means that the I is summoned to do God's work and be my brother's keeper. Levinas' articulation of fraternity as the chosen self who is responsible to each of its fellows draws upon the religious interpretation of the Face as the bearer of the trace of God. Brotherhood, defined as each person's unique responsibility for the Other, is the condition of our shared humanity, a "shared humanity," that does not rely on any assertion of commonality, since my responsibility is not the responsibility of my fellow man.

My uniqueness does not originate from being recognized as a free being by another human being, but in my being elected among brothers; in my infinite responsibility to be my brother's keeper. Infinite responsibility as personal assignment is a difficult freedom, as it obliges me to take each and every person into account, which in the end requires Levinas to mitigate infinite responsibility.

### §3.10 Questioning Levinas

In *Violence et Métaphysique* (1964), Derrida argues that Levinas' notion of the ethical relation opens the space of transcendence and liberates metaphysics by providing a Messianic eschatology. Derrida nevertheless also draws attention to the possibility that Levinas' thinking might return to the ontological totalization of violence because Levinas draws from the very realm of war from which Levinas seeks to move away from. Levinas argues that the eschatology of Messianic peace must superpose itself upon the ontology of the Same, so that ethics prevails over violence. Eschatology institutes a relation with the beyond being, but this ethical-religious relation cannot be thematized, but makes thematization possible. Levinas however does rely on religious categories from the monotheistic Western tradition to describe the Other who eludes

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<sup>154</sup>Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, 135.

thematization; does this not pose the problem of an implicit fidelity to the Western metaphysical tradition, a fidelity to faith and philosophy as articulated in the Greek and Judaic tradition?

Bearing in mind Derrida's critical reading of Levinas, as well as the worries of scholars such as Sikka (1998), Sandford (2000), McGettigan (2006), Ma Lin (2008) and Drabinski (2011) who accuse Levinas of Eurocentrism, this chapter seeks to understand Levinas' thought on cultural formation and his views on approaching the cultural other in the light of his phenomenology of transcendence. We have seen in the discussions of the two essays on culture that Levinas associates cultural formation with the economy of the same, but also outlines how cultures can become the object of aesthetic idolization. We have also seen that the ethical relation gives sense and orientation to cultures. It gives the self the possibility to form a judgment of other cultures and provides a language of peace in which we approach the cultural other in its otherness. We however still have to discern what this entails: the ethical relation as first philosophy cannot be thematized, has no specific content and does not provide us with standards on how to approach the cultural other. This raises the question how the ethical relation reveals itself. We will later on see that the ethical relation is revealed in discourse; a discourse that originates in the facing of the Other prior to any rational discourse.

The ethical relation as the precondition for culture, for philosophy and for politics cannot be thematized, but its metaphysical underpinnings are however issued from the culture of monotheism. The "culture of transcendence" as ethical-religious responsibility originates from the phenomenology of Judaism, which gives universal Greek thinking the surplus of an ethics that does not limit human autonomy and freedom but makes it possible. It is therefore that Levinas in an interview dares to say that for him:

Europe, that's the Bible and the Greeks. It has come closer to the Bible and to its true fate. Everything else in the world must be included in this. I don't have any nostalgia for the exotic. For me Europe is central.<sup>155</sup>

It is difficult not to read this statement as a troublesome form of Eurocentrism: Levinas clearly thinks that Western thought has the privileged position to

<sup>155</sup>Rötzer, F. (1995). *Conversations with French Philosophers*, Transl. G.E. Aylesworth, Humanity Press, 63.

express a universalism to which other cultural traditions need to accommodate. McGettigan, but also Caygill try to demonstrate that Levinas' remarks on the exoticism of other cultures and the dismissal of their significance is fundamentally connected to his conception of transcendence. Both scholars argue that Levinas' notion of transcendence relies entirely on sacred history as the monotheistic relation to the Holy and to God, which leads to seeing non-Western traditions as inferior or primitivist. This claim resonates with my earlier argument on the relation between immanence, primitivism, and transcendence; it is indeed the case that Levinas classifies a wholly immanent world as 'primitivist.' Levinas endeavours to show that meaning (*signification*) as particular and determined content tied to the thinking cogito is preconditioned by sense (*sens*) as the "significance of signification" that transcends any content. Sense is an ethical, personal vocation, a weight that orients being towards the good and is an invitation to act in a sincere, responsible way to the cultural other.

Levinas claims that transcendence as the ethical relation is solely revealed in the Cartesian relation to infinity and the Jewish religion, which is why Levinas prioritizes the Western tradition. Drabinski (2011) criticizes Levinas' conception of Europe which he argues is presented as "a single philosophical culture," an essentialization of European philosophy that neglect those outside of European narrative:

*Levinas's work is caught between two very different, very tense aspirations. There is, on the one hand, the language on first philosophy, subjectivity-time-space-embodiment as such, and so on. [...] Levinas's work clearly aspires to a certain kind of universality This is what it means to come to moral consciousness. On the other hand, there is the emphatic specificity of Levinas's work, which is rooted in the drama of European history and the Western tradition of navigating ideas.*<sup>156</sup>

When we want to show how Levinas can provide comparative philosophy with a critical-transformational discourse that helps us to approach the cultural other in an open way, we need to critically access Levinas' troublesome remarks and his reliance on the Western tradition as the sole source that can give humanity a shared ethical orientation. I will first concentrate on how Levinas thinks that Greek and Jewish thinking is able to provide all cultures with a necessary

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<sup>156</sup>Drabinski, J. E (2011). *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other*, University Press, 3-4.

ethical surplus that is not based on a shared identity but is based on the very particularity of the self.

Levinas qualifies the / as ethical responsibility, a “being-for-the-other” which he also calls the principle of absolute individuation; the Height of the Face is the only event that chooses *me* to become absolute and infinitely responsibility to each and every human being. Levinas relates the Jewish notion of Messianism in which the self is the chosen one to be responsible for his neighbour, to the Greek principle of individuation. It is the sacred history of brotherhood that differentiates the West from other cultural traditions and which privileges Europe as the place that has thought the infinite and has articulated transcendence as the relation to Goodness.

Sacred history as the relation to the infinite opens a different temporality and gives history the surplus of eschatological time. The significance of the eschatological dimension of human history is derived from the monotheistic Jewish heritage, a heritage, which, as Stella Sanford suggests gives Levinas the possibility of rethinking transcendence as first principle.<sup>157</sup> Human culture and the human egocentric spontaneity or its *conatus essendi* are fundamentally and necessary implicated in a prior ethical-religious relation that is revealed in the monotheistic Western tradition. Levinas privileges the Western monotheistic tradition because it has thought transcendence as goodness and has thought the relation to the infinite, notions that Levinas believes to be absent in other cultural traditions. The Western tradition does not constitute this ethical orientation, but only has revealed the significance of transcendence for humanity.

In *Détermination philosophique de l'idée de culture*, Levinas raises the question how we can be in a relationship with another human being who does not share the same cultural identity. Morality is most of the time derived from a common identity or from a collective cultural convention, but as Levinas argues in his essay on Hitlerism, any morality based on a common identity or “Blut und Boden” principle violates that what is other. At the end of the paper, Levinas criticizes ethnocentrism and a totalitarian cultural identity and argues that culture needs a universally significant culture that challenges the insistence on that very identity:

<sup>157</sup>Sandford, S. (2000). *The Metaphysics of Love. Gender and Transcendence in Levinas*, The Athlone Press, 2.

*A universally significant culture, like that of knowledge and technique in modernity, and like the one that, emanating from the university, has opened itself to the forms of cultures not belonging to the Greco-Roman heritage. But a culture in which, contrary to that of knowledge, technique and the arts, it is not a matter, for the Same of the human I, of confirming itself in its identity by absorbing the other of Nature, or by expressing itself in it but of challenging that very identity, its unlimited freedom and its power, without making it lose its meaning of uniqueness.*<sup>158</sup>

Levinas remarks on the higher culture of transcendence that challenges identity, is however difficult to reconcile with one of his most cited comments on the Asiatic heritage that is to say the least, political troublesome:

*The Yellow peril! It is not racial, it is spiritual. It does not involve inferior values; it involves a radical strangeness, a stranger to the weight of its past, from where there does not filter any familiar voice or infection, a lunar or Martian past.*<sup>159</sup>

I agree with Ma Lin (2008) and McGettigan who both argue that Levinas thinks that the Asiatic (I would say, all the other cultural traditions) lacks genuine significance, because it has not thought the dimension of transcendence.<sup>160</sup> However, both scholars fail to address how the question of transcendence is related to Levinas' conception of culture and to his critique of an immanent worldview. The above statement about the radical strangeness of Asia, which Levinas classifies as being "a stranger to the weight of its past," refers to Asian philosophy's immanent worldview, a worldview that is not like modern Western philosophies "anti-platonic" but a radical stranger to Platonism.

As we have seen, Levinas criticizes an immanent worldview, because he associates it with violence and cultural disorientation. The de-spiritualized immanent world is a pagan world that seeks the satisfaction of the self before the other. Levinas' strong belief is that the ultimate consequence of a de-spiritualized immanent is Hitlerism. In his essay *Quelques Réflexions sur la Philosophie de l'Hitlérisme* (1934), Levinas gives a phenomenological

<sup>158</sup> EN': 168; EN:193

<sup>159</sup> Levinas, E. (1960). "The Russo-Chinese Debate and the Dialectic" Cited in: Ma, 605.

<sup>160</sup> Ma L. (2008). "All the Rest must be Translated: Lévinas's Notion of Sense" *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 605.

account of the relationship between politics and philosophy and shows how the philosophy of Hitlerism results from the very logic of an immanent worldview. While the essay was written when Levinas was only 29 years old, it does show how Levinas argues for transcendence as a necessary surplus to an immanent world or the "ontology of a being concerned with being."<sup>161</sup> *Quelques Réflexions* was translated and published in English in 1990 and the essay begins with a short introduction in which Levinas himself reflects on his essay in the light of his philosophical project. Levinas writes that the essay stemmed from his belief that the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism originated from "the essential possibility of *elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself."<sup>162</sup>

The source of the horror of Nazism is for Levinas not a mistake of human reasoning, but the very consequence of a form of logical reasoning that enables humans to enact evil, a form of evil that results from the essence of human beings. The logic that can lead humans to enact such evil is the Heideggerian logic of existential ontology and the ideology of the free subject of transcendental idealism. While the first logic is the immanent worldview of the ontology of a being concerned with being; the immanent subject of transcendental idealism results in the conviction that the subject is free before everything, a claim that is for Levinas identical to "gathering together and dominating."<sup>163</sup> Later on in the essay, Levinas fiercely criticizes philosophies that emphasize the radical powerlessness of human beings and who take the identity between self and body as the primal essence of human experiences, primarily because these theories also articulate a wholly immanent world. The consequence of its anti-Platonism is the de-spiritualization of the Western culture, a de-spiritualization that allows for a biological truth anchored in the "Blut und Boden" ideology.<sup>164</sup>

Levinas believes that only in returning to the Judaic heritage combined with Greek universalism, we can find a notion of transcendence that can overcome the violence of primitivism or paganism. For Levinas, Judaism is thus seen as a necessary trans-historical, universal surplus for both Jews and non-Jews. An ideal that gives "sense" to all cultural expressions, a sense of ethical weight that makes it possible to approach the cultural other as interlocutor. It is thus important to make it clear that Levinas does not see other cultural traditions

<sup>161</sup> Levinas, E. & Hand, S. (1990). "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" *Critical Inquiry*, 17 N° 1, 63.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, 70.

as inferior, particularly because these cultures are all preceded by and produced by the ethical relation to the Other. Levinas privileges the Western metaphysical tradition or European culture because it has thought the infinite and transcendence and has as such revealed that what a wholly immanent worldview cannot accommodate and stays radically exterior.

This brings us back to the question of whether (1) Levinas' thinking is Eurocentric and (2) if Levinas' philosophy is hostile to the cultural other. Ma Lin argues that Levinas' thinking is Eurocentric because Lin concludes that Levinas:

*treat[s] Judaic and Greek traditions as the core of Western civilization, Levinas ascribes absoluteness and universality to these two traditions, especially the former, which is in fact only one among other traditions.*"<sup>165</sup>

Based on my reading of Levinas, we can see that the latter claim of Ma in which she argues that the Judaic tradition is only one among many, entirely misses the Levinasian relation between transcendence, an immanent worldview and violence. It is precisely by reducing the Jewish tradition as "one among others" that an immanent worldview devoid of transcendence is articulated.

The problem of Levinas' apparent Eurocentrism is not that he ascribes universality and absoluteness to the Jewish and Greek tradition but is a question of whether we are willing to accept that a wholly immanent worldview needs the surplus of transcendence as revealed in the Greek-Judaeo tradition. We have to notice that Levinas' reasoning is true if we accept the authority of the Jewish tradition, but what Levinas tries to show is that (Western) philosophy needs the surplus of the Jewish ideal to overcome paganism. It is here that we need to critically reflect on Levinas' notion of transcendence in *Totalité et Infini* and have to ask the question of whether this notion of transcendence can be accepted by the cultural other who does not share the monotheistic heritage.

In the next sections, I will contextualize Levinas' alleged Eurocentrism within his thinking of transcendence, language, and immanence as violence. I will reflect on Levinas' Messianism that enables us to rethink the question of the task of the European community as being responsive to the friction between the logic of identification and ethical responsibility.

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<sup>165</sup> Ma L., *All the Rest must be Translated*, 606.



### §3.11 Transcendence, Immanence, and the Cultural other

My contention in this chapter is that for understanding Levinas' political statements on culturally different traditions and to understand his alleged Eurocentrism, we need to elaborate on his conception of transcendence as a necessary surplus to an immanent worldview that is prone to violate that what is other. I will show how Levinas' thinking on culture, violence, dialogue and Messianism offers us an ethical-transformational discourse that does not relapse into the logic of identification in which singularities disappear within a cultural common identity.

Levinas is profoundly influenced by Heidegger and Husserl, but in contrast to these two thinkers who insisted on immanence, Levinas insisted on the necessary surplus of transcendence. Culture that consists of labour and habitation, recollection and egocentric enjoyment leads to economy, politics, arts, and religion that a historically embedded in a unifying comprehensive philosophical meaning. For Levinas, this culture of assimilation that expresses the ultimate "meaning of being" does not have the last word but is preceded by a personal relation between self and other in which the self is constituted in its being guilty of simply being an egocentric spontaneity. Transcendence as eschatology is a relationship with that what always remains exterior to totality, but which is nevertheless "reflected within the totality and history, within experience."<sup>166</sup> In *Totalité et Infini*, the locus of transcendence is on the Other who interrupts the self's egocentric spontaneity.

For our present purposes, Levinas' philosophy of the other illuminates that comparative philosophy as a discipline that wants to understand and learn from another cultural tradition, is always already a personal dialogue with the other. Comparative philosophy is always a form of cross-cultural conversation, and, as Levinas shows, it is always from the beginning ethically oriented. Levinas does not abandon ontology but argues that a philosophy of Being cannot give resistance to evil. This is also the main question for Levinas formulated in *Autrement qu'être*:

*The present study puts into question this reference of subjectivity to essence which dominates the two terms of the alternative brought out. It asks if all meaning proceeds from essence. Does subjectivity*

<sup>166</sup>TI:xj; Tel:23

*draw its own meaning from it? Is it brought out as a struggle for existence, to let itself be seduced by the power of powers, in the violences of nationalism, even when it hypocritically pretends to be only at the service of essence and not to will? The true problem for us Westerners is not so much to refuse violence as to question ourselves about a struggle against violence which, without blanching in non-resistance to evil, could avoid the institution of violence out of this very struggle.* <sup>167</sup>

Levinas' fundamental project is aimed at showing that meaning when meaning is entirely immanent, we risk reproducing violence. Levinas points to the fact that often violence is overcome by revolutions and utopias that are destructive justify violence in the name of peace. What we need is a "patient" revolution, a revolution in philosophy that is radically different to our current approaches.

Ontology needs the surplus of transcendence for a language of peace that orients the self towards the good. The pre-original experience is for Levinas the encounter to the Other, which is an encounter with alterity (*Autre*) and transcendence. The absolutely Other (*Autre*) is the Other (*Autrui*) as the face-to-face relation. The face-to-face relation as the ethical relation is here the revelation of transcendence, which indicates that ethics is the phenomenological attestation of transcendence. In line with Stella Sandford (2000) I would argue that the face-to-face encounter as the ethical-religious command that interrupts the self's *being-at-home* is moving towards transcendence. Levinas already said in a footnote in the essay *God and Philosophy* (1975) "It is the meaning of the beyond, of transcendence, and not ethics, that our study is pursuing. It finds this meaning in ethics." <sup>168</sup>

Critics contended that Levinas' notion of transcendence in *Totalité et Infini* is based on the articulation of an ethical relation, as the pre-ontological event that goes beyond totality and history, does violence to historical other who are racially and culturally embedded. In the light of my analysis, the question that is most interesting is how the cultural other, whose tradition does not have any notion of transcendence and who is a radical stranger to transcendence, is included in Levinas' ethical relation. Do cultural others need to convert themselves to the Western metaphysical tradition to understand the pre-ontological event of the ethical relation? For Levinas, this would amount to a

<sup>167</sup> OTB:176/177; AE:271/272

<sup>168</sup> CPP:165

translation of ontological content into an ethical dialogue of responsibility and peace. Is Levinas Eurocentric when he thinks that only the Western tradition can provide the surplus of the language of goodness? Levinas argues in an interview that "humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks, *All the rest can be translated*, - all the exotic - is dance." (my emphasis)<sup>169</sup> This statement is troublesome, especially in its refusal to grant other philosophical traditions sincerity. For Levinas, sincerity is only found in transcendence, never in being or immanence.

Critics however do not relate Levinas' Eurocentric statements to his fundamental project of providing a language of peace that does not negate or interfere with freedom but gives the free subject the weight of the ethical relation. A weight that is expressed in language as an ethical, passive, responsiveness, an experience in which the self is passively affected by a relation that does not originate from its own being. Levinas' notion of transcendence oscillates between the self and the other as the finite and the Infinite as two separated events that never can be unified. The strict transcendence of the Other in Levinas is a transcendence to which no reference can be made, which highlights the fundamental problem of Levinas who tries to articulate the possibility of transcendence while this notion of transcendence resists any conceptual structure.

Levinas' notion of transcendence primarily draws upon the Cartesian relation to the infinite that has left a trace in human thinking as an idea; an idea that cannot be thought and thus resists thematization. This doubling of the infinite is the entire inspiration of Levinas' conception of transcendence in *Totalité et Infini*, a transcendence that is built upon pure exteriority is felt in language as the oscillation between the *saying* (*le dire*) and the *said* (*le dit*), which I will discuss in depth in §3.13. At this point we have to agree with McGettigan (2005) who argues that in Levinas' thinking, Western thought is privileged as it contains the germ of the value given to the subject as the "finite site of the incarnation of the Infinite."<sup>170</sup> Levinas' understanding of Europe seems, at face value, to be problematic for its tendency to dismiss the possibility of the cultural other to gain access to the pre-ontological ethical relation without recourse to the Western metaphysical tradition. I agree with Ma Lin, who argues that Levinas' thinking is somewhat similar to Heidegger's position that I have outlined in §2.4, with respect to the origin and status of Western philosophy. Where Heidegger

<sup>169</sup>Mortley, 18.

<sup>170</sup>McGettigan, A. (2006). "The Philosopher's Fear of Alterity. Levinas, Europe and Humanities 'Without Sacred History'" *Radical Philosophy*, 15-25.

argues that the cultural other can only discover its own origin in the intercultural dialogue, Levinas seems to claim that the intercultural dialogue will call for the need to translate the cultural other into the monotheistic Western philosophical tradition.

While I do think that scholars such as McGettigan and Ma Lin rightly criticize Levinas' troublesome reliance on the Western Judeo-Greek tradition, I also think that there are some questions that should be investigated further before we conclude that Levinas' thinking is hostile to the cultural other and needs to be "decolonized", as Drabinski suggests in his book *Levinas and the Postcolonial* (2011). First of all, we need to consider that the accusation of Eurocentrism in Levinas' thinking is entirely based on his notion of transcendence as articulated in *Totalité et Infini*. But as Bergo (2005) has shown in her article on transcendence and immanence in Levinas' thinking, Levinas' notion of transcendence changes throughout his philosophical career and is even radically reconceived in his later work *Autrement qu'être* (1974). Furthermore, Levinas does not seem to deny culture but urges for the need of the surplus of transcendence. It also needs to be read as a critique to Hegel who argued that consciousness first must alienate itself from that what is other and then internalize it in order to be able to contribute to culture. Levinas want to maintain radical alterity, particular in thought and language, a relation to the other that suspends the internalization of radical alterity.

## **Part III: Europe and the Infinite Task of Moving beyond Identity**

### **§3.12 Immanence and the Problem of Culture**

This part is a further attempt to follow Levinas' thinking through questions of culture, the relation to the cultural other, language and violence so that its consequences for comparative philosophy can be considered. We have seen in §3.10 and §3.11 that transcendence as articulated in *Totalité et Infini* is problematic, particularly because it suggests that the cultural other can only discover the ethical primordial event by translating its own cultural heritage into the Jewish-Greek tradition. In this section, I will outline why Levinas thinks that the cultural other needs to translate its own cultural heritage into the Jewish-Greek tradition. I will highlight how the ethical relation as the irreducible alterity

of the other that precedes any cultural-symbolic construction, changes the particular way in which we have to understand “being privileged”.

Cultures tend to become totalizing entities that reduce that what is other to the same; they rely on a common identity or idolize cultural expressions. Levinas sees culture as the break with the horror of anonymous being (*il y a*), a (partly) overcoming of the weight of Being by means of transforming the alterity of nature into the Same. The immanence of culture is characterized by dwelling as the *being-at-home* that enables the continuation of enjoyment through possession and labour. This formation of culture as the break with elemental being is a culture that affirms human freedom and is characterized by self-preservation and self-justification.

Culture as expression of art is the second way that culture tries to overcome the alterity of nature. Art is able to reveal the ‘shadow’ of the world and shows us that the elemental world is essentially not “there-for-us.” Nevertheless, Levinas’ evaluation of cultural art is predominantly negative as he sees it as idolatry. Idolatry is in Levinas’ work the worst kind of paganism, an irresponsibility in which sociality is avoided and ignored. Levinas compares the enjoyment of cultural art as self-indulgence in which the *I* takes delight in the esthetical beauty of the world and turns away from the suffering of the Other. For Levinas, enjoyment is not gratuitous but is the essential precondition for infinite responsibility. The need of the Other, expressed in the epiphany of the Face, consists in his or her deprivation of the enjoyment and possession that the *I* does have, in which we have to take notice that even the economical encounter with the other in which the other has more material goods, is at the same time the encounter with the nakedness of the Other as stranger, orphan or widow.

Levinas’ Messianism as the paternal relation of election and infinite responsibility introduces for Levinas the possibility of rejuvenation and hope. Transcendence as the higher culture that gives cultures their universal ethical orientation offers novel possibilities as an openness towards that what is yet unknown, or unknowable. Transcendence as the ethical relation is a break from totalitarianism: transcendence can overcome the pagan immanent world of cultural de-spiritualized diversity. Sonia Sikka (1998) who argues that Levinas does not leave any room for the holiness of existence: only transcendence as the ethical relation that moves towards the relation to fraternal infinity can give the immanent world of being its necessary orientation and ethical goodness. In the previous sections, we have seen that this is indeed true; Levinas sees the

ontological world as a pagan, de-spiritualized world that can only offer violence disguised as peace. Culture is the break with anonymous being, a break with the elemental and the continuation of self-preservation and self-enjoyment. It can however also result in a perverse self-indulgence in which the relation to the Other is neglected and ignored. Culture, is for Levinas in the first place, is always an invitation to bear witness to a higher culture of goodness: a bearing witness to the ethical culture of personal responsibility. Only this ethical higher culture is able to genuinely overcome paganism, as it interrupts and suspends the culture of knowledge and as expression of art, while at the same time giving culture the surplus of the language of peace.

The ethical relation does not negate or deny the formation of culture but serves as the condition of possibility for their formation. The face of the Other forces individuals into discourse and is the “locus of truth in society.”<sup>171</sup> Ethics as infinite responsibility and first discourse is the concretization or move towards transcendence. In his more mature work *Autrement qu’Etre* (1974) Levinas reformulates transcendence in terms of proximity and language, which opens new ways to use Levinas’ thinking for our present purpose. Transcendence is now conceived as transcendence-in-immanence in which Levinas relates corporeal vulnerability with the preconditions of spoken meaning. Language as first discourse is here conceived as an exposure to the sensuous ethical relation to the Other that precedes all concepts and gives language its specific meaning as the gift to the Other.

### §3.13 Truth, Language and Dialogue

The theme that remains unthematizable throughout Levinas’ work is the Other whose radical alterity cannot be reduced to the Same. The Face of the Other “speaks to me” in an immediate way; it simply “expresses itself”<sup>172</sup> The self is bound to respond to the Face as a result of asymmetry in which the Other speaks to me from a Height; indicating that the self is vulnerable to the otherness of the other prior to any cultural construction of the world.

We have seen in the earlier sections that Levinas associates immanence with the persistent possibility of violence. The world is *being-at-home* as enjoyment as well as the totalitarian tendency to make radical alterity accessible to the human

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<sup>171</sup> TI:59; Tel:63.

<sup>172</sup> TI:51; Tel:54

cogito. In Levinas' thinking, the idea of fraternity as the intersection between the ethical and the political allows for the non-allergic resistance of totality that offers a language that does not originate in a shared system of signifiers, but is vocative before it is nominative. The speaking of the Other teaches the self the very presence of the Other and summons the self to unconditional responsibility to its brothers. Fraternity as conceived by Levinas enables the cultural dialogue; it enables judging cultures, and it enables to approach the cultural other from a position of responsibility. Fraternity affirms both the uniqueness of the self and the equality between brothers; it is a relation based on the irreconcilable separation between self and other that refuse power play and is as such a "non-allergic relation". The discussion now revolves around the question how we can orientate ourselves towards the other when the Other is revealed as the unknowable. The relation between "knowable" and "unknowable" unfolds in language as the tension between the "saying" (*le dire*) and "the said" (*le dit*).

For Levinas, the birth of discourse as truth originates in the encounter with the Other, a discourse of being answerable to the Other. The first word offered is inscribed in the Face of the Other, which is the religious command not to kill. This entails that our common language is always a belated response to this first word offered. The relation to transcendence that finds its expression in the ethical command is a relation of radical separation and non-adequation, or, better said, a relation beyond the distinction between adequation and non-adequation. Speaking about transcendence is as such never transcendence as transcendence, indicating that Levinas finds himself constantly entangled in expressing the inexpressible; an attempt to think that which is Other, which raises the question of whether such writing on the Other in Greek or in a non-Greek language is even possible. To quote Jacques Derrida, who has raised this problem in *Violence et Métaphysique*:

*But will a non-Greek ever succeed in doing what a Greek in this case could not do, except by disguising himself as a Greek, by speaking Greek, by feigning to speak Greek in order to get near the king?*<sup>173</sup>

For Levinas, the Greek as universalism and the Jewish command of the Bible implicate all humanity since "any man truly human is no doubt of the line of Abraham"<sup>174</sup> Being of the line of Abraham implies being the "chosen particular

<sup>173</sup>Derrida, J. (2005). "Violence and Metaphysics" In: C.E. Katz & L. Trout, *Emmanuel Levinas*, Routledge, 66

<sup>174</sup>NTR:99; DSS:19

one," an election that is bestowed upon me beyond and outside my socio-religious and political context. Language bears a trace of this Abrahamic responsibility, despite the impossibility to bring it to light. Abrahamic responsibility, or Messianism, is a "trauma" that resists thematization which constitutes subjectivity. Subjectivity is thus always inspired by the mystery of proximity that gives subjectivity the surplus of a vocative "difficult" freedom as the passive, obsessive responsiveness to the Other. Language attests to this response of responsibility, this openness of me of the "Here I am" before my brothers. Election by the Good is for Levinas a "passivity more passive than passivity," a non-action or non-violence," a non-violence that is broken to pieces the moment when I utter words, as words are always objectifying the other. Yet, because the self is structured as infinite responsiveness, it seems that the self cannot stop speaking, but always has to start saying something.

It is precisely in the tension between infinite responsiveness to the Other as responsibility and the violence of speaking itself that Levinas is able to distinguish the saying (*le dire*) from the said (*le dit*). The said refers to ontological rational discourse, *interested* language, language directed at manifestations or phenomena conveyed before the *I*. The said is the language of "being" (*einai, on*), language that is a thinking of totality, that of *doxa* in which the "given is held in its theme."<sup>175</sup> The said objectifies and universalizes phenomena by thematizing them; by robbing them from their strangeness and bringing them under a common denominator. The said is driven by the "instinct for integration," an imperialism of the "search for security."<sup>176</sup>

Levinas argues that through the command of the Face as the first signifier, the self "comes into being" and becomes oriented towards the relation to infinite goodness. This orientation is a move towards that what cannot be known or understood and constantly interrupts the self's egocentric spontaneity. This other is the Other who can never be fully represented because my language cannot thematize the radical alterity of the Other. The Other is outside of totality, his Face is irreducible to a theme, yet the Face speaks to me and is welcomed as interlocutor.<sup>177</sup> Levinas calls the relation to the Other the very origin of signification, in which the archetype of signification is dialogue. Dialogue is a personal relation between me and the Other, a dialogue among brothers characterized by non-indifference to the Face of the Other, an infinite

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<sup>175</sup>OTB:36; AE:78

<sup>176</sup>EV:50; DEE:68

<sup>177</sup>TI:69; Tel:66



responsiveness that is interpolation, vocation, and an infinite apology of my egocentric usurpation of the world.

"To approach the Other," writes Levinas "is to welcome his expression," an expression that can never be captured nor thought but to which I nevertheless am obliged to listen.<sup>178</sup> Even in my choice not to speak to the other, I have already responded to the Holiness of the Face, which reveals a dis-correlation between signified and signification.<sup>179</sup> Saying reveals the intentionality of language toward the Other as interlocutor, an intentionality that cannot be reduced to a theme, but is dialogue as a moral imperative that originates from religion. Saying is "discourse before discourse," a communication constituted by the metaphysical transcendental relation between the I, the Other and the Infinite. The said as impersonal discourse, discourse that is spoken in the name of *logos*, is preceded by the personal face-to-face situation in which the Other signifies himself and the I is exposed to his otherness.

Levinas shows that we always violate the otherness of the other by bringing the other under our own concepts. The saying as ethical discourse will always be betrayed by the said; every word that I utter will reduce or violate the very otherness of the Other and will capture him in universal, general terms, revealing the necessity of interpretation and translation of that which cannot be said. In *At this very moment in this work here I am*, Derrida asks what becomes of this fault, and wonders whether this betrayal of radical alterity is inevitable.<sup>180</sup> Can we attest to the Face by minimizing the totalizing gaze of the economic self? And can we be hospitable to the wholly Other by writing about the Other, a medium that departs from the voice of the Other and reduces the diachrony of the saying to something that always is a said? Based on Levinas' thinking, Derrida interprets the task of philosophy to go beyond language, to attest to grammatical opening in language, to become open to recognize language as chaotic, ambiguous, and never fixed. In the introduction to the English version of Derrida's work *Writing and Difference* (1978), Alan Bass describes the need to go beyond language as a:

*[..] moment of irreducible difference conceived not only as the danger to the doctrines of truth and meaning which are governed*

<sup>178</sup>TI:51; Tel:44

<sup>179</sup>OS:40; HS:52

<sup>180</sup>Derrida, J. (1991). "At this very moment in this work here I am" In: R. Bernasconi & S. Critchley, *Re-reading Levinas*, Indiana University Press, 16

*by presence, but also as an inevitable danger in the form of writing  
which allows truth and meaning to present themselves [...].*<sup>181</sup>

Going beyond language is for Derrida the exposure of language to interruption and disarticulation. In the process of writing and speaking each theme is “disarticulated, made inadequate and anterior to itself, absolutely anachronistic to whatever it said about it.”<sup>182</sup> Speaking is first a personal vocation, responsiveness to the accusation of the Other. The Saying refers to the generosity of the subject who infinitely gives his words to the Other, a giving of words that can each time be interrupted and questioned by the Other. Beginning to speak is always a gratuitous response to the Other, an infinite giving that does not ask for reciprocity.<sup>183</sup>

Levinas’ entire phenomenological analysis is focused on showing how transcendence is needed in order to overcome the violence of the same, a violence inherent in language and its relation to knowledge. For Levinas, a wholly immanent world can never be sincere, because the sincerity of desire can only refer to the self as second, to the self who passively receives the surplus of pure goodness. Sincerity as desire that is dis-interested is a pure goodness that does not ask for anything in return; giving to the other does not satisfy any of the self’s own needs. Levinas’ distinction between the saying and the said reveals that intercultural or comparative philosophy can never become a panopticon, but should be seen as a dialogical “movement of the same toward the Other than can never return to the same.”<sup>184</sup> Comparative philosophy is a philosophy that is driven by the desire to gain knowledge of another cultural philosophical tradition, but Levinas shows that the cultural other can never be fully captured.

For Levinas, the Face of the Other opens the relation to infinite as the move towards God. For Levinas, the ethical relation originates in Jewish Monotheism, because “I can only go towards God by being ethically concerned by and for the other person.”<sup>185</sup> Levinas’ thinking reveals that the central concern for any philosophical inquiry is not to bring the cultural other into the sphere of sameness or familiarity, but to recognize the irreducible distance between self and other. Comparative

<sup>181</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, xiii.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>183</sup> OTB:7; AE:19

<sup>184</sup> HO:29; HA:37

<sup>185</sup> Levinas, E. (1984). “Dialogue with Emmanuel Lévinas.” In Kearney, R. (Ed.), *Dialogues with contemporary continental thinkers: The phenomenological heritage* (pp. 47–70). Manchester University Press.

philosophy is first the recognition of this ethical relation between self and other, which can be translated as the ethical competence to welcome the cultural other without any common horizon and without any hope to understand or grasp that other. Comparative philosophy will always be disturbed, traumatized, and haunted by the proximity of the Other, an interruption that demands rephrasing, re-saying (*dédire*) and re-interpretation. Philosophy is, Levinas writes, never a wisdom, but is always marked by non-adequation:

*Philosophy is never a wisdom, for the interlocutor whom it has just encompassed has already escaped it. Philosophy, in an essentially liturgical sense, invokes the Other to whom the "whole" is told, the master or student. It is precisely for this that the face-to-face proper to discourse does not connect a subject with an object and differs from the essentially adequate thematization. For no concept lays hold of exteriority.*<sup>186</sup>

The human world that is structured by language and cultural practices (a totality) is grounded upon the relation to the Other that precedes experience. Totality can as such never be entirely subjective, as it always originates from the relation to the transcendent Other, nor can it be objective, as it is the activity of the subject that constitutes totality. The doubling of discourse, is traced back to the origin of the otherness of being as illeity: "Illeity is the origin of the otherness of being, in which the *in itself* of objectivity participates by betraying it."<sup>187</sup>

Levinas tries to justify the interruption of the ethical by seeing the diachrony between the saying and the said as the origin of philosophical scepticism. While Levinas is not a sceptic, he does emphasize the significance of philosophical scepticism as proof that language has an ambiguous and dual nature and can signify something else than its content.

"Scepticism," writes Levinas at the end of *Autrement qu'être*, "traverses the rationality or logic of knowledge, [it] is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said."<sup>188</sup> Scepticism shows how language as identity is derived from a non-identity. For Levinas, scepticism is not an attitude, but arises out of the tension between the offering of the Face of first discourse (the Saying) and

<sup>186</sup> TI:295; Tel:328

<sup>187</sup> HO:44; HA:52

<sup>188</sup> OTB:171; AE:265

the system of structure and grammar as possible ontological discourse (the Said). Scepticism draws happily from the diachrony that precedes synchrony, which is why scepticism can never be refuted. Levinas speaks therefore of scepticism's "paradoxical presence within our very possession of language."<sup>189</sup> The sceptical discourse attests to the fissure in language and comes up from the dis-correlation and dis-synchronization between the Saying and the Said. Levinas remarks that it seems "as though scepticism were sensitive to the difference between my exposure without reserve to the other, which is saying, and the exposition or statement of the said in its equilibrium and justice."<sup>190</sup>

We have to attune here to the "as though," which serves as a warning that, although Levinas uses philosophical scepticism to reveal that which is otherwise than being, Levinas does not want us to become radical sceptics who unsay A in favour of its negation. For Levinas, the task of the comparative philosopher is to infinitely unsay the entire ontological domain, as that which is said so that the pre-original relation to the Other can be revealed. This is in the end what Levinas has in mind when he argues, "philosophy is thinking more boldly than the others."<sup>191</sup> Thus task is bold because philosophy that keeps un saying that which is said inevitably betrays the fact that the condition for philosophy lies beyond the order of philosophy.

Comparative philosophy must be unsaid, must be interrupted and traumatized, in order to break with identity and open up to the Saying that nevertheless always remains the "not-yet." The "not-yet" is not the "not-yet" that sinks into nothingness but is the hope of a rejuvenated future of the *other than self*. Comparative philosophy as such is not the love of wisdom but is the "wisdom of love in the service of love,"<sup>192</sup> a *disinterestedness* love for the Other that bears witness to the Other while betraying it. Comparative philosophy is first and foremost an ethical dialogue with the cultural other in which we are open to being infinitely interrupted by the otherness of the other. Truth is, in dialogue, the persecuted I who does not suppress the voice of the Other but fully attests to it. This also means that Levinas suggests that there are ways of speaking that deny the voice of the Other, which is, unjust or violent language. The Face that appeals to me and commands me to respond always remains outside of what is said. The voice of the Other is beyond ontological formulations, but nevertheless

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<sup>189</sup> CPP:168

<sup>190</sup> OTB:178; AE:272

<sup>191</sup> CC:346

<sup>192</sup> OTB:157; AE:251

leaves a trace, - an ethical residue-, in that what is said. The tension between the Saying and the Said creates an opening in language to attest both to the radical alterity of the Other and to speak about that other in common conceptions.

### **§3.14 Infinite Responsibility and Comparing the Incomparable**

**3**

The aim of this chapter is to revise the approach to the cultural other in light of Levinas' formulation of transcendence. Levinas challenges current conceptions of cultural dialogue that are driven by affirming commonality between distinct cultural philosophical tradition and deny the heterogeneity in the relation between the self and the cultural other who is also Other (*l'Autre*). Levinas shows that in order to answer the question of how to approach another cultural tradition, the personal relation between self and other is an essential point of departure. Infinite responsibility to the Other as an exclusive relationship between two persons, is for Levinas a necessary relation, but this relation of love is not "Other enough." The infinite relation to the Other is broken down when the third party enters and also demands justice. The closed culture that consists of personal relations needs to be opened and this happens when the third party, - described by Levinas as the widow, the orphan or the poor, enters. The entrance of the third party necessitates us to compare the incomparable.

In the previous section I have outlined how we always necessarily have to betray the saying by the said. Ethics as pure exteriority always needs to be translated to ontology or politics. Levinas argues that the demand for social justice in the ontological domain comes upon the scene when the third party enters. It is the ever-presence of the third that, as Simon Critchley argues, constitutes the political aspect of Levinas' ethical relation.<sup>193</sup> Critchley argues that the Face is always already a relation to humanity as a whole and as such ethics is always already political. Critchley thus sees a necessary relation between fraternity and the sacred history of chosen ones and the political domain of human respect and dignity. For Levinas, human rights receive their significance from the infinite responsibility of the self to the Other. Human rights have thus no significance without the primordial ethical orientation; these rights are not founded upon the mutual recognition between human beings but are dependent upon the asymmetrical relation to the Other.

<sup>193</sup>Critchley, S. (1992). *Ethics of Deconstruction*, 224.

At this point it is important to notice the independency between exteriority and totality. Levinas articulates a totality and an infinity, not an either/or relation even though totality and exteriority do not share a common foundation. Nevertheless, the ethical relation as demand for social justice is "felt" in the ontological domain when the third party breaks the one-to-one relation. The face-to-face encounter as the one-to-one relation in which the I bears infinite responsibility to the particular unique individual, to his brother, is disturbed by the third person who presents himself also as a neighbour to whom I bear infinite responsibility. The proximity of human plurality starts from this third person; it is the third person who makes my freedom a *difficult freedom*, and forces me to compare the incomparable. The third party interrupts the intimacy of the "society of two," and is, as interruption, the birth of the question "What do I have to do with justice?" This is, writes Levinas, a question of consciousness that demands ontological justice:

*Justice is necessary, that is, comparison, coexistence, contemporaneity, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system, and thence also a co-presence on an equal footing as before a court of justice.*<sup>194</sup>

The obsession with the Other who cries out for justice, breaks infinite responsibility down to the question of who needs the most and transforms social justice in a demand for measuring and comparing. The third party that also demands infinite responsibility requires the troublesome, or violent use of universality, generalization, and judgment. While justice derives from the infinite responsibility to each and every human person, the recognition of the Face, the seeing of the Face, speaking about and to the other as well as comparing unique individuals are necessary practices for a religious-ethical inspired justice.

Levinas shows that commonality does not derive from anonymous Being, but from the unique third person who signals the endless responsibilities I have and breaks the face-to-face encounter as relation between the I and the Other. In the third party, the neighbour that obsesses me is already a face, and already comparable and incomparable, yet each individual is a unique face "visible in

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<sup>194</sup>OTB:158; AE:245

the concern for justice."<sup>195</sup> The third party is the incessant correction of the asymmetry of the Face, which is, as Levinas writes, a betrayal of "my anarchic relationship with Illeity," it is the betrayal of accounting for each and every person, the betrayal of giving each one his proper name as the necessary translation of the *illeity* to the *il*. The third party however is the necessary correction for pure exteriority to touch ontological totality.

The third party triggers me to visualize how I can make society more inclusive and peaceful, a question that moves me to action, which gets me out of bed and inspires me to re-commence and devote myself to the time of the Other. For Levinas, the personal call for social justice is the inspiration for politics, although Levinas does suggest that politics as a "science" which concentrates on "what is" necessarily fails to do justice to the infinite responsibility to the Other. Levinas clearly prioritizes the self's *being-for-the-other*, a prior religious-ethical command that inspires and makes autonomy and freedom possible. Politics is no longer the realm in which the rights and freedom of the individual are the main focus, but the infinite responsibility to the Other which, in the political domain, is broken down to the question of justice for the other.

Levinas argues that politics needs to respond to the ethical relation and needs to mitigate infinite responsibility. Levinas' critique on politics, as a practice of nations and thus related to cultural identity, relates to politics' tendency of totalization. Enrique Dussel highlights the relation between political violence and ethics in his contribution *'The Politics' by Levinas: Towards a 'Critical' Political Philosophy* (2006) and shows that Levinas' negative interpretation of politics originates in his belief that politics is driven by the desire to bring unique individuals under the common identity as "members of a certain state or nation."<sup>196</sup> This conclusion aligns with my central argument that Levinas argues that culture, and politics as such, originates in bringing unique individuals under a common identity and making them knowable or recognizable. A political culture that neglects its ethical orientation as the move towards the unknown, is a violent, primitive culture that can never bear witness to the otherness of the other. When we do not notice Levinas' critique on primitivism and the need of transcendence, we might agree with Jason Caro who argues that Levinas endorses a "sociability in which no epistemological clarity is permitted that

<sup>195</sup>OTB:158; AE:245

<sup>196</sup>Dussel, E. (2006). "'The Politics' by Levinas: Towards a 'Critical' Political Philosophy" Transl. by J. Rodriguez, In: A. Horowitz & G. Horowitz, *Difficult Justice. Commentaries on Levinas and the Political*, University of Toronto Press, 79.

could determine *in situ* personal duties," which jeopardizes political stability and social order.<sup>197</sup> This is however not the case; as we have seen Levinas claims that politics cannot do justice to the otherness of the other when it does not recognize it is preconditioned and interrupted by the ethical relation. Levinas wants to show how the dominant view on politics in the West is shaped as a consequence of the prevailing view of persons primarily for themselves (Spinoza's *conatus essendi*), as persons who only will cooperate with others out of self-interest. Levinas wants to show that politics originates from infinite responsibility, as the infinite demand to offer our words and possessions to the stranger, the widow and the orphan. This involves a recognition of the way national politics is based on the exclusion of the stranger, a necessary exclusion, but which does not acquit politics to take these others into account.

Levinas' conception of the political is a difficult and often misunderstood theme, mostly because Levinas' rejects all common assumptions of traditional political philosophy. Levinas' thinking betrays a deep suspicion of politics, a suspicion that is the direct result of the political horror of the Nazi regime. In *Signature* (1978), Levinas describes his life as "dominated by the presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror,"<sup>198</sup> a presentiment that prevails in his thinking on justice, philosophy and the political. Levinasian politics is inspired by irreducible plurality and endorses a politics of non-identity. It is a fundamental critique on Western political thinking that claims peace as the basis of tranquillity and the "man who is at home with himself behind closed doors, rejecting the outside that negates him."<sup>199</sup> Levinas argues that politics based on identity is a violence disguised as peace; it is a politics that leaves itself undisturbed by that which is other. In other words: it is an immanent politics devoid of transcendence and that solely is based on self-preservation and self-justification of its citizens. This is for Levinas a primitivist politics that does not take into account the Other and the way we are indebted to and responsible to each human being.

Levinas' notion of transcendence that gives the ontological realm of the same its ethical orientation, rejects the core of most political theories that centre around individual freedom and the right to property. The law does not arise from the clash of wills between beings that try to secure their egocentric spontaneity but arises as a function of pre-original responsibility persons have for their

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<sup>197</sup> Caro, J. "Against Levinas' Messianic Politics: A Polemic" *Continental Philosophy Review* 51, (2018):1-21.

<sup>198</sup> DF:291; DL:405

<sup>199</sup> AT':136 AT:140



brothers. For Levinas, politics does not originate from a clash of wills in the state of nature, but from the personal relation to the Other. Politics is produced by the infinite responsibility of each / for each of his brothers. A just society is for Levinas based on the shared notion of fraternity in which each person is infinitely responsible to his or her brothers. A just society is inspired by the unmediated encounter with the Face that reveals the nakedness of the Other.

Levinas reverses common political themes such as autonomy and freedom and makes them dependent upon the transcendence of the Other. Levinas claims that freedom and autonomy are dependent upon the ethical relation, which entails more specifically that autonomy and freedom do not originate from the self's desire to fulfil its own needs but is grounded in the self's metaphysical desire to give to the Other. The ethical-religious command is an invitation to take the Other into account, to give to the Other, an invitation that nevertheless can be resisted or denied by the self. This is precisely the surplus that does not negate or destroy human freedom and autonomy, but gives it an ethical orientation, the transcendental weight of the Face's accusation that can be "redeemed" through ethical practice.

Ethical responsibility as the way to transcendence interrupts the linear history of humanity and makes historical or cultural totalities impossible. Levinas' concern is however that we can tend to forget or ignore transcendence; we can become obsessed with cultural identity and idolize cultural expressions, we can become obsessed with knowledge and mistakenly believe that we can make another cultural philosophical tradition or the cultural other entirely transparent. These Pagan tendencies, these anti-Platonic inclinations, place the self before the Other and promote a violence disguised as peace. In the end, Levinas' entire work revolves around the question how we can bring peace to the world, which, for Levinas revolves around the question how we can conceive, a non-allergic relation to the Other. This non-allergic relation to the Other is conceived in terms of "hospitality of radical alterity," a "surplus of meaning that comes from the Other," that originates in an "ethics beyond ethics."

### **§3.15 Transcendence as Interruption**

The aim of this study is to describe ethical competence as a form of intercultural communication. In the previous section the distinction was introduced between the content of speech (*the said*) and the saying, which indicates the event of

becoming responsive to the Face of the Other. This distinction can be used for comparative philosophy to reconceptualise responsibility and the relation between self and other in the intercultural encounter. Levinas defines the ethical relation as the encounter with the other whose radical alterity I can never bring to light, highlighting the open-ended and indeterminable character of intercultural dialogue. Transcendence is for Levinas the interruption of the realm of egological culture that bring unique individuals together under a common identity and excludes that what is other.

Levinas' conception of transcendence hinges on the Cartesian relation to infinity that concretizes in the Jewish command to be one's brother's keeper. Levinas' strong claim is that only the Western Greek-Judea tradition is the privileged tradition that can provide humanity with a sacred history that brings the language of peace. In this section I will investigate how Levinas conceives transcendence in *Autrement qu'être* and how we need to understand the privileged place of the Western tradition in Levinas' thinking. In other words: what does it mean to be the chosen one from a Levinasian point of view?

We have seen that the ethical relation as the relation to infinite and the move towards transcendence is the higher culture, the culture that produces and orients the variety of cultural formations and expressions. Levinas' important insight is that the presence of the Other does not clash with freedom and autonomy, but precedes and invests our understanding of freedom and autonomy. It is thus transcendence and immanence that Levinas is after. Transcendence is for Levinas needed as surplus to ontology because ontology is the violent realm of the same that neglects that what is radical different and cannot bring genuine peace. Particularly in his essay *La Signification et le Sens*, Levinas calls for the need of a "universal language" in which I am able to evaluate the cultural other without relying on a common ground.

In his later work Levinas reformulates the subject as "transcendence-in-immanence" and emphasizes the primary dispossession and vulnerability of the subject as both self and Other. Transcendence in *Autrement qu'être* is a combination of the corporeal vulnerability, - which Levinas relates to trauma-, and the disruption of identity that leaves a trace in spoken language. I will show how this later conception of transcendence can help us to reformulate the privileged place of Western philosophy as the infinite task to move beyond identity.

In Levinas' later work, the subject itself is "an identity in disruption," a self that is constantly interrupted and questioned by the proximity of the Other. The alterity of the Other gives the self the very surplus of ethical non-indifference: the Other as the neighbour or "le prochain," always haunts the self and summons him or her to responsibility. Proximity in Levinas' work is similar to the gentle caress in the erotic relation, a gentle sensibility that does not aim at being grasped or understood, - it is non-conceptual and non-intentional and non-reciprocal. Proximity marks the indebtedness of the self to the Other; it is the Other who teaches the self that his egocentric spontaneity is violent, and it is this non-allergic interruption that brings the possibility of peace. For Levinas, the relation to the proximity of our neighbour is the relation to my brother, in which I, and only I, am my brother's keeper.

The ethical relation constitutes the self, it gives the self a reason to get out of bed; the relation to the Other singles the self out and makes its existence indispensable for human history. Proximity denotes the infinite responsibility that persons have for each and every human being and is the self-reflective moment in which persons find themselves as usurpers of the world. It is here that language becomes essentially an apology: the exposure to the Other initiates a dialogical relation in which the Other has the authority to interrupt and question the self's considerations. Throughout Levinas' work transcendence remains linked to *excendance*; the I's move beyond itself is a transcending towards the other person, a movement towards radical alterity defined as the relation to infinite goodness. *Excendance* is for Levinas an evanescence of Being that can only be accomplished by the infinite relation to the Other. In his later work *Autrement qu'être*, Levinas argues that being is conditioned by being's Other.<sup>200</sup> Instead of referring to the alterity of the other human being, Levinas now refers to the Other that is already within the self.

Levinas' mature notion of transcendence that synthesizes sensibility and the possibility of language does not overcome the problems of §3.11; cultural others still need to translate their philosophical tradition into the European tradition to understand how transcendence gives immanence its necessary and indispensable surplus. Levinas' notion of transcendence can be found as a trace in the immanent world of vision and in language as such, but this ethical residue, the ultimate 'sense' that orients cultures, is still dependent upon the call of the infinite and the Jewish notion of ethical responsibility that is revealed in the European philosophical tradition.

<sup>200</sup> OB:16; AE 21

Levinas' fundamental belief is that an immanent world of self-justification and self-preservation embraces a violent imperialism in which truth and knowledge are accessible to the egocentric masterful self. In the earlier sections of this chapter, we have seen that the ethical can never be justified, because of the radical otherness of the Other. Truth as justice comes from the Other, it is the Other who interrupts the solipsistic, masterful self and brings the self into a dialogical relation. The dialogical relation is however not a reciprocal relation, nor a relation in which the self and other share a common *logos*; it is a fundamental asymmetrical relation. However, we have also seen that the entrance of the third person does make this "un-dialogical relation", reciprocal and symmetrical.

The entrance of the third party mitigates infinite responsibility, but never takes it away. It is a necessary break with the infinite demands of responsibility, but it will always be marked by the trauma of having to compare the incomparable and as such violating the otherness of the other. Levinas here dismisses the idea that we can unproblematically relate to the other through a common foundation. A common identity or relatedness between self and other is brought by my infinite responsibility to the other and is always a trauma that breaks off every justification and reliance on *logos*.

Transcendence is needed as the unthematized that infinitely disrupts thematization. In *La Philosophie et l'Idée de l'Infini* (1957) Levinas writes that "an existence which takes itself to be natural, for whom its place in the sun, its ground, its site, orient all signification – a pagan existing."<sup>201</sup> It is a world devoid of hope and salvation, a world in which the self remains riveted to its own materiality and is at the mercy of crude, anonymous Being. Salvation rests upon the orientation towards goodness that is concretized in the intersubjective ethical relation. A relation as unthematized interruption of the self's own concerns that a Pagan view cannot articulate.

We have seen that Levinas' believes that Europe is the privileged tradition that can provide human history with the relation to infinite goodness to which the ethical relation attests. Instead of concluding that Levinas is "Eurocentric" and can therefore not be used for postcolonial purposes, I would like to ask the question of what it means for Europe to be the privileged tradition. What does it mean for Europe to "the privileged tradition"? The answer to this question will

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<sup>201</sup>CPP:52; DEHH:236

become also important to reformulate the task of comparative philosophy and intercultural ethical competence.

### §3.16 Europe and the Duty of Moving Beyond Identity

This chapter has shown that the distinctiveness of Levinas lies in his critique of an immanent understanding of culture and language in which truth and knowledge is accessible to the masterful, egological self and in which the other is approached from a shared, common ground. The logic of the Same tends to ignore our primary responsibility to the neighbour, a responsibility that is gratuitous and does not originate from any egocentric activity. The difference between self and other created by relying on cultural identity are prone to producing effects of colonizing and excluding the other, while Levinas' insistence on transcendence as the "higher culture", or better said, "the culture of Height," originates in a difference between self and other that affirms particularity and endorses human plurality.

Levinas shows us that comparative philosophy is always already a conversation with the cultural other. The Other, as Ma Lin writes, is not only a "necessary participant in cultural expression, but is also the interlocutor with whom expressions converse."<sup>202</sup> In other words, the cultural other is both the other who we can understand by bringing the other under familiar concepts and by relying on family resemblance concepts, but at the same time it is also the Other who interrupts our totalizing tendencies and creates the surplus of meaning expressed in discourse. Ethical discourse disrupts the logic of the same, disrupts identity, but is also the very foundation of the subject as a particular *I*. Hospitality to Others as the welcoming of Others in their otherness always breaks through any cultural expression.

In comparative philosophy we try to create a meaningful relation with another cultural philosophical tradition. Through comparing culturally distinct concepts, we try to identify differences and familiarities. We approach the other from an intimate familiarity and try to make the other transparent so that we can learn from that other tradition. This comparative practice is however not only an epistemological endeavour, but also a form of intercultural dialogue. Important for the intercultural dialogue is to approach the Other, an approach that requires an ethical competence of the person doing the comparative project.

<sup>202</sup>Ma Lin, *All the Rest must be Translated*, 603.

In this chapter I have tried to show how Levinas can provide us with a different conceptualisation of the relation between self and other, a relation in which the other is not an object of understanding, but our interlocutor to whom we bear responsibility.

When comparative philosophy as a discipline of European, Western philosophy wants to avoid theoretical colonization of the other, we need to critically assess the way we approach the cultural other. From a Levinasian point of view, we can only become genuinely open to the otherness of the other when we have a sense of justice. Ethical justice is for Levinas related to the vulnerability of being questioned by the Other. We need therefore to reflect on the Levinasian notion of hospitality. For Levinas, the question is how the natural subject that does not let otherness reveal itself can become open to the Other. Such a conversion cannot come from egological economical culture but needs to come from the Other who calls this culture of self-justification and self-gratification into question. Justice as critical knowledge that acknowledges the way the self violates the otherness of the other in its egocentric tendencies, can only arise in a subject that has an origin prior to its own origin; it can only arise in a subject that already is hospitable to the Other.

Hospitality is understood in Levinas' work in its Biblical sense, in a non-economical sense, implying that hospitality is here not associated with any (monetary) rewards or returns, but is wholly gracious. Hospitality is to be the self's, or European philosophy in our case, vulnerability to the encounter with the Other, a relation of responsibility that concretely translates as the infinite task to go beyond identity. Hospitality as the absolute welcoming of the Other is the very condition for self-identity, indicating that identity arises from non-identity. At the same time this self-identity is constantly interrupted by the presence of the Other: hospitality is thus the tension between the constitution of identity and the demand to attest to the non-identity of the Other. This demand keeps on interrupting any consolidation of identity.

Derrida sees this Levinasian notion of hospitality as first having something in possession and then, prior to my own decision, inviting unconditionally a stranger into my home, as to the central duty of Europe. In his essay on Europe entitled *The Other Heading* (1992), but also in other works, Derrida associates the name "Europe" with the possibility of a better world. In line with Levinas, Derrida argues that culture and identity require difference to itself and argues that the central task of Europe is to affirm identity as non-identical. This would

entail that comparative philosophy, as a discipline of European thinking is the exemplary discipline where identity is rethought and exposed in the presence of the radical otherness of the cultural other. In *The Other Heading* Derrida urges for a re-identification of the duty of Europe:

*Hence the duty to respond to the call of European memory, to recall what has been promised under the name Europe, to re-identify Europe – this duty is without common measure with all that is generally understood by the name duty, though it could be shown that all other duties perhaps presuppose it in silence.*<sup>203</sup>

In what follows, I shall try to explain what it means to have a duty without a common measure and why for Levinas as for Derrida this privileging of Europe is not a form of Eurocentrism but is a demand to move beyond any form of identity, a move beyond any form of -ism). In Derrida's reading, hospitality bears the tension of being hospitality to non-identity and the formation of cultural identity and the celebration of cultural expressions of art.

For Derrida, Europe is the symbol for cultural identity without stability because it is constantly challenging and questioning its own cultural identity. The privilege of Europe consists in serving as an example of displacing and questioning any consolidation of identity and is as such a bearing witness to the fact that its own identity originates in the ethical relation of non-identity. Bearing witness this "other heading," writes Derrida, can help us to relate differently to the other:

*Indeed it can mean to recall that there is another heading, the heading being not only ours [le nôtre] but the other [l'autre], not only that which we identify, calculate and decide upon, but the heading of the other, before which we must respond, and which we must remember, of which we must remind ourselves, the heading of the other being perhaps the first condition of an identity or identification that is not an egocentrism destructive of oneself and the other.*<sup>204</sup>

Derrida points to the fact that no matter how xenophobic we are toward the stranger, Europe nevertheless has an intimate kinship with the other. For

<sup>203</sup>Derrida, J. (1992). *The Other Heading. Reflections on today's Europe*, Transl. P.A. Brault & M.B. Naas, Indiana University Press, 76.

<sup>204</sup>Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 15.

Derrida, but as we have seen for Levinas as well, the paradox of Western philosophy is that it tries to articulate the transcendental. Transcendentalism culminated in the work of Hegel who tried to reconstruct European identity. Hegel articulated human freedom as a self-shaping identity and in his belief this freedom was most adequately configured in modern Europe.

Hegel privileged Europe because it was founded upon the human free subject instead of defining the subject in terms of certain qualities (nationality, sex, religion etc.). Hegel believed that every content embodied three moments: the abstract-intellectual, the dialectical-negative and the speculative-positive moment.<sup>205</sup> In Hegel, the initial terms of oppositions are in the third and constitutive moment grasped as the totality of determinations and as such as a unity. Hegel's conviction is that every truth holds in itself its own negation; the process of identification and determination of any content form his idealism. When applied to the European identity, Hegel insisted that we should not take any particular content as the ultimate source of European identity, but instead we should question all given forms through a process of thorough philosophical inquiry.

In Hegel, we already see the task of Europe as the renunciation of any fixed identity. For Hegel, particular forms of world experiences, such as national states, are "non-real" and need to be overcome by realisation of the universal spirit. Derrida and Levinas identify the violence inherent in Hegel's view, a view that tries to erase particularities to make room for a unifying universalism. As we have seen, the subject for Levinas is heteronomous; its egocentric identity is produced by the non-identical relation to the Other. Derrida takes up on this idea and applies it to the task of Europe that is the task of attesting to this non-identity, attesting to never being one with itself. The duty of Europe is:

*[..] opening it onto that which is not, never was, and never will be Europe. The same duty also dictates welcoming foreigners in order not only to integrate them but to recognize and accept their alterity: two concepts of hospitality that today divide our European and national consciousness. The same duty dictates criticizing ("in-both-theory-and-in-practice," and relentlessly) a totalitarian dogmatism that, under the pretense of putting an end to capital, destroyed democracy and the European heritage. But it also dictates criticizing a religion of capital that institutes its*

<sup>205</sup> Hegel, G.W.F. (2019). *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Nikol, §79.



*dogmatism under new guises, which we must also learn to identify – for this is the future itself, and there will be none otherwise. The same duty dictates cultivating the virtue of such critique, of the critical idea, the critical tradition, but also submitting it, beyond critique and questioning, to a deconstructive genealogy that thinks and exceeds it without yet compromising it. The same duty dictates assuming the European, and uniquely European, heritage of an idea of democracy, while also recognizing that this idea, like that of international law, is never simply given, that its status is not even that of a regulative idea in the Kantian sense, but rather something that remains to be thought and to come [à venir].<sup>206</sup>*

Derrida here points to the infinite task of Europe to be responsible for opening to the other as the principle of non-exclusion that originates in the very constitution of the history of Europe. In other words, Derrida suggests that the project of constructing a European identity is marked by the infinite responsibility as hospitality to the other, a task that is never completed, but always needs to be performed anew.

Derrida highlights this discourse of responsibility by pointing to the exemplarity of Europe. Europe as the unique example posits itself as universal example; revealing that while attesting to universality each time the exemplarity of the example affirms at the same time its uniqueness. In other words, by positing itself as an example for the rest of the world, Europe attunes to being the host of the universal in the singular; a tension between same and other that cannot be resolved. Derrida concludes that this tension is marked by the “play of the same”, a play that is only possible when otherness is already inscribed in the same. The infinite task of Europe is to take responsibility for this heading that heads toward to other, a heading that can no longer even relate to itself as its other, the other with itself.<sup>207</sup> The infinite task of Europe, and of comparative philosophy as such, is thus an infinite task of moving beyond identity, a move toward the unknown other that cannot be anticipated or conceptualized.

The infinite move beyond identity motivates and forces us to decide on what cannot be decided. This drives us to attune to the Levinasian notion of justice in which we have to weigh alternatives, calculate probabilities, take chances and risk committing violence to the other. If Europe has a privileged place in the work

<sup>206</sup>Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 76-78.

<sup>207</sup>Derrida, *The Other Heading*, 77

of Levinas, it cannot give rise to Eurocentrism, as Levinas' notion of privilege does not give rise to stability, certainty, and knowledge. Being privileged means having the infinite responsibility to move beyond identity, to attest to the interruption and prosecution of the other who questions my egocentric tendency to construct an identity that leaves the other out.

The task of Europe as the infinite move beyond identity originates in the relationship between the infinite and the finite; responsibility is derived from the non-correlation or non-unifying experience of the transcendental within the finite. The Levinasian framework provides comparative philosophy with a reconfiguration of the self-other relation in which static conceptions of self and other are challenged and an appeal is made to an ethical attitude of vulnerability to the other as embodied being who deserves justice.

While one can still claim that Levinas privileges the European tradition because it has attuned to transcendence, in contrast to the Asian tradition which is from the start immanent, this privilege can never become a fixed form of Eurocentrism as scholars such as McGettigan and Sikka suggest. These scholars concentrate on Levinas' statements on the cultural other that are, when not considered in their appropriate context, Eurocentric, but that can be understood from the broader relation between immanence, transcendence, and primitivism.

I have shown that Levinas' later work in which the self is marked by both *being-at-home-with-oneself* as infinitely being affected and haunted by the proximity of the Other, leads Derrida to reconfigure the duty of Europe as the infinite task to move beyond identity. The tension between same and other, between identity and non-identity allows for a discontinuity in which philosophy cannot draw upon or build upon an essential identity but is open to the infinite play of the constant becoming and deconstruction of identities. The Derridean/Levinasian conception of hospitable justice opens a space where self and other both can affirm themselves in their uniqueness and can be heard. Because the receives a critical-transformational position in relation to the Other, the self is both capable of accessing knowledge and practicing self-doubt. The relation to infinity gives birth to ethical discourse that voices different perspectives and possibilities. An immanent world in which the relation to the infinite is absent is a world in which this openness to infinite alternatives and perspectives is cut off and neglected. In other words, Levinas argues that the relation to infinite as the move towards what is yet unknown mitigates the imperialistic tendencies of cultures to exclude and muffle alternative voices.

This brings us to the problem that Levinas states that Asian tradition need to be translated into the Western tradition. What does “translating” here mean? Translating can only mean becoming open to the Other and becoming susceptible to the Face that interrupts our egological quest for knowledge. Levinas provides historical, contingent cultures with the surplus of a signification “before cultures,” a higher culture of absolute separation, non-adequation and non-identity that interrupts and at the same time makes culture possible.

Central to Levinas’ thinking is the liturgical work as the move of the same to that what is other that never returns to the same. For comparative philosophy this suggests ethical responsiveness that will be concretized as adopting the transformative attitude that is tolerant and responsible toward an infinite of alternative perspectives. Chapter 5 will draw out the implications and characteristics of ethical responsiveness, which will be especially enriched, as we shall discover, when accompanied by the insights of the *Zhuangzi*.

### §3.17 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown the relevance of Levinas’ relevance to comparative philosophy and particularly the problem of how to approach cultural others in their uniqueness. Levinas shows that ethics precedes knowledge and that we can only gain knowledge because our prior hospitality to the Other. The Other can never be known; his or her otherness originates in the Cartesian infinite relation that keeps interrupting the self’s egocentric activities. Bringing the other under our own categories and employing cultural categories to approach the other are in Levinas’ thinking seen as an, although inevitable, betrayal of the other. When we want to engender responsibility and openness toward the other, it is important to recognize that we are indebted to the self as interlocutor; it is through the intercultural conversation and the otherness of the other that we can explore new forms of knowledge.

For the purpose of this dissertation, I have concentrated on the relation between immanence, transcendence, language, and culture. Although Levinas is not a philosopher of culture, he has written two important essays that help us to understand why cultural formation and multiculturalism pose a problem for him. I have argued that despite Levinas’ Eurocentric disposition, his thinking is well suited to see comparative philosophy as intercultural dialogue. Levinas criticizes an immanent worldview and its central dimension of reducing that what is other

to the same and focuses on an ethical orientation that is not grounded in any assertion of commonality.

The self in Levinas' work is reconfigured as both a free and autonomous self that through inhabitation, possession and labour is able to secure its enjoyment of the world, as a self that is vulnerable to, or hospitable to welcoming the Other. The otherness of the Other originates in the Face of the Other whose Height is dependent upon the *illeity* as the trace of God. The Face of the Other is the only non-phenomena that is able to interrupt the self's egocentric usurpation of the world without destroying or limiting the self's freedom. The Face interrupts the self's egocentric spontaneity by calling this spontaneous activity question and transforming the self into a *being-for-the-Other*. Through the Cartesian relation to the Infinite, Levinas shows that the ethical relation as the move toward the Infinite, constitutes the self's activities. The self is thus first a *being-for-the-Other* and only after a *being-for-itself*.

Levinas argues that transcendence concretizes in the infinite giving to the Other, a giving of possessions and opening of my home to the Other and gives the immanent world the necessary surplus of the language of peace. This concretizes in language as the tension between the saying and the said which opens the self to the critical-transformational discourse of self-doubt. It is only in receiving this critical-transformational discourse of self-doubt that we receive in the transcendence of the Other that we can become open to the cultural other and learn from that other. While cultural diversity and multiculturalism are ontologically given, they will never be able to provide a genuine language of peace and can only articulate a "peace disguised as violence,"<sup>208</sup> as cultures are intimately tied to the logic of the same. Only with the notion of transcendence as ethical discourse, - as sense-, are we able to attune to the otherness of the Other in our intercultural interactions and can we judge the cultural other and other cultural traditions. The cultural other whose worldview is wholly immanent needs therefore to be translated to the Western Judeo-Greek tradition in order to gain access to this higher culture.

Levinas' affirmation of sacred history as the relation to infinity, God and the Holy, is seen as "the higher culture" and his statements that the "cultural other is "exotic" and "needs to be translated," are justifiably criticized as Eurocentric. In this chapter, I have related Levinas' Eurocentrism to his critique on immanence and his insistence on transcendence as the necessary surplus that can interrupt

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<sup>208</sup> Levinas, E. (1995). *Alterité et Transcendance*, Fata Morgana, 136-138.

the egocentric domain of self-justification and self-affirmation. Levinas' fundamental belief is that Greek philosophy and Jewish religion can save humanity from primitivism as the ethical relation is based on the inversion of the self's *conatus essendi*. For Levinas, the Greek as universalism and the Jewish notion of responsibility implicate all humanity.

Instead of dismissing Levinas' thinking as Eurocentric, I have posed the question of what it means for the Western tradition to be the privileged tradition. After all, comparative philosophy is a discipline of Western philosophy. I have turned to Levinas' mature notion of transcendence in which he relates the self's vulnerability to the Other to language. The encounter of the Other who summons me to responsibility is the birth of discourse as being answerable to the Other. The distinction between the *saying* and the *said* reveals that the otherness of the Other is constitutive for language. The comparative encounter is a personal responsiveness to the otherness of the Other; an infinite responsibility characterized by interruption, vocation, and hospitality.

In the end, I have taken up the question of what it means for Europe to be the privileged tradition. By relying on the work of Derrida and his thoughts on the duty of Europe, I have focused on hospitality as the infinite task to move beyond identity and to avoid essentialist generalizations. Derrida argues that philosophy needs to go beyond the language of identity and bear witness to the fact that philosophy is always already open to the wholly Other. The relation to the wholly Other gives us a fundamental reappraisal of the encounter with the Other in which the other is not an object of understanding, but the one who interrupts and challenges essentialist generalizations and identities. Europe as the site or place that has no common identity or a common language, poses itself as a universal exemplar of democracy and freedom. Derrida derives from the tension between particularity and universalism of the exemplar and as such has the duty to attempt to go beyond identity. Europe as exemplar, as the privileged tradition, has the infinite task to move beyond identity and is open to the infinite play of the constant becoming and destruction of perspectives, ideas, and identities.