

## *The Itinerary of Emmanuel Levinas' Thought*<sup>1</sup>

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Emmanuel Levinas' thought developed over a period of more than 60 years. We first need to inquire what constitutes the unity of his itinerary. If we take a retrospective look at this trajectory, it is tempting to say that Levinas is the philosopher of the Other and of ethics, the philosopher who never ceased to delve into and enable us to discover the meaning of the relationship toward the Other. This interpretation, however, has a major flaw: Levinas' pre-war texts did not ascribe particular importance to the relationship to the Other. Moreover, ethics only gradually became a major theme in his thought as of the 1950s.

### **The Humanity of Man: freedom, the face, responsibility**

Luckily, Levinas himself provides an explanation. In his youth, he encountered "the philosophical problem understood as the meaning of the human"<sup>2</sup> in the Russian classics and in the great philosophers of Western Europe. What characterizes the humanity of man? This is the question Levinas sought to answer. He constantly affirmed the exceptional, transcendent quality of the human phenomenon as opposed to the brutality and anonymity of Being. Explicating this quality constitutes the thread interweaving his philosophical inquiries. It is also what immediately

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<sup>1</sup> The topics presented here are discussed in more detail in my book *De la Bible au Talmud, suivi de l'itinéraire de pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 2008. See also my article entitled "Ethics and Politics in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas," trans. Esther Singer, in *Levinas in Jerusalem: Phenomenology, Ethics, Politics, Aesthetics*, Springer, 2009 pp. 59–74.

<sup>2</sup> *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985, p. 22.

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brought him close to Jewish thought in general and Talmudic thought in particular.

Schematically, we can define three successive stages in the development of Levinas' thought, characterized by the words freedom, face and responsibility. The first phase lasted until the outbreak of the Second World War. At this phase the humanity of man was defined by freedom. The second period started during World War II when Levinas was a prisoner of war in a camp in Germany.<sup>3</sup> It includes numerous works and culminates in 1961 with the publication of his major work *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>4</sup> The meaning of the humanity of man is now revealed in the face to face with the Other, the encounter with his face. The third stage starts in 1961 in which the key word becomes the responsibility toward the Other, which is defined as the ultimate secret of the human subject.

### Biographical Milestones

In 1923 Levinas went to Strasbourg to study philosophy under mentors he admired greatly: Blondel, Halbwachs, Pradines and Carteron.<sup>5</sup> Later on he would write "These were men!"<sup>6</sup> The philosophy of the time had a name—Bergson.<sup>7</sup> In 1926 he formed a friendship that would last a lifetime with a man who would become a fascinating writer, Maurice Blanchot.<sup>8</sup> Strikingly, each man was the other's only friend and they addressed each other in the familiar form. Levinas discovered the school of phenomenology when writing his dissertation on Husserl<sup>9</sup> and remained faithful to

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<sup>3</sup> "The Name of a Dog, or Natural rights," *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 151–154.

<sup>4</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1979). See also John Wild's commentary on the book "Speaking Philosophy," edited and annotated by Richard Sugarman, *Phenomenological Inquiry*, volume 24, October 2000; *Totality and Infinity at 50*, edited by Scott Davidson and Diane Perpich (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Blondel (1879–1939), physician and philosopher; Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), philosopher and sociologist; Maurice Pradines (1874–1958), psychologist and philosopher; Henri Carteron (1891–1929), philosopher, translated Aristotle's *Physics*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 25–26.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Bergson (1859–1941), one of the more influential philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003), a French writer, philosopher, and literary theorist.

<sup>9</sup> *Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. André Orianne, Northwestern University Press, 1995. Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) is a German philosopher

this intellectual method, to which he would progressively add his own personal touches. Husserl's thought stresses theoretical thinking, or more generally the postulate that the meaning of things is the one attributed to them by a free mind that confronts reality. Levinas never refuted the value of science or theory, but the acknowledgment of interpersonal relationships would lead him to assign them the prime role. It should be noted that it was Levinas' thesis, which he wrote at the age of 25, that first introduced Husserl's phenomenology to France.

### **1. The essence of man as freedom: Reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism.**

But history would soon intervene. And not just any history. In 1933, Hitler, Evil itself,<sup>10</sup> rose to power. As Levinas often pointed out, the Nazi cataclysm and its consequences were decisive for the orientation of his thought. In 1934 Levinas published an article of unprecedented prescience entitled "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism."<sup>11</sup> He examined the meaning of Hitlerism and showed that it was not an ordinary form of madness. Hitlerism was based on a guiding principle that challenged European civilization in its entirety as never before. What is European civilization based on? The idea of freedom to the fullest. Beyond merely political freedom, freedom is a concept impacting the fate of humanity as a whole, a metaphysical principle defining the human essence. It is freedom as regards the world, the incessant renewal of one's existence, freedom with respect to history. In absolute terms, says Levinas, "man has no history." Levinas then analyzes the key figures of freedom in European society in this framework.

### **The figures of freedom: Judaism, Christianity, the Enlightenment, Marxism**

Levinas identified Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, as the figure of freedom in Judaism. Its profound meaning is the mastery of time, the possibility of effacing the past through actions in the present. "The fait accompli, swept along by a fleeing present, forever evades man's control, but weighs heavily on his destiny."<sup>12</sup> "Time is clearly a condition of human

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who founded the school of phenomenology, a major trend in 20<sup>th</sup>-century philosophy.

<sup>10</sup> Or 'Elemental Evil,' the term used by Levinas.

<sup>11</sup> "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," trans. Sean Hand, *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 17, 1 (Autumn 1990), pp. 62–71.

<sup>12</sup> "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," p. 65.

existence but nothing is irreparable.” “A magnificent message,” says Levinas.

Christianity achieves a similar goal through an entirely different path, that of the Eucharist, which triumphs over sin and liberates man. But also, and probably for Levinas what was more important, is the equal dignity ascribed to all souls by Christianity, regardless of the individual material or social condition. This is a power given to the soul to free itself from what bound it.

The third figure of freedom is the liberalism of the Enlightenment, the sovereignty of Reason. By exercising reason, man dominates reality, physical matter and social processes. The French philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century played a major role. They gave us human rights, democracy and political freedom where the sovereign freedom of the free mind replaces the Christian figure of freedom through grace. “In a world of liberalism, man is not weighed down by History in choosing his destiny.”<sup>13</sup> Unlike many 20<sup>th</sup>-century thinkers, Levinas would always adhere to these ideas of the Enlightenment, although he would later change their meaning.

The last figure of freedom is Marxism. It might be claimed that Marxist materialism, by acknowledging material and social determinisms and in particular the class struggle, would conflict with the principle of liberalism. Levinas rejected this assumption. Being conscious of one’s social situation frees oneself from its fatalism. Marxism thus also integrates the quest for a liberated humanity.

European society, through these figures, thus resolutely maintains the idea of freedom: moral freedom, freedom through grace, the freedom of reason, and social freedom.

### **Hitlerism: the essence of man as “bondage”**

National Socialism shattered this cornerstone of Western humanism. Hitlerism defined spiritual life in terms of a mystique of the body. Biological destiny, the mysterious paths of blood, become the core of spiritual life. The essence of man is no longer freedom but rather his bondage to the obscure powers of the body. Racism derives very naturally from this dark notion, which Levinas would later regret having termed “philosophy.” In addition, no truth, not even Hitlerian truth, can renounce becoming universal, and since a racist universalism cannot be propagated in the realm of ideas, this can only be an expansion by force. Hitlerism thus necessarily leads to war, says Levinas, in what was rightly a kind of philosophical prophesy. Here is his conclusion:

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<sup>13</sup> “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism,” p. 66.

Perhaps we have succeeded in showing that racism is not just opposed to such and such particular point in Christian and liberal culture. It is not a particular dogma concerning democracy, parliamentary government, dictatorial regimes or religious politics that is in question. It is the very humanity of man.<sup>14</sup>

Thus for Levinas, in 1934, and up to the War, the essence of man, the humanity of man, is defined by freedom. These ideas of freedom, the transcendence of the subject, reason, the recognition of social issues would be preserved, but their meaning and their role would be altered. Returning in 1990 to the 1934 text, Levinas, without dismissing it, would note its limit by writing:

We must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject. Does the subject arrive at the human condition prior to assuming responsibility for the other man in the act of election that raises him up to his height?<sup>15</sup>

## **2. Ethics and the face of the Other: *Totality and Infinity***

The second stage in the evolution of Levinas' thought begins with World War II. This evolution, as manifested in the publication of numerous works, culminates in 1961 with a major work, *Totality and Infinity*, in which Levinas' thought is laid out systematically. I will go directly to this endpoint and omit the intervening phases over the twenty-year period leading up to it. In a nutshell, *Totality and Infinity* tells us the following: the happy life of the egotistical, isolated I is upended by the encounter with the Other, and this encounter forms the basis of ethics, or morality if you like, since these two terms are used interchangeably. The description of the modalities and consequences of this experience, this revelation of Alterity, is the driving force in Levinas' analyses. The key word is the notion of 'face' encountered in the 'face-to-face' encounter.

To describe this relationship in the Levinasian sense, we need to answer the following questions: What is the I (the self)? What is the Other? Where and how does this relationship take place? Finally, how should we understand the fact that this relationship is fully accomplished through moral obligation?

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<sup>14</sup> "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," p. 63.

### **The uniqueness and singularity of the self**

First of all, what does the self mean? [What is the 'I?'] Every member of the human species lives among his fellowmen, is part of the same history and the same natural world, the same totality of which he is clearly a constitutive part. The notions of genre, similarity, totality are categories that fit this description. But this is not enough to exhaust the meaning of existence. This is because I can turn inward on myself, my thoughts, my feelings, my happiness or my sadness, feel radically separate in my interiority from the totality to which I am assumed to be attached. Levinas pinpoints the ultimate meaning of this description. The self is even more unique, more separate in itself than the Mona Lisa, which can be related to a genre, the pictorial genre. The sense of self, or the "Ipseity" of the self, consists of remaining outside the distinction between the collective and the individual. The self in the Levinasian sense is absolutely unique or irreducibly singular.

### **The transcendence of the other**

Let us now look at the meaning of the other and his alterity for Levinas. The other, as well, but in another way, escapes the logic of genre. The other is distinguished in an irreducible way from all things in the world, which I encounter. I can obviously not take him for a thing subjected to my powers. But I also cannot even grasp him through a definition. If I characterize him by his history, his profession, or by some physical or even psychological feature, more generally, if I classify him by some attribute, this depiction of the Other causes me to lose the sense of his alterity.

Levinas goes even further. The other and the self do not derive from a common concept or genre that would forge our relationship, making us similar or different. I thus cannot even be satisfied with using expressions such as 'the other is my fellow human' or 'my alter-ego.' Any commonality of genre annuls alterity in the Levinasian sense.

### **The idea of infinity and the face to face**

Levinas discovers this formal structure in the relationship to the other. Simplifying somewhat, we can say that the relationship to the other is the relationship to the absolute other, it is a relationship to infinity. Furthermore, it takes place only in the face-to-face encounter. It cannot be apprehended from the outside. The face-to-face relationship is thus an ultimate situation.

In passing, a frequent misinterpretation consists of referring indiscriminately to Levinas and the notion of the Other in the context of relationships between cultures or between peoples, which are defined by a collective identity.<sup>16</sup>

### **The manifestation of the Other: 'Discourse'**

Let us now address the third question: Where and how, in what concrete situation, does this extraordinary relationship take place, or at least emerge, between the self and the other?

Levinas' answer is: in expression, speech, 'discourse.' Let us describe the meaning of this privileged situation, minutely depicted by Levinas in all its facets. Through speech, the Other manifests its self, directly, detached from the context; this is where the term 'face' appears in Levinas' writings, which is virtually synonymous with Other. Face signifies the opposite of a mask. It is not a face that can be captured in a photograph or in memory but rather a presence and a living expression. It can be speech, request, supplication, commandment, or teaching. The Other is present through his speech, he reformulates it, retracts it, completes it, changes it. This is a situation where the interlocutor is the source of his discourse, beyond any system, and where he is not on the same level as the self. Naturally, speech can also be understood as the reciprocity of dialogue, intimacy, or the sharing of information. But for Levinas this is not the profound essence of language. Its true essence is produced in a situation where the Other is encountered as the absolute other, where the Other is not 'Thou' ('Tu') but 'You' ('Vous').<sup>17</sup>

### **The relationship to the other, source of ethics**

Finally, how should the tight correlation constantly reaffirmed by Levinas between ethics and the relationship to the Other be understood? Or more precisely, how should we understand that the relationship to the Other is at the same time the origin of ethics, that it shapes its structure and defines its content?

We can get a better grasp of this by comparing ethics, morality in the Levinasian sense, and the classical notion of morality.

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<sup>16</sup> See also Oona Eisenstadt and Claire Katz, "The Faceless Palestinian: A History of an Error," *Telos*, 174 (Spring 2016), pp. 9–32 <<https://jewish-philosophyplace.files.wordpress.com/2016/03/faceless-palestinian1.pdf>>.

<sup>17</sup> As found in the title of the book by Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. Buber (1878–1965) was a philosopher, theologian, Zionist thinker and leader. The core of his philosophy is the primacy of the I-Thou relationship.

### **Classic Morality, Self-Actualization**

Morality, in its classic definition, identifies with a quest for perfection that can take multiple forms. Achieving the ‘golden mean’ in one’s behavior, controlling one’s impulses, obedience to a law dictated by one’s own mind, achieving a contemplative life, or alternatively obeying the imperative for action and its fulfillment, are a few of these models. What they have in common is that the subject himself is the driving force. I need to aim for a type of perfection and thus fulfill my true nature. Even existentialist morality, which dismisses the notion of human nature, maintains the need for authenticity and the actualization of the self by the self.

### **The encounter of the other’s face as the source of ethics: challenges and obligations**

Levinas demarcates himself from these schemes. The ethical impulse no longer comes from the self. It comes from the relationship to the Other. On what level does this relationship to the Other take place, where one is stripped naked of all conceptual determination? This relationship cannot be part of the realm of knowledge, since knowledge always means delimitation and comprehension through the intermediary of concepts. If the Other is respected as infinite, he is beyond all my powers. Hence when facing the other man, freedom can no longer be defined within the framework of power and powerlessness, but rather that of justice and injustice. The acceptance of the other as infinite, which by so doing challenges my freedom, is the start of an ethical conscience.

It is the revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls into question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being.<sup>18</sup>

But we need to go even further. This initial questioning turns positively into obligations. In other words, the infinity encountered in the face of the Other transforms into an infinite source of moral obligations. This idea can be clarified by showing that the abstract and formal notions that describe the alterity of the other man have a concrete meaning. For instance, the transcendence of the other can be deformed in the real world by its instantiation—the situation of the stranger in his poverty and material deprivation. By contrast, the self, in the solidity of its identity, is the comfortably installed native. Likewise, the Other is stripped of con-

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<sup>18</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 84.



ceptual determinations and this logical nakedness is concretized in the nakedness of the exposed face, itself extended by that of a body exposed to the cold.

It thus comes as no surprise that the Jewish dimension of Levinas's thought integrates naturally into the framework of his most abstract philosophical considerations. He is at one with the relentless call of the prophets of Israel reiterated by the exigencies of the Sages of the Talmud:

The Other qua Other... has the face of the poor, of the stranger, of the widow, of the orphan, and, at the same time, the face of the master called to invest and justify my freedom.<sup>19</sup>

The ethical duty elicited by the infinity encountered in the face of the Other is not confined to the ethereal realm of spiritual relations.

To leave men without food is a fault that no circumstance attenuates; the distinction between the voluntary and the involuntary does not apply here, says Rabbi Yochanan.<sup>20</sup>

Before the hunger of men, responsibility is measured only 'objectively'; it is irrecusable.<sup>21</sup>

This, briefly, is a panorama of Levinas' ethical philosophy at the time of *Totality and Infinity*. This general scheme was the point of departure of numerous analyses. Levinas reconsidered the meaning of home, property, sexuality, and the family in this light, to mention only a few. Similarly, he contrasted his philosophy with that of other philosophers either to distance himself radically from them as in the case of Hegel and Heidegger, or to indicate his partial agreement, such as with Buber and Gabriel Marcel.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, his interpretation of Judaism and the place of the Jewish people in history are tightly correlated with this perspective, as is the acknowledgment of the value of Christianity and Islam although he polemicalized at times virulently with the former. All this appears in texts that are admirably crafted where each sentence, each detail, abounds with meaning.

### **3. Subjectivity and Responsibility for the Other: *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*<sup>23</sup>**

The third stage of his itinerary began very shortly after the publication of *Totality and Infinity* and led to the publication in 1974 of a work entitled

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<sup>19</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 251.

<sup>20</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 201 note 1: Tractate Sanhedrin 104b.

<sup>21</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 201.

<sup>22</sup> Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973): French Christian existentialist philosopher.

<sup>23</sup> Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. In fact, the impetus for this new phase can already be found at the end of *Totality and Infinity*. This new perspective can be described in the following way. In *Totality and Infinity*, we saw that the point of departure was the I [the self] that is separated from everything, and turned inward in its egotism which is challenged by the revelation of the face of the Other. By contrast, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas posits that the ultimate secret of subjectivity is primarily ethical. The innermost structure of the human subject is responsibility towards the Other. Responsibility constitutes the self from the start, prior to any encounter. Ethics as responsibility for the Other does not follow a preexisting existential basis. It is the ultimate step in our quest for what constitutes the humanity of man.

This shift in perspective paved the way to a series of innovative, radical and initially disconcerting analyses, where Levinas practically defined a new language. I will examine only three of these key notions: responsibility, uniqueness and the singularity of the self, and finally, the ‘third party.’

### **Responsibility toward the Other**

Let us begin with responsibility. The issue is to describe the human subject without using the verb ‘to be’ in the sense of an existence underpinning such and such an attribute. If I say for example that man is a thinking being, this is understood as ‘having an existence prior to this existence’ and on this basis endowed with the faculty of thought, a ‘thinking substance.’ For Levinas, the human self, as responsibility for the Other, plays an exceptional role. It transcends everything material or spiritual, any event, all theoretical or empirical knowledge, everything that can be thought, in short, everything that is. Hence the surprising phrase in the title “Otherwise than being.” Responsibility in the Levinasian sense must not be understood as an attribute, an inclination, a psychological trait or a specific behavior. It is not a way of behaving amongst others. It does not mean taking on or assuming some type of responsibility, which would be the choice of a way of being. Responsibility for the other precedes any involvement. In Levinas’ terms, it is ‘a past which was never present.’<sup>24</sup> As a human subject, I do not ‘have’ responsibility, I ‘am’ this responsibility. Responsibility toward the Other is the first, fundamental structure. It is the meaning of the self itself, the meaning of the human subject.

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<sup>24</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, p. 24.

### **Levinas and Spinoza**

We can better account for this unfamiliar notion of 'otherwise than being' by examining an idea put forward by Spinoza. For any being, the key issue is what Spinoza calls the *conatus essendi*, in other words, the 'perseverance in being.' Any living thing strives to persevere in its being, and even increase its power of being. This applies to human beings but also to all other living things. Being signifies persevering in one's being. Levinas' position differs. As responsibility toward the Other, the human subject is turned toward the exterior and is freed of concerns for the self. He is the exception to the general law of conatus.

### **The dimensions of responsibility**

There are numerous dimensions of responsibility toward the Other and these can take extreme forms. It can first of all be responsibility for the life, the misfortunes and the oppression to which the Other is subjected. But it can also be the responsibility for the sins of the Other, as though I were responsible instead of him, like a captive, as though I were substituted for him. In the extreme case, but here Levinas is careful to qualify his affirmation, I can even be responsible for the pain and the evil caused to me by the Other.

It is clear that this radical perspective is a philosophical construction whose ties to empirical reality and translation into practice are anything but straightforward. As early as in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas warned the reader that his analyses did not describe a concrete person as he lives in society and appears to us in most cases. But the fact that an ultimate philosophical notion does not immediately emerge in daily life should not astonish us any more than the fact that hydrogen and oxygen are invisible but yield the visible properties of water, such as quenching our thirst. For Levinas, the fact that in its ultimate structure the subject is responsible towards the Other is a precondition for the possibility for there to be goodness, solidarity and fraternity. Levinas was criticized for having professed a utopia. He responded that if there is a utopia, this utopia was not absent from reality.

### **A new meaning of the uniqueness of the self**

What can now be said about the uniqueness and the singularity of the self? In *Totality and Infinity*, this uniqueness is associated with the possibility of turning inward on the self. It might be assumed that given the reversal of perseverance in being to the for-the-Other, the self, now without its own

for-oneself ('quant-à-soi'),<sup>25</sup> would disappear or would be only one specific element defined by its place in the web of totality. Nothing would be further from the truth. In fact, the singularity of the self takes on a new meaning. In its responsibility towards the Other, the self is irreplaceable. This uniqueness, this 'election,' is an integral part of the meaning of responsibility as the ultimate structure of the self.

### **The 'third party,' justice and liberal democracy**

We need to complete this picture with an essential component. The Other is not alone. Thus the third party and all the others enter center stage. At the same time as I am responsible towards the Other, I am responsible for the third party, which alters the relationship I have with the Other. And above all, on the other hand, the Other and the third party are themselves related and I cannot be held entirely responsible for that relationship. The situation becomes complex and a new requirement is added—that of justice. Pure ethics no longer suffices. Ethics itself now obliges us to place the Other and the third party on an equal footing: we need to think, calculate, compare and judge. The universal makes its appearance. To pure goodness, we need to add reason, knowledge, objective science and finally a State and political institutions. "What is Europe? It is the Bible and the Greeks,"<sup>26</sup> says Levinas.

As of this juncture, Levinas' thought took on a political dimension. This State and these institutions can, in their rationality and their universality, become an end in themselves and disregard the uniqueness of each human subject. Justice must be constantly ameliorated and made less severe. In short, justice, severity stemming from an initial goodness, must be returned to its source and in turn be moderated by ultimate goodness. This is why Levinas ascribed a major role to a liberal and democratic State—not as a government of the people or for reasons of economic efficiency but because a democratic state has internal mechanisms of reform and oversight over its own legislation. In contrast to Hobbes for whom the role of the State was solely to achieve an end to violence where "homo homini lupus est"—"A man is a wolf to another man." Levinas writes:

This is perhaps the very excellence of democracy, whose fundamental liberalism corresponds to the ceaseless deep remorse of justice.

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<sup>25</sup> French expression that Levinas defines as the egotistical sense of existence of the Self (or the 'I').

<sup>26</sup> "The Bible and the Greeks," *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith, The Athlone Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, pp. 133–136.

Legislation always unfinished, always resumed, a legislation opened to the better... But when it forgets that, it risks sinking into a totalitarian and Stalinist regime...<sup>27</sup>

#### **4. Ethics, Religion and Zionism: Difficult Freedom, Talmudic Readings<sup>28</sup>**

In closing, how does Levinas' philosophical reflection intersect with religion in general, his attachment to Jewish tradition and his thinking of Zionism?<sup>29</sup>

##### **Ethics, religion and the Talmud**

First of all, Levinas examines theological statements as a philosopher, like Maimonides whom he admired greatly. There are no dogmatic theological analyses in Levinas' works. Was Levinas a believer or a non-believer? This is an absurd question to which he responded with scathing mockery:

We are far from so-called Spinozists for whom the believer and the non-believer alternative is as simple as pharmacist– non-pharmacist.<sup>30</sup>

The primacy ascribed to ethics in the relationship towards the Other in Levinasian philosophy can be found in his approach to religion. He was careful to clearly state his rejection of any form of unity with God, contemplation, participation, or direct relationship with the divine being. Thus theological language cannot ever be taken literally. He writes:

Everything which cannot be reduced to an inter-human relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion.<sup>31</sup>

Our knowledge of God which is expressed, according to Maimonides in the form of negative attributes, takes on positive meaning through the moral “God is merciful,” which implies to “Be merciful like him”... To

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<sup>27</sup> *Entre nous. On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 230.

<sup>28</sup> *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.

<sup>29</sup> On Levinas' relationship to Judaism before the War, see his article “The Meaning of Religious Practice,” introduction and translation by Peter Atterton, Matthew Calarco and Joëlle Hansel, *Modern Judaism* 25, 3 (2005), pp. 285–289. Reprinted in *Levinas Studies*, Duquesne University Press, 5, 2010. See also Joëlle Hansel, “Levinas's Early Jewish Writings: Beyond Phenomenology,” in *Levinas Studies*, 5, Duquesne University Press, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> *Difficult Freedom*, p. 117.

<sup>31</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 79.

know God is to know what should be done. The pious man is the just man.<sup>32</sup>

The ethical order does not prepare us for the Divinity; it is the very accession to Divinity. All the rest is a dream.<sup>33</sup>

Levinas' postwar encounter with a remarkable teacher, Mr. Chouchani, prompted him to ascribe to the Talmud—of which he had known little—a key role in a true understanding of the Bible. Here again this understanding is inseparable from the ethics that permeates Jewish law in its entirety developed in the Talmud. This approach is presented excellently in the numerous essays published in *Difficult Freedom* as well as the series of 'Talmudic readings' he delivered at colloquia addressing French-speaking Jewish intellectuals.

### **Levinas and Zionism**

Before the war, like most Jewish intellectuals of that time, Levinas had no affinity with Zionism, which he saw purely as a national movement. But as of the Liberation he approved the aspiration for a return to Zion. In 1951 he published an astonishing text entitled "The State of Israel and the Religion of Israel." This text not only contradicted his position before the War but was a forerunner to what would be formulated 20 years later in his philosophical writings. The founding of the State of Israel has a meaning that goes beyond the political act. It does not only involve the creation of a safe haven for the Jewish people. The ultimate reason for the State is to implement the social laws of Judaism:

The thing that is special about the State of Israel is not that it fulfils an ancient promise, or heralds a new age of material security (one that is unfortunately problematic), but that it finally offers the opportunity to carry out the social law of Judaism... The subordination of the State to its social promises articulates the religious significance of the resurrection of Israel as, in ancient times, the execution of justice justified in one's presence in the land.

It is in this way that the political event is already outstripped. And, ultimately, it is in this way that we can distinguish those Jews who are religious from those who are not. The contrast is between those who seek to have a State in order to have justice and those who seek justice in order to endure the survival of the State... Justice as the *raison d'être* of the State: that is religion.<sup>34</sup> ❧

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<sup>32</sup> *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>33</sup> *Difficult Freedom*, p. 102.

<sup>34</sup> *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 218-219.