

Levinas' God: Ethical Horizon, Political Necessity

Joël Madore

Preview

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The idea of God in Levinas is resonant of the First Testament: a voice from higher above that clamors: *Thou shall not kill*; the unsettling call of the Infinite that commands us to leave the familiar towards the unknown, like “Abraham’s journey who left alone, towards all—from particularity to universality—under the threat of nights and the hope of days, in the words of Maurice Blanchot. Hard, long path of justice.”¹ God in Levinas thus echoes the Kantian practical postulates, framing the ethical injunction as both divine and unquestionable, and will constitute his answer to the imperative of Auschwitz. Though necessary, the law of the State is insufficient to resist the violence of tyranny. Ultimately, the sanction against murder is enforced by God, the Invisible made visible through the face of the Other. As such, justice for Levinas consists not only in serving the latter, but to do so unconditionally because he opens up to the divine. Ethics is thus articulated as the movement towards an Other who reveals an absolute difference alone capable of interrupting the homogenizing impulses of politics.

This emphatic recourse to God appears somewhat untimely, at least at first sight. Many have been the thinkers who have defined modern society along the lines of secularization, that is, as severed from reference to divine transcendence. This is not to say that the Western world has entirely evacuated manifestations of the religious, but that it is now self-legislated: the ground of moral and political authority no longer requires an appeal to the “outside” for validation. From the regime of heteronomy, we have moved to the regime of autonomy,² and so Levinas’ appeal to the Infinite may seem outdated, if not altogether inapplicable. Of course, one might point out here that this was his intention all along, i.e., to condemn this hubristic dismissal of exteriority as the philosophical cause of the 20th-century death camps. Yet Levinas himself *also* makes the case for emancipation, identifying “atheism,” or an existence separated

¹ Maurice Blanchot, in *Difficile justice: dans la trace d’Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998), 12. My translation.

² See Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 131-132.

from the divine, as the condition of ethics. If there is a God, he argues, then the human being exists outside of him, indeed as *utterly* separated from him.

It seems from what precedes that we are faced with a contradiction. *Either* there is a complete separation between the created and the Creator, in which case it is difficult to see how exactly God—as invisible, unspeakable and inaccessible—can continue to play any role in human affairs, be it as the horizon that steers us away from the imperialism of the Same, towards unconditional dedication to the Other. If ethics does involve an infinite distance between the self and the Other who reveals God, then how is any relation possible in the first place? *Or* there is a rapport between the one and the other, but with one term so commanding and overwhelming, it absorbs the other. If the human being is indeed borne out of God to whom he owes everything—including his own life— then how could he ever be understood as existing separately? In short, what exactly is the nature of the relation between the self and the Other, or the created and the Creator, in Emmanuel Levinas? What rapport can maintain the ascendance of the one over the other all the while keeping them separate? This paper would like to suggest that the very idea of God itself contains the answer to this query. Again drawing from the First Testament, Levinas reminds us that if God dominates the human being, both exist independently. This relation of the non-relation, as he says, may be understood by (I) fleshing out what he understands by the metaphysical Desire and (II) by examining how freedom emerges from absolute obligation. Thirdly, we will (III) examine how this relation mirrors the rapport between ethics and politics, the first subordinating the second whilst preserving its independence.

The Metaphysical Desire

Levinas' work sets out on an audacious effort to break with the tradition of Western philosophy he considers responsible for the violence that scarred the past century: against its relentless attempt to systemize the particular into a homogenous universal, he proposes the Hebraic alternative of a difference so great it cannot be absorbed. In other words, political tyranny is itself rooted in an ontological totalitarianism only a metaphysical account of alterity can resist. If the Same is that which flattens out differences and reduces plurality to an ordered and representable entity (such as “concept” or “citizen”), then only an infinite exteriority can interrupt this inexorable movement; the *absolute* Other³ alone, who can be neither represented nor comprehended,⁴ can fissure Europe's monolithic system of thought.

How are we to understand, then, the rapport between the two terms? What to make of the conjunction in the title: Totality *and* Infinity? It cannot indicate a relation, at least not in a conventional sense, for the distance between

³ “Other” is often, though not always, capitalized in Levinas' work. I have preferred the capitalized form unless the translation writes it differently (namely, to render “autrui”).

⁴ From the Latin *com-prehendere*, that is, “to take with.” To comprehend is to assimilate knowledge, to claim that nothing eludes us, which is exactly what the Other precludes.

them is incommensurable. They cannot be merely opposed either, for “if the same would establish its identity by simple opposition to the other, it would already be a part of a totality encompassing the same and the other.”⁵ The Same—or the ego, the self, the subject—exists alongside the irruption of the Other; only because there is already an identity can there be difference. To “listen to what comes from the outside,”⁶ to hear the voice of the Other and account for his presence, there must be a self,⁷ an egoistic subject capable of witnessing his revelation and, subsequently, of serving him. Consequently, if the Infinite towers before the self and commands him absolutely, this does not entail that the latter disappears before the former. It does, however, imply that any relation between them must be understood as a *separation*. “The idea of Infinity implies the separation of the same with regard to the other, but this separation cannot rest on an opposition to the other which would be purely anti-theoretical. . . . An absolute

transcendence has to be produced as non-integrable.”⁸ Such a rapport is mirrored in the paradox of creation within the specific context of monotheism, whereby “the separated and created being is not simply issued forth from the father, but is absolutely other than him.”⁹ As suggests Petrosino, the monotheistic account of creation, contrary to the Greek demiurgic interpretation, poses the created existence as being outside the system, an exteriority independent of any category. It is even separated from the Infinite, not in the sense of a mere negation, but as a self-limitation by the Creator himself so that the other can appear, that is, *alterity*.¹⁰

The above might leave the reader somewhat puzzled. . . . There can be no relation between the self and the Other—not even one of opposition—as they exist independently. Yet ethics demands that the former serves the latter. Surely this indicates some sort of rapport between the two. Levinas, in trying to define it, alludes to a rather cryptic “relation of the non-relation,” whereby the Infinite constantly eludes the grasp of the ego, in an almost dialectical fashion. Still, we are left wondering what connects the ego to the Infinite when the distance between them is incommensurable. Perhaps the notion of “metaphysical Desire” can shed some light on this difficult moment in Levinasian philosophy. It initially supposes a distinction between the formal alterity of the world and the

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An essay on exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 38; *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1987), 27. Henceforth, the English pagination will be given followed by the corresponding French pagination.

⁶ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 29; *Difficile liberté: essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), 50.

⁷ “L’altérité, l’hétérogénéité radicale de l’Autre, n’est possible que si l’Autre est autre par rapport à un terme dont l’essence est de demeurer au point de départ, de servir d’entrée dans la relation, d’être le Même non pas relativement, mais absolument. *Un terme ne peut demeurer absolument au point de départ de la relation que comme Moi.*” Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 36/25.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53/45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 63/58.

¹⁰ Silvano Petrosino, “D’un livre à l’autre. Totalité et Infini—Autrement qu’être,” in Jacques Rolland et al., eds., *Les Cahiers de la nuit surveillée* (Paris: Verdier, 1984), 207.

inalienable difference of the Other. Everyday existence is played out on the mode of appropriation, whereby the ego seizes the objects that surround him in order to satisfy his needs. This represents a necessary and selfish movement whereby difference is absorbed within one's identity of thinker or of owner: *I* make mine what is other. Foreign if not hostile, this *élémental* gradually becomes familiar to the self who tames it.

However, the hand—and eventually the gaze—which had hitherto seized the world to appropriate it, is suddenly faced with a difference that upsets this process of domestication. The face of the Other reveals an Infinite alterity that cannot be objectified or reduced to a means of satisfaction, lest its very own essence be betrayed. It simultaneously triggers in the self a desire that is incomparable to the fleeting needs he looked to satiate in the *élémental*, i.e., a *metaphysical* Desire. Perfectly disinterested, the latter does not invite the satisfaction of pleasure, it commands absolutely; it turns the self towards an alterity that could never complete it. “The movement of Desire can only exist as a paradox, as renouncing the desired,” rightly suggests Derrida.¹¹ The itinerary of the metaphysical Desire thus follows the path of Abraham, not that of Ulysses; it leaves the familiar for the unknown, *exiled*, and guided only by the trace of the Infinite.¹²

Hence, metaphysical Desire is what opens up the “very dimension of height,” turning the ego from the needs that paced his everyday, rooted existence towards the horizon of the Infinite. It does not destroy the relation to the Other, but speaks of a remoteness, indeed of an asymmetry, between him and the self, and it is precisely this ascendance that unconditionally binds the latter to his responsibility. In an age where the slightest mention of hierarchy is enough to disqualify the most celebrated of thinkers, Levinas boldly insists that ethics is not the space of equality. On the contrary, it is obligation towards a being that maintains its exteriority, towards the idea of an Infinite that continuously exceeds representation and to whom I owe everything, even my life: “to die for the invisible,” warns Levinas, “this is metaphysics.”¹³ As such, obligation to the Other is what leads to the Infinite; it is “the very accession to the Divinity. All the rest is dream (*chimère*).”¹⁴

To be clear, Levinas maintains that the ethical movement, outside knowledge and pointing to the ineffable, is a *religious* relation. This is not so much because it refers to an abstract term; the space of the metaphysical Desire is “neither supra-terrestrial nor imaginary, but on the contrary the space supremely concrete of the face-to-face where the ‘I’ is de-posed, and the Other im-posed in

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1967), 138. My translation.

¹² Miguel Abensour's analysis of this exile is enlightening: “Ce retournement de l'utopie, cette dénucléation du sujet, ce retournement de l'égoïsme, cette déneutralisation nous reconduisent à son retour vers l'autre homme, hors de tout enracinement, hors de toute domiciliation, signifiante sans contexte, en dehors des limites de l'être et du non-être.” See Miguel Abensour, “Penser l'utopie autrement,” in *Cahier de l'Herne*, N°60, dirigé par Catherine Chalier et Miguel Abensour (Paris: Éditions de L'Herne, 1991), 598.

¹³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 35/23.

¹⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 102/147.

a luminous, inalterable alterity!”¹⁵ If it is religious, it is rather because “the uprightness of the face-to-face,” or justice, “is necessary in order that the breakthrough that leads to God be produced.”¹⁶ The metaphysical Desire is triggered by the revelation of the face, a “spiritual optics” that manifests the greatness of God and, simultaneously, a God accessible in justice.¹⁷ This is why the relation between the created and the Creator coincides with the relation between the self and the Other: in both cases, only justice, that is to say the gift (*le don*) or goodness (*bonté*) can answer the moral call summoned by the face. If there is a difference between God and the Other, it is not to be found in their authority—both command from a position of transcendence—but in the fact that the Other is the “visible invisible” to whom we give everything. This mark of transcendence experienced as an infinite command is none other than ethics as religion. “Moses and the prophets preoccupied themselves not with the immortality of the soul but with the poor, the widow and the orphan.”¹⁸ It is therefore justice towards one’s neighbor that brings us closer to God. This proximity through obligation “is as intimate as prayer and liturgy which, without justice, are nothing.... The pious man is the just man.”¹⁹

Freedom as Commandment

The relation between the subject and the Infinite is beginning to take flesh. The Other irresistibly draws the self towards him whilst continuing to elude his grasp, almost like a constantly renewed invitation. Consequently, there is a moral commitment that binds them together, but in a rapport that is never consummate, as the two terms continue to exist separately. In other words, the self exists *alone*, much in the same way the created is removed from its Creator. This parallel is crucial: atheism is the mark of existence, claims Levinas, not inasmuch as God does not exist, but because the human being exists outside of him. “One can call atheism, he declares, this separation so complete that the separated being maintains itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated—eventually capable of adhering to it by belief.”²⁰ In terms highly reminiscent of the most forceful secularist theories that make the case for a disenchanted world, i.e., a universe governed by human initiative rather than invisible, exterior forces, Levinas states:

¹⁵ François Poirier, *Emmanuel Levinas: Essais et entretiens* (Paris: Babel, 1996), 27. Italics are in the text.

¹⁶ Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 78/77. I have replaced “breach” with “breakthrough” in translating the word “trouée.” Breach, in effect, is equally used by Lingis’ translation to render “rupture,” whereas “trouée” does evoke a sort of “percée” or “that which opens to.”

¹⁷ Ibid, 77/76.

¹⁸ Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 20/36. The translation actually reads “immortality” and not “immortality.”

¹⁹ Ibid, 20/34.

²⁰ Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 58/52.

When I maintain an ethical relation I refuse to recognize the role I would play in a drama of which I would not be the author or whose outcome another would know before me; I refuse to figure in a drama of salvation or of damnation that would be enacted in spite of me and that would make game of me. This is not equivalent to diabolical pride, for it does not exclude obedience. But obedience precisely is to be distinguished from an involuntary participation in mysterious designs in which one figures or which one prefigures.²¹

Atheism, then, marks the solitude of the subject, alone capable of upholding his obligation towards the Other. Granted, the face is precisely what reveals the presence of the divine, but as a reminder that the command to obey one's neighbor is absolute, as the trace of the Infinite, not as a saving grace that would deflect one's moral obligation. "But when he knows that he is not only worse than all those in the world, but is also guilty before all people, on behalf of all and for all, for all human sins, the world's and each person's, only then will the goal of our unity be achieved," repeats Levinas, quoting Zosima from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. Atheism does not toll the death of God, it signals the birth of ethics; it announces the metaphysical Desire as an unconditional, all-consuming obligation towards my brother I alone can bear.

It should be clear at this point that the Levinasian conception of the Infinite is not to be conflated with Parmenides' view of Being as a continuous, indivisible "One." In many ways, however, the central difference between both accounts is *ethical*. Granted, being is a part of Being, and the created an object of Creation. Even the Scriptures seem to suggest that an Infinite author comes with the weight of an infinite debt: the laws structuring the community, freedom from the oppressor, shelter and a promised land, daily Manna, etc., all come from God to whom we owe everything. It is difficult to see how one can exist independently from him in this context. Yet it is precisely the call of God—which summons Abraham out of the familiar and compels Moses to free his people—that tears us from anonymity. Within everyday selfish existence, there is no freedom, only an ego who goes about his routine, looking to satisfy his natural needs in an almost automated manner. It is only following the revelation of the face that the self begins to doubt. Suddenly, he is confronted with a presence that commands obedience, and it is this epiphany that triggers freedom: though the 'I' cannot deny that he has been summoned to serve the Other, he can indeed refuse to bear his moral duty. Freedom is first and foremost an *answer* to the Other who calls me into question, who interrupts my self-centered existence and demands that I respond to his plea.

This is why the command of the Other cannot be confused with the order of the tyrant. A slave's obedience is blind; not a response to a question, but compliance to a diktat. There is no freedom here, precisely because there is no resistance possible: "To have a servile soul is to be incapable of being jarred

²¹ Ibid, 79/78.

(*heurté*), incapable of being ordered. The love for the master fills the soul to such an extent that the soul no longer takes its distances. Fear fills the soul to such an extent that one no longer sees it, but sees from its perspective.”²² If tyranny is so difficult to resist, it is because its very principle consists in erasing difference, i.e., bringing the slave to internalize the order of the tyrant so perfectly, he conflates it with his own will. As such, tyranny not only precludes alterity, it does so by convincing the slave of its independence, almost as if convincing the Same of its alterity. The “supreme violence” of tyranny is found in this “supreme gentleness”²³ of seducing the slave into thinking he speaks his own mind, when he is in fact merely echoing his master’s voice. The command of the Other, however, expects an answer: he beckons the self to obey him, who in turn can very well ignore the call. The tyrant is convincing because his decree carries the force of violence, be it under the surreptitious cloak of seduction; the Other’s command draws its authority from its vulnerability, from the moment the self realizes that he could indeed deny his difference, though only at the expense of his very existence. “The negation of the face is thus impossible unless it is total, says Pierre Hayat, introducing *Freedom and Command*. Hence the order not to kill which is heard from the face, but also the temptation of total negation—murder.”²⁴

Contrary to the tyrant, the command of the Other sets me on the emancipating path of justice; the face commands obedience, but in doing so it sets my freedom in motion. Its imperative is indeed absolute, but it is only from this unquestionable authority that the ego has an actual choice, that of leaving his selfish life and serving the Other, or refusing his responsibility. Kant already reminded us that autonomy is not absence of constraint, but the act of becoming the author of one’s constraint. Levinas goes a step further: freedom is not a soliloquy, but a dialogue with an interlocutor whom, from his height, evokes my absolute obligation. “Creation leaves to the creature a *trace* of dependence, but it is an unparalleled dependence: the dependent being draws from this exceptional dependence, from this relationship, its very independence, its exteriority to the system.”²⁵ It is worth insisting on the word ‘trace’ here, etymologically related to the Latin *trahere* meaning both ‘to drag’ and ‘to attract.’ The call of the face carries this ambiguity of the voluntary and the constrained, of the command and the invitation. If the reader—or Levinas—can forgive a reference to the Gospel, it is not without reminding the order of Christ to his apostles: “Come, follow me,”²⁶ he summons, on an itinerary we know also leads to absolute commitment to the Other at the sacrifice of one’s life.

²² Emmanuel Levinas, *Liberté et commandement*, avec une préface de Pierre Hayat, (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1994); “Freedom and Commandment,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 16/37-8. It is strange that “jarred” should be used to translate “heurté,” which means to hit or be hit, almost as if being struck.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Pierre Hayat, “Préface,” in Emmanuel Lévinas, *Liberté et commandement*, 14-15.

²⁵ Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 104/108. My italics.

²⁶ Matthew, 4:19.

It is worth noting that this relation of the non-relation finds another explanation in Levinas with his concept of fecundity. Just like the created is issued forth from the Creator yet remains other than him, so too the son is engendered by the father yet exists separately. Filiation, however, allows Levinas to articulate the temporality of infinite responsibility. The child represents for the father the possibility of extending his ethical commitment beyond his death. The son continues to serve the Other by relaying this obligation to his son. The father recognizes himself in his son when the latter takes over his responsibility to the Other. As such, the meaning of the son and of progeny resides in the inexhaustible renewal of responsibility. The relation to a future—an *à-venir*—as beyond immanence, beyond the present, this is the essence of fecundity. Time, in the full sense of the word, is paternity for Levinas.²⁷ It allows the subject to perpetuate obligation—a goodness that engenders goodness, a Desire that engenders Desire.²⁸

From Ethics to Politics

The relation of separation between the created and the Creator clarifies Levinas' proposition that politics is simultaneously issued from ethics yet autonomous. Politics, undoubtedly, is borne out of ethics. The movement that brings the self to serve the Other is a relation of transcendence, but it is not an exclusive one. Through his eyes, the ego sees a *third* to whom I also owe an absolute obligation. His irruption thus coincides with the emergence of an inevitable—and insoluble—dilemma: if I am asked to give everything to the Other, what is left for the third? In other words, infinite justice entails presenting oneself before the others empty-handed. With the appearance of the third, the subject is suddenly confronted with a plurality of demands each requesting infinite responsibility, thus leaving him with the task of comparing that which cannot be compared. How can he serve the Other without neglecting the others?

Politics in Levinas is precisely this space of questioning where the double commitment towards the Infinite and the third is posed. “What ought I to do? What have they already done, one to the other? Which comes before in my responsibility? What are they exactly, the Other and the third, one towards the other? Birth of the question,” says Levinas.²⁹ This questioning already recognizes that the ethical rapport is not bilateral, so to speak; it is not an amorous relation between infatuated partners since it opens up to the community: the Other's gaze reveals both God *and* the others. In fact, “the intersubjective rapport of love is

²⁷ Wolfgang Krewani, “Le temps comme transcendance vers l'autre. La notion du temps dans la philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas,” *Archives de philosophie* 44 (1981): 529-60, 557.

²⁸ “Par-delà le sacrifice qui impose un don, le don du pouvoir du don, la conception de l'enfant.” Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 269/302.

²⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, “Paix et proximité” in Jacques Rolland, et.al, eds., *Les cahiers de la nuit surveillée* (Paris: Verdier, 1984), 345.

not the beginning, but the negation of society.”³⁰ Through the eyes of the Other, the self sees humanity altogether ordering him to assume his responsibility.

Once more we are faced with a conundrum regarding the nature of the relation, this time between ethics and politics. If “the presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of the whole of humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding,”³¹ does this not reduce politics to a mere category of ethics? In other words, if ethics engenders politics, can the latter continue to be understood as an independent space? How is politics separate if it is *derived* from ethics, if “every social relation leads back to the presentation of the other to the same without the intermediary of any image or sign, solely by the expression of the face?”³² As suggested above, their relation is framed by the same pillars that structure the rapport between the self and the Other: separation, asymmetry, and interruption. To put it briefly, politics exists independently, yet continues to see its imperialistic logic relentlessly called into question by the primacy of ethics. Let us examine this more carefully.

Politics, once again, is charged with the immediate and unavoidable assignment of calculating the incalculable. In answer to this impossible though necessary task, individuals within society accept to confer to an institution the duty of redistributing infinite justice into equitable shares. The State, with its cold, mathematical *raison d'État*, thus emerges as a response to the problem posed by the appearance of the third. “In the measure that the face of the Other relates us with the third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of the We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality.”³³ Blindfolded, with a balance in one hand and a sword in the other, State justice will divide absolute obligation formally and objectively. In addition, Levinas warns us that we are incapable of fighting by ourselves the violence of tyranny. Our freedom must be guaranteed by an institution capable of imposing a lasting order against individual passions and arbitrary brutality. “Freedom is not realized outside of social and political institutions, which open to it the access to fresh air necessary for its expansion, its respiration, and even, perhaps, its spontaneous generation.”³⁴ For these reasons, the State is indispensable and must rely on its neutrality, or its detachment, for its efficiency.

However, the very measures that we have adopted against the dangers of totalitarianism soon turn against us. The State cannot see the singularity of its subjects; indeed it *must not* by virtue of its mandate. Its impersonal laws apply to all, indiscriminately and uniformly. As a result, it can see no difference before it, only the blind category of citizenship. The State imposes and maintains the regime of the faceless, of the Same, much like the ego in the *élémental* who

³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, “Le Moi et la Totalité,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, octobre-décembre (1954): 353-73, 359.

³¹ Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 213/234.

³² *Ibid.*, 235/213.

³³ *Ibid.*, 334/300.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 269/241.

absorbed alterity. In other words, the law—a human creation—does not recognize its very own authors, who remain anonymous for the sake of universality.

Institutions obey a rational order in which freedom no longer recognizes itself. The freedom of the present no longer recognizes itself in the guarantees that it has provided against its own degradation (*déchéance*). The last will and testament drawn up with a lucid mind can no longer be binding on the testator who has survived. The will experiences the guarantees that it has provided against its own degradation as another tyranny.³⁵

In denying particularity, the State also precludes the possibility of commandment. The commandment of the Other, as we have observed, presupposes a free interlocutor capable of accepting or refusing an invitation. The State, however, has an inherent propensity to homogenize difference within a single representable entity. As such, the singularity of the face appears as a threat to its calculating objectivity. In other words, the State embodies in the political what the imperialism of the Same exercised at the level of thought: it totalizes the particular into one, homogenous concept. Both disfigure the Other by reducing the uniqueness of his face to the anonymity of categories (e.g. citizen, concept, identity ...), thus leading Levinas to conclude, ominously, that “politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and thus as in abstentia.”³⁶ And yet the Other exceeds definition; he eludes the totalizing reflexes of the State.

It follows that ethics not only interrupts politics, it does so by constantly recalling that the community is fragmented, that it is constituted of a multiplicity of subjectivities irreducible to any homogenous whole. Moreover, it reminds the State that it is not *causa sui generis*, but borne out of ethics: at the origin of the social relation is the ethical movement itself, a responsibility to an Other whose gaze reveals the others. The social relation is a relation with the unknown since it is, in the first instance, a rapport with the stranger. As a result, claims Levinas, if the individualities that compose society are singular, they nevertheless congregate around the principle of absolute obligation; they exist as a *fraternity*, bound together by a commitment to the Infinite. “The relation of the face in fraternity, where in his turn the Other appears in solidarity with all the others, constitutes the social order.”³⁷ It is neither a biological feature nor a hereditary trait that weaves the members of a society together, but the trace of the face leading me towards the horizon of ethical commitment.

³⁵ Levinas, *Liberté et commandement*, 17/40-1. I would prefer the more robust “downfall” to “degradation,” as it translates the French “*déchéance*” related to “*déchu*,” or he who has fallen (including in a Biblical sense).

³⁶ Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 334-5/300.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 313/280.

This conception of society thus answers Levinas' most pressing imperative: escape from the rootedness of existence, be it the chains that enslave us to identity or the shackles that confine us to Being. "It is a matter of getting out of Being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seem the most evident,"³⁸ he claims. This new path is the ethical movement driving the self outside the ethnic group and towards the community of the father, a liberating itinerary that does not deny Being, but points to something greater, proposes an existence capable of elevating itself towards something higher. The father is none other than the Invisible who commands obligation, God himself who calls for solidarity through responsibility.

That humanity be a community of brothers brought together under the banner of justice—and not identity—such is the very essence of monotheism, according to Levinas. Monotheism is multiplicity regrouped around the messianic utopia of ethical responsibility, utopian because without a specific lieu such as a homeland, and messianic because it is never achieved. "Monotheism is not an arithmetic of the Divine. It is the perhaps supernatural gift of seeing that one man is absolutely like an other man beneath the variety to man under the diversity of historical traditions kept alive in each case. It is a school of xenophilia and antiracism."³⁹ Obligation unites us within society; the community is inherently turned towards the Infinite, towards the father who leads us out of egoism and towards commitment to one's brother.

Orientation towards transcendence or "the trace as the opening of the divine as an absence" is precisely "what prevents the community from becoming wholly immanent to itself."⁴⁰ This doesn't mean that the community is not concrete; simply, confronted with the trace of the face, it is constantly reminded that it is subordinated to a greater principle, the Invisible. By claiming that politics is issued from ethics, Levinas is hoping to interrupt the former's totalitarian impulses, to constantly remind it that it is not autarkic. This is not tantamount to deifying politics but to remind it of its sacred origin: an infinite responsibility towards the poor, the widow and the orphan that humanizes politics. Ethics is what calls into question the regime of the faceless from a distance; its remoteness from politics is precisely what makes proximity with one's neighbor possible. Just like the Other breaks the meaningless egoism of the self from its height, so too ethics constantly reminds politics of its ultimate end: commitment to the Stranger.

Perhaps it is fitting that the final word be given to the Verb. We have just seen that the revelation of the third is not sequential: he does not follow the Other, but is already present in his gaze. The political imperative does not follow my ethical commitment, but appears simultaneously with it. Is this where the

³⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. by Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 73.

³⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 178/249.

⁴⁰ Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992),

rapport between the created and the Creator no longer mirrors the one between politics and ethics? For the Book of Genesis is clear: there *is* God, who first creates the heavens and the earth, only to create the human being subsequently. Hence, the human being comes after God, does he not?

This may seem like a minor exegetical point, but in examining it we can further elucidate how ethics and politics intersect. Let us state it bluntly: God's being is predicated upon the gift of his Word. To be an infinite exteriority, he must reveal himself to an alterity, to a being who exists separately: "The true paradox of the perfect being has consisted in wanting to create equals outside himself, a multiplicity of beings, and consequently action, beyond interiority. It is here that God has transcended creation itself. It is here that God 'has emptied himself'. He has created someone to talk to."⁴¹ The interlocutor is he without whom God would not *be*, for he allows him to "exist divinely," that is, as an Infinite irreducible to a totality. His Verb unveils him to humanity and breaches the dark anonymity of the *élémental*, of a world without ethics. "Speaking implies a possibility of breaking off and beginning."⁴² Hobbes was misled: the first rapport with the Other is not one of fear, but of gift (*don*). It is the Infinite making himself visible through his given Word, and the self offering the world to the Other through language. Meaning does not come from the world itself or its appropriation, but from the encounter with a difference with whom I speak.

Signification arises from the other stating (*disant*) or understanding (*entendant*) the world, which precisely is thematized in his language or his understanding. Signification starts with the speech (*verbe*) in which the world is at the same time thematized and interpreted, in which the signifier never separates himself from the sign he delivers, but takes it up again always while he exposes. For this assistance always given to the word which posits the things is the unique essence of language.⁴³

Language expresses the possibility a new beginning, of an encounter with an alterity who calls me to action. It speaks of goodness or of ethics as first philosophy, not since it absorbs the space of politics, but because it gives it meaning.

Conclusion

More often than not, the Western world has felt threatened by difference, laments Levinas. To this refusal of otherness, symptomatic of a thought that seeks to unify and to universalize, he will introduce an alterity that can be neither absorbed nor included within a system. Levinas looks to defeat political totalitarianism by first defeating ontological totalitarianism which, he argues, is

⁴¹ Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, 141/200.

⁴² Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 88/87.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 98/97.

ingrained within European thought. It follows that his defense of ethics appears so emphatic, it leaves no space to politics, which is then merely reduced to a category dependent and predicated upon the former.

This verdict seems contradictory with the spirit of Levinasian philosophy, dedicated to an indictment of the Same. Ethics may supersede politics, yet both remain absolutely separated. How then can there possibly be a relation between both realms? To answer this query, we turned to the rapport between the created and the Creator. The created is borne out of the Creator and owes him everything, including his very own life; and yet immediately after birth, a separate will, a different will, a free will. And so it is between ethics and politics as it is between the father and his child: both appear simultaneously, the latter in life, the former in responsibility. And yet immediately after birth, absolute difference. Behind the idea of God, therefore, the ethical inspiration—indeed filiation—of politics, and the space of its own autonomy.