PART 2
Levinas' post-anti-humanist humanism and after

As a way of accessing the guiding question of this Part, I combine the two uses of the term *humanitas* indicated by Aulus Gellius – either as *philanthropia* or as *paideia*[1] – to give an approximation of the idea of humanism. Accordingly, humanism concerns schooling – in particular schooling in what are considered the most excellent cultural products of a particular group, in other words schooling in the authoritative tradition – with the intention of cultivating people that would live more virtuously with others. Often such an intellectual position is accompanied and enforced by a cultural politics that involves the study of this tradition and the promotion of this culture, with the claim that it would contribute to moral progress and serve as an antidote for corrupting attitudes and uncivilised behaviour. The declared intention is to open a way for laudable (or humane) interaction with all people and it is exactly this humanist study that would give insight not only into what it means for some people to be human, but what it means for all to be human and what it means to be truly human in a normative sense.

This approximation[2] suffices to suggest that if Levinas, at a certain stage of his intellectual trajectory, presents his own philosophy as a humanism –

1 Aulus Gellius, *The Attic nights*, Vol. 2. London: William Heinemann (Loeb classical library), [1927] 1982. *Philanthropia* is indicated by Gellius to be the common, but incorrect, meaning: "signifying a kind of friendly spirit and good-feeling towards all men without distinction". The proper, Latin meaning corresponds with *paideia*, which is the exclusively human pursuit of "education and training in the liberal arts". (Book XIII, xvii, pp. 457–458).

2 I insist on the orientational value of this approximation; any proper encyclopaedia of the history of ideas will reveal the complex history of cultural practices and attitudes that have been named "humanist".

albeit then as a "humanism of the other" – then we can expect not only a claim to the universal validity of the responsibility at the core of his concern for the other, but also that we would find some indication of the kind of humanist culture, or an equivalent thereof, that would support this responsibility. Such is the working hypothesis that will be put to the test in this second Part – to be partially confirmed and partially amended and discarded. Thematically the hypothesis links Part 2 of this book, not only to the theme of politics in the Introduction and the question concerning the global range of responsibility in Part 1, but also with my own elaboration on responsibility and the means by which responsible action is supported as detailed in Part 3.

Since the diversity of humanisms and claims to the meaning of "real humanism" cannot easily be harmonised into a few general theses, it would require a particularly sophisticated knowledge of the historical development of the different species of humanism to do justice to a comparison between them and the work of Levinas. I don't claim such competence and shall opt for a different approach that would be equally legitimate for the explorative purposes of the current study. In the centre of the current study will be an examination of the use that Levinas has made of the term "humanism" and "anti-humanism".[3]

Yet, even though this is a completely reasonable question to pose to the works of Levinas, it could hardly be said to be an evident question to put to it. Were it not for the fact that Levinas gave the title *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, "Humanism of the other (human)", to a small selection of essays in 1972, it would certainly have been less obvious to enquire about humanism in his thought. The reason for this is the fact that the question of humanism is hardly present in his work. A consultation of the *Levinas concordance*[4] shows that no use is made of the word "humanism" in *Existence and existents* or in *Totality and infinity*. It is barely given more than a passing mention in *Otherwise than Being*, and in his other books it is very infrequently used – the notable exceptions, namely the last two essays of *Difficult freedom* and the book that carries the word in its title, *Humanism of the other*, will be brought to our attention later. Of all these disparate references, it is certainly not irrelevant to

3 Since the issue here is the way in which Levinas' develops his own position, and not a reconstruction of all the implicit and explicit debates with those thinkers of the "end of man", I use "anti-humanism" in the way that Levinas does and thus without any claim from my side either of there being a unified position held by a number of authors, or reducing any of them to an anti-humanism.

4 Cristian Ciocan and Georges Hansel. *Levinas concordance.* Dortrecht: Springer, 2005.

note that more pertain to anti-humanism than to humanism and in total a larger volume of discussion is set aside for presenting Levinas' agreements with anti-humanism than with humanism, or his criticism of anti-humanism than his actual support for humanism.

If we suspend for a moment the two exceptions (alluded to above) to this general lack of interest in matters of humanism or even anti-humanism, one finds in the entire works of Levinas so little that is explicitly developed on humanism and anti-humanism that it cannot be credibly systematised. However, the most important theses retained in his works can be rendered fairly easily:

(1) In both the Judaic texts and the philosophical texts the heart of humanism is the human being and its value, its liberty and its material needs. This human being is in the first place the other human being.[5]
(2) Of pre-modern, Greco-Roman humanism we learn that it was assimilated partially by Christianity and Judaism, and is an element that facilitates dialogue between these two religions.[6] It is at the same time the required defence of society against revenge and violence, but can lose its vigilance for instituted violence.[7]
(3) In as far as the *philosophy* of humanism is concerned, we hear about its socialist[8] or Marxist[9] versions, for which Levinas shows some support. The same affinity is expressed with regard to its existentialist articulation in Sartre[10] or in Bloch's neo-Marxist reformulation.[11] Sartre fares better on the all-important issue of human freedom than does Merleau-Ponty.[12] This support includes the criticism formulated against previous schoolish humanism[13] and of bourgeois humanism by Althusser,[14] and implies some criticism of Heidegger's apparent lack of attention to the material conditions of human existence.[15] That Heidegger's thought is not humanist is claimed already for *Being and time*,[16] but of course also for the ideas expressed in the

5 BPW 14 / LC 71, NTR 98 / DSAS 17.
6 DF 105, 160 / DL 151, 225.
7 BV 40 / ADV 57.
8 TO 61 / TA 42f.
9 NTR 97 / DSAS 16f, GCM 48 / DVI 84.
10 IH 106, IH 128.
11 GDT 94 / DMT 109, GCM 33 / DVI 62.
12 Compare IH 128f with ENT 112 / EN 122.
13 IH 128.
14 GCM 3 / DVI 18.
15 TO 61 / TA 43.
16 IH 186, ENT 210 / EN 207, GDT 24 / DMT 33.

Letter on "humanism"[17] and his later philosophy in general.[18] Anti-humanism is appreciated for its attention to human misery,[19] for the decentring of the subject[20] and to a certain extent for exposing what hypocrisy there might have been in humanist literature.[21] However, it is criticised for its moral laxity and lack of orientation.[22] It is associated with the death of God, the end of a certain idea of the human being and the play of language without final significance.[23]

(4) There exists also a special link between *Judaism* and humanism,[24] and Judaism could be considered as the humanism of a demanding God.[25] It is from Judaism that one learns in the first place about the humanism in which the other is the centre piece.[26] Humanism can have the meaning of "humanitarianism" – it is, for example, appropriate to call the ancient institution of "cities of refuge" humanistic.[27] The Torah and the study thereof could reanimate a humanism that has lost its vigilance.[28]

Taken in isolation, the single references in this catalogue of opinions regarding humanism and anti-humanism are hardly of any interest. Which is not to say that they are of no value. In their respective context these remarks make a contribution to the argument of the respective texts. Considered together, they indicate at least that Levinas showed some interest in the development of the debate about humanism and anti-humanism. However, in none of these instances is the issue a presentation or overview of humanism or a considered evaluation of whatever the main tenets of humanism might be.[29]

The picture changes somewhat if we turn our attention now to the texts that have thus far been left out of consideration: the two essays at the end of *Difficult freedom* and *Humanism of the other*. In doing so, it seems prudent to respect from the outset the fact that Levinas practices in them two distinct

17 GDT 24 / DMT 33, 68.
18 PN 127f / SMB 10f.
19 OS 131 / HS 178.
20 OB 127 / AE 203, GDT 182 / DMT 213.
21 PN 14–15 / NP 19, BV 32 / ADV 43.
22 GCM 49 / DVI 86.
23 PN 4 / NP 8, ENT 61 / EN 72.
24 NTR 82 / QLT 175.
25 DF 26 / DL 46.
26 NTR 98 / DSAS 17.
27 BV 42 / ADV 59.
28 BV 38 / ADV 55.
29 This does of course not exclude the possibility of examining each of these remarks in detail, as I have done with the even rarer remarks by Levinas on ethnography or decolonisation in Part 1 of this book. But this will not be my approach here.

discursive modes: in the first case we find a pedagogue that is concerned about the role of Jewish education in a secular (*laïque*) Western country and about the merits of Judaism as a religion – the writer is not insensitive to the philosophical ambiance in which he speaks about education; in the second case, the author is a philosopher who is concerned about the ethical, about finding the appropriate discourse in which to explore and advocate it, and who, while thinking, is inspired to a degree by his own understanding and practice of Judaism. One Levinas, two distinctive voices: Jewish pedagogue and French philosopher. Even though there are similarities in the two voices – as will be shown – the conclusions to be drawn from them are not identical. Since most of what has been catalogued above from the works of Levinas concerning humanism and anti-humanism can be related to these texts, I shall proceed by discussing first the two essays from *Difficult freedom*, before attempting a full commentary on *Humanism of the other*.

The first two chapters of this Part of the book are devoted to a careful exegesis and presentation of Levinas' humanism, where humanism is understood to provide a perspective on Levinas' main philosophical concerns in view of the question of the universal significance thereof (and of which Part 1 mapped the global, political significance). Accordingly, in Chapter 4 the idea of a Hebraic humanism and the opposition between the study of the Talmud and anti-humanism will be explored. Similarly, in Chapter 5 a detailed interpretation of the 1972 book, *Humanism of the other*, is worked out. Also, the thought exposed in that book will be situated in the development of Levinas' philosophical thought with respect to the influential views on humanism by such divergent contemporaries of Levinas as Sartre, Heidegger and Althusser. The main ideas of Levinas' later philosophy – as presented in the two preceding chapters – will be submitted to critical scrutiny especially with regard to the political implications thereof, in Chapter 6. By doing so, I expose my agreements and disagreements with Levinas and justify my quest of an understanding of political responsibility for a globalised world, after Levinas.