

Chapter 1

Doing justice to responsibility: The primordial political nature of Levinas' philosophy

1 ORIENTATION: LEVINAS AS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER

Emmanuel Levinas today enjoys wide recognition as one of the most original and important thinkers of the Western philosophical tradition on the ethical. Through the changes in his manner of thought over the six decades during which he wrote, developed his central concern, namely to argue that, and show how, we are not duped by ethics, rather, it is the ethical that sets the tone for our entire human existence. The best-known analysis that evokes the core of Levinas' work, and that could be considered his philosophical signature, is the idea of the face of the other, by which the self is affected in a *sui generis* manner, namely ethically.

By far the largest part of his philosophical work is devoted to the question of the self and the other, to the *vis-à-vis*, to the for-the-other. That being the case, when one writes about Levinas, one has to write about this, and the present book is no exception in this regard. However, as justified and as common as this perspective on Levinas' work might be, it is of crucial importance to see how Levinas relativises the place of the face-to-face, of the intimate ethical relation to the single other, by the relation to the third, i.e. to the plurality of others. In other words, one has to see that the reflections on the ethical find their place within reflection on the political.

The political importance and even the intrinsic political nature of Levinas' thought have not always been recognised. That this is the case is to a certain extent Levinas' own doing and to some degree due to good reasons. Is his point not after all that it is hopeless to start contemplating the political if the essence of the ethical has not been determined? And since it is already an enormously ambitious project to determine the meaning of the ethical, most of Levinas' attention by far is devoted to it. The dominance of the analyses of the relation between self and the single other should not mislead us though:

“[t]here are *always* at least three people. [...] *As soon as* there are three people, the ethical relation to the other becomes political”,¹

says Levinas, and this will be the recurrent theme throughout this book. The tension between the ethical and the political in Levinas' philosophy is betrayed by the contradiction between the two adverbs “always” (*toujours*) and “as soon as” (*dès que*) in this citation: the political introduces something new to a relation that exists before it ... but there is no before, since the plurality of others was always there and thus the relation to the other had always been political.² And this is exactly where the concern of the current book is situated. My entire reading of, and dialogue with, Levinas is guided by the conviction of the crucial place of the political in his thought.

Having stated the general orientation of this study, the place of the political in Levinas' thought has to be traced more clearly in order to justify the political perspective with reference to Levinas' argument and with respect to his work on the ethical.³

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- 1 “Ethics of the infinite”, in *Dialogues with contemporary Continental thinkers. The phenomenological heritage*. Richard Kearney. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, pp. 49–69 / “Il y a toujours au moins trois personnes. [...] Dès qu'il y a trois personnes, la relation éthique à l'autre devient politique” in “De la phénoménologie à l'éthique”, in *Esprit* 234, 1997, pp. 121–140, citation, p. 129 (my emphasis, translation modified).
 - 2 See *De l'éthique à la justice* 338–344. This idea will be developed below, as well as in Chapter 6 (§ 2) and Chapter 7.
 - 3 In the entire book, the emphasis of the exploration of Levinas' political thought will be on his later work. This is justified to a certain extent by the fact that the larger part of the themes explored in this book is situated in Levinas' later works (of these themes the exegesis of the humanism of *Humanism of the other* in Chapter 5 takes a central place). Furthermore, the central issue of the third is simply not well developed in Levinas' earlier work. Finally, the exploratory nature of the argument that I present in this book serves as further justification for this strategy. This choice for the later philosophy is not principled and therefore, in subsequent

2 “THERE ARE ALWAYS AT LEAST THREE...”: URGENCY AND PRIMACY OF THE POLITICAL RELATION⁴

One of the most articulate expressions of the intention and ambition that Levinas had for his philosophy is to be found in the essay *Ethics as first philosophy* and this intention again clearly situates his work with respect to the tradition of Western philosophy:

“In this essay we wish to ask whether thought understood as knowledge, since the ontology of first philosophy, exhausts the possibilities of the meaning of thought and whether, beyond knowledge and its hold on being, there doesn’t emerge a more urgent *wisdom* [une *sagesse* plus urgente].”⁵

In opposing these two possibilities the aim is not to replace the tradition of philosophy (or ontology) with the more urgent wisdom that Levinas proposes, but to relativise the former by reference to the latter. If the Western tradition of philosophy is not to be abandoned, what then, in Levinas’ mind, motivates the quest for a new philosophy, and even a different kind of first philosophy? What is it that makes Levinas’ first philosophy a “more *urgent wisdom*”? The particularity of Levinas’ notion of a first philosophy, and the justification for his claim to its urgency, resides in what it identifies as the first question of philosophy. This first question is not

“‘[w]hy being rather than nothing?’, but how being can be justified [or justify itself]”⁶

As is well known, this question, according to Levinas, is not one of mere curiosity or even of methodological rigour, it is a question of one’s own life⁷ and of its justification:

elaborations of the current study, Levinas’ earlier philosophy will have to be accorded its rightful place.

4 What follows here (§2) is the first part of the essay announced in *De l’éthique à la justice* 372 as forthcoming under the title “The ambiguous meaning of politics in Levinas.” The second half is to be found in §§ 2.1 and 2.2 of Chapter 6.

5 LR 78 / EPP 77, translation modified.

6 LR 86 / EPP 109, translation modified.

7 This is also what Husserl, in a text on responsibility and first philosophy, claims for his own version of first philosophy: “we realize that such a philosophy could be no theoretical hobby of humanity, that a philosophical life should rather be understood as a life out of absolute self-responsibility: the personal single subject, as subject of personal life, wants in its entire life, in all of its praxis to make up its mind genuinely freely, that is that it can at any time justify the right of its decision for itself.”, “Meditation über die Idee eines individuellen und Gemeinschaftslebens in absoluter Selbstverantwortung”, in Edmund Husserl, *Erste Philosophie*

“One has to respond to one’s right to be, not by referring to some abstraction and anonymous law, or judicial entity, but in fear for the others [...] as if I had to answer for the other’s death even before I had to *be*.”⁸

More explicitly then, the death or the vulnerability of the other in general, imposes the question that sets first philosophy in motion.

It is for this reason that the phenomenon of tyranny represents a major point of orientation in Levinas’ work. Tyranny is not only indicative of the extremes of violence to which people may be subjected, it is also the condition in which people are most at risk of being incapacitated to respond for their own being by answering for the fragile being, mortality and death of others. As such, tyranny could be considered the culmination of everything against which Levinas developed his thought and one could perhaps say, as he said of Plato, that his philosophy is “as it were obsessed by the threat of tyranny”.⁹ This political obsession drives first philosophy. It is because of the threat of tyranny and a myriad of other forms of violence that “may well have to be challenged according to the criterion of our ethical responsibility to the other” that “ethical philosophy should remain first philosophy”, as Levinas explains in a remark that will retain our attention later.¹⁰

Thinking radically, Levinas’ opposition to tyranny does not limit itself to an opposition to historical instances of political oppression, dictatorship, totalitarianism and genocide – of which, alas, it is not difficult to list examples. Rather, “politics left to itself bears a tyranny in itself”,¹¹ that is to say, “the element of violence in the State, in the hierarchy, appears even when the hierarchy functions perfectly”¹² or again, the finality of justice behind the institution of the State is “soon unrecognized in the deviations imposed by the practicalities of the state”.¹³ It follows naturally from this conviction

(1923/1924), Zweiter Teil: *Theorie der phänomenologischen Reduktion*, Husserl Gesammelte Werke Band VIII. Rudolf Boehm (ed.). Haag: Martinus Nijhof, 1959, pp. 193–202 (citation, p. 197).

That Levinas’ notion of first philosophy shares much more with the Husserlian notion thereof than with the Aristotelian first philosophy has at least been indicated in Jean Greisch’s and Jacques Rolland’s “Présentation” to the volume *Emmanuel Lévinas. L’éthique comme philosophie première*. Paris: Cerf, 1993, pp. 7–10, of which they were the editors, and later by Jacques Rolland in “L’humain dans l’homme. Quelques notes”, in *Esprit* 234, 1997, pp. 111–120, in particular p. 115.

8 LR 82, 83 / EPP 93, 98, translation modified.

9 CPP 16 / LC 36.

10 “De la phénoménologie à l’éthique”, *op. cit.* p. 137 (my translation) / “Ethics of the infinite”, *op. cit.* p. 66. See Chapter 6, § 2.2.

11 T&I 300 / TI 334–335.

12 BPW 23 / LC 97.

13 OS 123 / HS 167.

that Levinas' philosophy should be characterised by a profound interest in politics, at the very least in politics as problem. In fact, it would not be exaggerated to claim that behind the description of the essential nature of politics in these citations also lies an implicit reference to that which urged their author to reflect on it: he who writes that "politics left to itself, carries in itself a tyranny", does not want to leave politics to its own devices, does not want politics to function perfectly according to its own inherent logic, and cannot accept that justice is traded for mere practical expediency. Ethics as first philosophy can only be called "urgent", if this driving intention of it is borne in mind.

But what does it mean not to leave politics to its own devices by writing philosophy? In order to answer this question one needs to inspect Levinas' strategy for speaking about the political. This will be done in two parts: arguing, first, that on the most profound level politics is constituted by the non-ontological meaning, that is, by ethics; and second, that ethics necessarily passes into politics, or in fact, that ethics has always already passed into politics.

2.1 The constitution of political meaning

In order not to leave politics to itself, Levinas tackles this problem at the most basic level known to him, namely that of meaning. Two completely different sources are identified: phenomenology or ontology and ethics.¹⁴

Firstly, as Levinas summarises the most important lesson he learned from *Sein und Zeit*, the whole human being is *ontology*:¹⁵ with my whole existence I am a *logos* about Being, because I am the ontological difference. Levinas calls this *logos* the Said in his later philosophy and describes it as a *conatus in suo esse perseverandi*, the exertion to persevere in one's own being (Spinoza). If this is all there is to being human and to meaning then, according to Levinas right from "Some reflections on the philosophy of

14 "I would maintain, against Heidegger, that philosophy can be ethical as well as ontological, can be at once Greek and non-Greek in its inspiration. These two sources of inspiration coexist as two different tendencies in modern philosophy and it is my own personal task to identify this dual origin of meaning – *der Ursprung des Sinnhaften* – in the interhuman relationship." "Ethics of the infinite", *op. cit.* p. 57 / "De la phénoménologie à l'éthique", *op. cit.* p. 129. Similarly GDT 126f / DMT 143f, formulated closely to OB xlii / AE X.

15 "The whole human being is ontology." (ENT 2, translation modified) / "Tout l'homme est ontologie." (EN 13). In Levinas' adoption of the notion of "first philosophy" one should probably see a continuation of the polemics with Heidegger as summarised by the question of the famous article "Is ontology fundamental?"

Hitlerism” (1934),¹⁶ there is no escaping the fire of war burning always in Being itself:¹⁷ the being that is characterised by the fact that he/she belongs to Being (what Heidegger calls *mineness*, *Jemeinigkeit*) would be a warrior. This is the first, the ontological, source of meaning.

But, secondly, Levinas learned a perspective on reality from Husserl in which one’s natural attitude is suspended in order to gain an understanding of the originary phenomena that constitute meaning behind the subject’s back and that could be thematised only later in reflection.¹⁸ In Levinas’ later philosophy, reduction leads (*re-ducere*) the Said back to its constituting Saying, which is the second source of meaning, namely the ethical. Just as in the study of the pragmatics of language, but here with a completely different import, the Saying belongs to the Said: the Saying is the Saying of a Said, but the significance of the Saying exceeds that of what is Said – by being directed at someone, by being a Said *for* someone. One could rephrase this idea in more ontological terms: the being that I am has a significance that exceeds that which can be attributed to its always understanding Being, always being ontology, always being Said – and this by being *for* the other.

Emblematic of these two sources of meaning – of the ethical difference between the Saying and the Said with which the Saying associated – is the phenomenon of ageing:¹⁹ the more I persevere in my existence, the more I lose my life; the *conatus* cannot be dissociated from a passivity of which I am not in any sense the agent. Levinas analyses this passivity as the proximity of the other. In proximity, my exposition to the other is a giving of myself to the other, to the point of substituting myself for the other. I am being made a sign for the other.²⁰ This sign is the testimony, that I give to the other, of being absolutely under the influence of the other, in the sense of having the totality of my being directed to the other.²¹ The sign that I am as given to the other, the Saying of the Said that I am, is a kind of meaning that is not ontological, and Levinas wagers that it can thus only be an ethical meaning, namely my election or assignation to be *re-*

16 IH 23–33.

17 T&I 21 / TI 5.

18 DEHH 131, OB 20 / AE 38–39. Cf. also OB 53 / AE 91: “The movement back to the Saying is the phenomenological Reduction, in which the indescribable is described.” (translation modified).

19 Cf. OB 59–94 / AE 86–94. The discussion of ageing will be resumed and expanded in Chapter 5, § 3.

20 Cf. OB 49 / AE 83, GDT 198–199 / DMT 231–232 and the exposition of the theme in *De l’éthique à la justice* 257–259.

21 GCM 74 / DVI 121–122.

sponsible for the other.²² The passivity of losing or ceding my life for the other is so decisive that I can only react to it, or respond to it, and this in the ethical sense, namely to take responsibility for it.

It is of the greatest importance to underline the most salient characteristics of this responsibility as presented by Levinas. (1) My life is the “ethical difference” (cf. ageing), the difference between the Saying and the Said and this difference marks an absolute *asymmetry* between myself and the other. This asymmetry consists of owing the other my devotion, or rather responsibility, without there being any contract that establishes this obligation; this obligation precedes all contracts, agreements or legal status between people. (2) This responsibility is an *infinite* imperative – the more I answer the other, the more I obey the originary imperative, the more I still have to do so. I owe the other everything. (3) This imperative has no content. The injunction “thou shalt not kill” by which Levinas often designates this imperative, is to be interpreted as just a *formal absolute imperative* not to infringe on the mortality of the other,²³ not to act in such a way as to reduce the other to mere being, but to give yourself for the other. The Saying remains unsayable or unspeakable (*indicible*).²⁴ (4) This responsibility is the principle of *heteronomy*. I am the assigned or elected one or the hostage of the others’ imperative. (5) In the face of this imperative *nobody can answer for the other in my place*. Responsibility radically singularises the subject.

All of this comes to the fore under reduction. Most of Levinas’ philosophical effort goes into pointing out and reflecting on the Saying, arguing that we are not duped by it. However, there is never a question of a Saying which is not a Saying of a Said. The subject might be passively constituted by its exposition to the other, but he/she lives in an ontological world. The Saying has meaning only as Saying of a Said.

2.2 Politics: the indispensable translation of the Saying to the Said

There is continuity between the unspeakable Saying and the Said of which it is the Saying. But the Saying goes beyond the Said and the Said

22 OB 47 / AE 80: “saying is to respond to another” (in italics in the text).

23 The face is sometimes defined by the non-phenomenalisable mortality of the other: “This discovery of his/her death [the death of the other – EW], or this hearing of his/her appeal, I call the face of the other”, in *Racismes. L’autre et son visage*. Grands entretiens réalisés par Emmanuel Hirsch. Paris: Cerf, 1988, citation p. 94.

24 OB 7 / AE 19.

never exhausts the Saying.²⁵ The clearest way to express Levinas' perspective on the relation between the Saying and the Said is by referring to the pair translation/treason:

“The correlation of the Saying and the Said, in other words the subordination of the Saying to the Said, to the linguistic system and to ontology is the price asked for its manifestation. In language as Said, everything is translated in front of us – albeit at the price of a treason. Language as servant and thus indispensable.”²⁶

Thus, there is no automatic, unproblematic transition between the two sources of meaning identified by Levinas. The translation of the Saying into a Said is always imperfect. Yet, it is this indiscreet translation of the unspeakable ethical imperative of Saying into the sayable, audible and ontological language of the Said that serves to let the ethical meaning of the Saying appear in the ontological world. That is why the translation is indispensable even if its service comes at the price of a partial treason.

The paradigmatic situation in which Levinas identifies and describes the Saying or the proximity of the other, is one in which the other is alone in front of me. The vast majority of his texts on this issue follow the pattern of a subject face-to-face with one other. But this is an abstraction: life is life with many, also for Levinas. And it is this fact that necessitates and complicates the translation of the Saying into the Said. If there were just two people, I and the other, my responsibility would have entailed the direct, immediate and complete giving of myself to the other. But there are always at least three: I, the other and another other of the first two of us.²⁷ I find myself in the proximity of a plurality of others, each of which constitutes me as subject beyond my ontological existence, each of which elects me to infinite responsibility. What is the relation between this plurality of expositions that constitute me, in the face of which I answer every time: “Here I am”? According to Levinas, this relation is one of *contradiction*:

“The third introduces a *contradiction* in the Saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction. This is, in itself, the limit of responsibility, birth of the question: What do I have to do in justice?”²⁸

25 OB 57 / AE 96.

26 “La corrélation du dire et du dit, c’est-à-dire la subordination du dire au dit, au système linguistique et à l’ontologie est le prix que demande la manifestation. Dans le langage comme dit, tout se traduit devant nous – fût-ce au prix d’une trahison. Langage ancillaire et ainsi indispensable.” (AE 17–18, my translation / OB 6).

27 OB 157 / AE 245.

28 OB 157 (translation modified); “Le tiers introduit une *contradiction* dans le Dire dont la signification devant l’autre allait, jusqu’alors, dans un sens unique. C’est,

The plurality of appeals made to me, troubles the apparent unambiguity of the ethical imperative and creates the question in me: who comes before whom and how? Ethics now demands justice.

The moment this question arises, consciousness is born, but always born as bad consciousness, as bad conscience (*mauvaise conscience*). The first “break with passivity”;²⁹ the first moment of *conatus*, the commencement of the Said, of the ontological difference, the *Da* of *Dasein*, is that question concerning the thirds: who comes before whom? This is the question of justice and in the mindset of Levinas the birth of politics. Hence the decisive remark by Levinas (cited above):

“There are always at least three people. [...] As soon as there are three people, the ethical relation to the other becomes political and enters into the totalizing discourse of ontology.”³⁰

This conclusion summarises the vital point that the Levinasian subject, always faced with the plurality of ethical others, is constituted as a *political* subject, as a subject whose being consists of having to translate (at the risk of treason) ethics in the world of ontology, that is the world of *political* co-existence. In other words, there is no aspect of the existence of the Levinasian subject that is not always confronted by the question about and the obligation to realise justice, because the subject is always already taken up in the concern for the plurality of others, that is, the *political* concern. Therefore, the implication of Levinas’ philosophy of the plurality of others is that all responsibility has to be borne politically; “political responsibility” is a pleonasm. All the readings of Levinas that see in him a non-political philosopher miss this central point.³¹

de soi, limite de la responsabilité naissance de la question: Qu’ai-je à faire avec justice?” (AE 245, my emphasis).

29 OB 62 / AE 101.

30 “Ethics of the infinite”, *op.cit.* pp. 49–50 / “De la phénoménologie à l’éthique”, *op. cit.* p. 129.

31 Although Didier Frank (*L’un-pour-l’autre. Levinas et la signification*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008) exposes difficulties in the “transition” from ethics to justice in a way different from what I have done in *De l’éthique à la justice* (Chapter 8, § 4) or from what I am doing here, we do concur that “if the third looks always in the face and the eyes of others, then substitution – supposing that the presence of the third doesn’t make substitution inaccessible, or even completely impossible and this is exactly the entire problem – is always from the outset measured or weighed [*mesurée*]” (p. 229), where “measured” means the same as “entered into the calculation of justice”, i.e., the practice of politics (cf. *De l’éthique à la justice* 346–349). From this Frank derives the necessary “anteriority of justice” in relation to ethics (p. 240). It might be that the conclusion of an “an-

Levinas is notoriously skimpy on what this political condition of the subject consists of and, as already indicated, it is the objective of the current study to make a contribution to this issue. However, it is appropriate to render the most important indications given by Levinas of the changes that take place when the Saying is translated into the Said in the company of the third. (1) There is (at least, according to Levinas) a correction of the asymmetry between me and the other(s); the other is looked at or even defaced (*dé-visagé*),³² that means, consideration of the other is henceforth integrated in the ontological world. (2) Why is this asymmetry corrected? It happens on the basis of the mutual contradiction between the thirds. The State is the condition in which my infinite responsibility for the others is limited. (3) This means that instead of being immediately infinitely responsible for this or that particular other, I have to think, weigh, compare and measure. The others become brothers, citizens and I also may become an other, I may become important, because the actualisation of justice depends on my capacity to actualise it. Thus the State is the institutionalised rendering of people's answer to the question of justice: who comes before whom? (4) But no institutionalisation of any idea of justice could ever be complete. I am called to act as a prophet in order to call the State to greater justice, to respond to the other beyond the call of law. (5) This extreme justice asks of me to unsay the Said: firstly, the Said in the form of a currently institutionalised system of justice, but secondly, also the Said that I am myself, that is, to continue to give my life for the other up to the point of saying *à-Dieu* to the ontological world – to the point of becoming saintly – but this, always only in so far as this call for saintliness is limited by the initial question of justice: which of the others should come before the other others?

What then is the political scenario to which these considerations will lead, or rather, how does Levinas interpret the political implications of his philosophy of meaning and of the constitution of the subject? According to him, my efforts of answering the initial question of justice will lead to prophetic and even saintly acts. These are acts by which the ethico-political subject will attempt to achieve as well as possible an answer to the plurality of infinite appeals made to him/her, that is, he/she will do whatever is possible to actualise justice. This is the political model of Jerusalem. But that same subject will have to question the efficiency and durability of these

teriority" over-states the case; it would probably be more prudent to consider ethics and justice to be "contemporaneous". This does not, however, exclude the claim for the primacy of the political that I make in the present Chapter.

32 OB 158 / AE 246.

efforts of justice and therefore, in the face of all the thirds, there is an equality that arises between the subject and the others. Out of this relation, institutions and the law grow too, all of which would then ideally attempt to safeguard a particular idea of what justice entails. This is the political model of Athens.³³ And since every institutionalisation of justice is imperfect, Levinas believes in the “liberal State”, that is, a State that is always capable of improving legislation and justice.³⁴ This perspective on politics could be summarised as follows:

“Usually the State is preferable to anarchy – but not always. In certain cases, in fascism or totalitarianism for instance, the political order of the State may well have to be challenged according to the criterion of our ethical responsibility to the other. That is why ethical philosophy should remain first philosophy.”³⁵

In other words, the State as an institutionalised endeavour of realizing justice will always have to be called upon to improve justice; the indiscretion and partial betrayal committed to the plurality of Sayings in an attempt to translate them as truly as possible, should be unsaid (*dédit*) by the prophetic or saintly intervention (by Jerusalem) in order to create an even more just Athens. By developing this theory of justice (Said) that depends on the Saying (therefore, ethics as first philosophy), Levinas would have contributed to his initial task, namely not leaving politics to itself, not letting politics unfold itself by its own logic, and not abandoning the ethical finality of the State to oblivion.

Up to this point, this reading of Levinas’ later political thought should be considered as uncontroversial. Levinas’ philosophy is one of demanding ethics, one of remaining responsible for the other even up to the point of unsaying the Said that you are yourself, that is, up to the point of giving yourself in saintliness to the other. In the pages that follow, I shall further explore, explain and criticise these points. The nature of the ethical intervention in politics will also have to be reconsidered in view of answering the difficult question: is the kind of politics that Levi-

33 BPW 24 / LC 99–100.

34 “Socialité et argent”, in *Emmanuel Lévinas*. Cahier de l’Herne. Catherine Chaliel and Miguel Abensour (eds.). Paris: Editions de l’Herne, 1991, pp. 106–112, reference p. 111.

35 “L’Etat est d’habitude préférable à l’anarchie – mais pas toujours. Dans certains cas, dans le fascisme ou le totalitarisme, par exemple, l’ordre politique de l’Etat peut devoir être défié d’après le critère de notre responsabilité éthique à l’autre. C’est pourquoi la philosophie éthique doit rester la philosophie première.” “De la phénoménologie à l’éthique”, *op. cit.* 137 (my translation) / “Ethics of the infinite”, *op. cit.* p. 66.

nas had in mind as actualisation of his ethics the only Levinasian politics conceivable? (see especially Chapters 6 and 7).

3 CLARIFICATIONS ON THE TITLE

This preliminary presentation of Levinas as a political philosopher should suffice to justify the line of research of this book. Those interpreters of his work that are convinced that his sole concern was with a philosophical presentation of the ethical and that it would therefore be impermissible or at least besides the point to interrogate his work on the practical, political implications thereof, will probably be frustrated by my line of exploration and discussion of the work of Levinas. To such scholars it should of course be conceded that by far the biggest part of Levinas' work is devoted to finding a credible and intelligent discourse on the ethical, that Levinas didn't spend much time on the practical implications of his work and besides that he didn't consider the elaboration on the practical implications of his thought to impact significantly on the discourse on the ethical. However, it should be borne in mind that the person who wrote Levinas' books – Emmanuel Levinas himself – was, by doing so, already responding not to the appeal of *an* other, but to the appeals of the plurality of others and thus, by so doing, was looking for the realisation of justice – that is, if we follow his own philosophy. One has to measure what it means when he claims that the Saying is not only the meaning of being, but “the very signifyingness of signification [*la signifiante même de la signification*]”,³⁶ in other words, the significance of Being. How could *signifiante* (significance and meaning) be significant, if it is nothing more than a meaning (that remains unspeakable, *indicible*) and if nothing can be said of this significance? What is significance, if one can have no discussion about this weight? Also what does it mean – as in the citation above – if Levinas calls ontology ancillary or servant and thus indispensable (*ancillaire et ainsi indispensable*)³⁷ to ethics, if one should simply dispense with the question of how it is ancillary and indispensable? That is why restricting Levinas to contemplation on the ethical alone, is condemning him to a performative contradiction and rendering the urgency with which he regards first philosophy unintelligible.

36 OB 5 / AE 17.

37 OB 6 / AE 18.

This brings me to the justification of the title of this Chapter – *doing justice to responsibility*.³⁸ Levinas is a philosopher of ethics of the greatest importance. But the centre of gravity of all of his thought seems to be political: there is no relation to the other that is not politically mediated, since all relations to the other involve relations to the plurality of others. For this reason, if Levinas is a philosopher of ethics, of responsibility, he is so by being a philosopher of justice: the only thing that one could responsibly do out of responsibility for the others in the plural, is to relativise the responsibility for each one of them, by the call for justice. This is the first sense in which *justice should be done to responsibility*: it means that recognition should be given to the fact that the relations of responsibility to the others are plural and that this fact calls for a reflection appropriate to this plurality, which means considering responsibilities from their import of justice. Responsible responsibility is justice. But the quest for justice towards which responsibilities naturally lead, transforms them, it does something to those responsibilities, but only thus could they remain responsible. Only by submitting responsibility to this transformation can it remain true to itself; only thus could *justice be done to responsibility* – which is the second sense of the title. Responsibility without justice is irresponsible.

When the theme and approach to Levinas in this book is indicated in the title as that of “political responsibility”, the relationship between these two terms should consequently be understood as explained here: it is only by taking the political dimension of responsibility seriously that justice can be done to responsibility. Even though a lot of my effort will be devoted to analysing and responding to the limits and weaknesses of Levinas’ own contribution to this question, it can certainly not be claimed that the question concerning the relationship between the ethical and the political in responsibility is foreign to Levinas. Since it is, then, the explicit aim of the present study to approach Levinas from this tail-end of his philosophy, much less will be said about language, alterity, face-to-face, proximity and other more central notions of Levinas’ philosophy. Instead, the question concerning the political will be pursued with the objective of seeing how to go beyond Levinas – as per the purposely ambiguous subtitle of the book – how to reflect on political responsibility “after Levinas”.

38 I came across this very appropriate phrase in the title of a book review by William S. Hamrick, “Doing justice to responsibility”, in *Human Studies* 26/3, 2003, pp. 401–407; the specific content given to the phrase is derived from my interpretation of Levinas’ ethico-political project, rather than from that review.

This objective will be pursued while constantly keeping in mind the second part of the title of the book: “for a globalised world”. This is certainly the most unexpected part of the title of this book and of its content. It will be the objective of Chapters 2 and 3 to shed light on this dimension of responsibility. However, a few remarks by way of introduction are in order. Whereas it is quite obvious that Levinas was not a theoretician of globalisation or international relations, one has to concede that such questions are not completely absent from his work. Consider for instance the significance of political catastrophes for Levinas, of which most had an international or global dimension:

“The 1914 War, the Russian Revolution refuting itself in Stalinism, fascism, Hitlerism, the 1939–45 War, atomic bombings, genocide and uninterrupted war. [...] A liberal politics and administration that suppresses neither exploitation nor war; a socialism that gets entangled in bureaucracy.”³⁹

It is noteworthy that Levinas placed on the same level those instances of catastrophe that took place very far from his lived experience and those of which he was personally a victim, at least as far as they merit reflection on the ethical. If it is further taken into account that these catastrophes practically always have an international dimension, then one could reasonably claim that, for Levinas, what happens on an international level concerns individual ethical subjects, at least in the sense that it poses or enforces the question concerning the ethical.⁴⁰ If we then ask “what is it in our day and time that could be considered worthy of serious reflection concerning the ethical?”, would it not be such international or global historical phenomena as the genocide in Rwanda or the global network of exploitative labour relations or again the inhumanity of some humanitarian aid after the earthquake in Haiti? If the global extent of the events that enforce the question concerning the political is to be affirmed, should it not at least be regarded as a legitimate question to see if the response to the world – the responsibility taken for the world – has to take on the same scale?

The notion of responsibility for a globalised world is not entirely foreign to Levinas’ way of thinking. But even if it were, would that prevent us from enquiring into Levinas’ thought as fitting contribution to an issue that wasn’t his? The reference to a “globalised world” in the title of the book thus stands for the deliberate attempt to appropriate Levinas, or to

39 DF 281 / DL 390–391, similarly PN 3 / NP 9, A&T 132 / AT 139, ENT 97 / EN 107.

40 These international and global implications of Levinasian thought on responsibility will be developed in more detail in Chapter 3, especially § 3.

put his philosophy to the test, for a context that was not at the centre of his preoccupations. This approach seems to me justifiable in itself, but also called for by the change in context from that of Levinas to that of the present author. Whereas I don't dispute the right of people outside of Europe or the West to read and comment on works of European authors and to do so in the terms of the authors they comment on (e.g., I respect the right of anybody outside of France to become a Levinas scholar in the narrow sense of the word), it seems equally acceptable for us, writing from different contexts to those of the author commented on, to engage seriously with these authors, but with a different agenda.

If this book is intended as reflection on political responsibility *for a globalised world*, then the ambition is not to develop an ethics for globalisation and international politics. Rather the last half of the title of the book refers to the extent and context of relevance of responsible action. Furthermore, the insistence on a *globalised* world also serves to underscore the importance of reflection on the contemporary state of the means by which responsible action is undertaken. This means that the question of responsibility will be considered as it takes profile *in* an era of globalisation, *with* the means available to people living in such a world and *for* a world in which the geopolitical dimension of action is its ultimate horizon. "For" refers to the context of relevance and to the beneficiary. But these themes will be addressed in detail in the Chapters that follow.

