

## Preface

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At the threshold of this book a few remarks concerning its origin and nature might be helpful to clarify its intention and thus prevent misunderstandings in this respect.

In 2006 Jörn Rüsen, the president at that time of the *Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut* (KWI) in Essen, launched an interdisciplinary project under the title “Humanism in an era of globalisation – an intercultural dialogue on culture, humanity and values”.<sup>1</sup> This project was never intended to provide a defence for a number of pre-established theses concerning humanism; in fact, it explicitly re-examined the viability of traditional Western and other humanisms and involved itself in the quest to overcome their defects. For this purpose, the project included a thorough revision of the entire dossier on the historical debates concerning humanism as support for an inter-cultural reflection on the orientation of people’s action – wherever they may be interacting in this globalising world. Consequently an examination of the long history of the criticism of humanism formed an integral part of the project.<sup>2</sup>

It is within this framework that I was requested to contribute a monograph to the project in order to clarify Levinas’ position on humanism. I acquit myself of this task in Part 2 of the book. The aim of this reading of Levinas is, in accordance with the spirit of the project, neither to demonstrate Levinas’ fidelity to a particular idea of humanism, nor to provide an apology for Levinas’ philosophy, but to propose a balanced interpretation of what Levinas understands by the “humanism of the other (human)”. The title chosen for my book testifies to the very favourable impression

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1 At the time of the finalisation of this book the project description was accessible in <http://www.kwi-humanismus.de/en/k3.Humanismusprojekt.htm>.

2 See also the Foreword to *Shaping a human world – Civilizations, Axial Times, Modernities, Humanisms*, ed. by Oliver Kozlarek, Jörn Rüsen and Ernst Wolff. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2011.

that the global dimension of the KWI project has made on me; its formative influence on the entire content will be evident.

As readers of Levinas know, the central tenets of his humanism of the other are similar to those found elsewhere in his philosophy. For this reason, a number of remarks are warranted about the manner in which this reading of the humanism of the other will be submitted to criticism and embedded in the larger design of the present book. Given the critical position that I defended in *De l'éthique à la justice*<sup>3</sup> with respect to both Levinas' philosophy of the signification of alterity and his idea of political justice that is rooted in it, no obvious way forward in reading Levinas presented itself to me. Levinas is a great philosopher – one cannot easily dismiss his work, nor can one simply step into it with a few corrections. Consequently, the present study serves the purpose of looking for a way of engaging with Levinas after the criticism of his philosophy formulated in my above-mentioned book. The reader will therefore find in these pages an attempt, an essay, or an exploration in thinking “after Levinas”, rather than an introduction to his work.<sup>4</sup> Such an undertaking requires a lot of preparatory exegetical work. Since parts of the relevant work in this regard can be found in *De l'éthique à la justice*, I shall, where necessary, refer to, summarise or reformulate the argument, as required in each case. As response to my earlier book, the present book presents the next step in my reflection on Levinas and on those matters which concerned him.

This is then the meaning of the “after Levinas” in the subtitle of the book. I have purposely chosen the word “after” for its ambiguity. When it is said that somebody is after money, it means that that person pursues money, just like when somebody runs after someone else. In this sense I follow Levinas, since, despite my criticism, there are a number of key aspects of his philosophy that I do consider worthy of following (an exposition of these aspects will be given in Chapter 6, §3). But because of the seriousness of my earlier criticism of Levinas, something essential to his work has to be left behind and in this other sense that which is undertaken in this book is reflection after Levinas. The title of the book represents both of these two meanings: on the one hand, this study is Levinasian in the central position it accords to the notion of responsibility; on the other hand, the span, the means, the conditions and the beneficiary of this responsibility – all indicated by the phrase “globalised world” – represent my concern to pursue thought on responsibility in a different way to that of Levinas.

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3 *De l'éthique à la justice. Langage et politique dans la philosophie de Lévinas* (Phaenomenologica 183). Dordrecht: Springer, 2007; henceforth *De l'éthique à la justice*.

4 This does not exclude the fact that I have tried to present especially the Part on humanism in such a manner as to give access to Levinas' thought for the non initiated.

The adjective “political” in the title indicates that I delimit my reflection, as far as is practical, to the question of the political implications of Levinas’ philosophy and assign a relatively minor position to the issue of signification and the debate about ontology and ethnicity. However, I definitely do not intend to indicate by “political responsibility” an exploration on the duties of political office bearers, which was the earliest sense in which the word responsibility was used. “Political”, as used in the title, doesn’t refer to the particular social sphere of politics, but rather, in accordance with Levinas’ own use of the term, is used to designate the dimension of action with and toward the plurality of others. Political responsibility refers here to responsibility as it is integrated into the political, and thus has consequences for issues like power, strategy, and institutions in politics, but also elsewhere. In fact, Chapter 1 is devoted to advocating that for Levinas already the adjective “political” is always attributed “pleonastically”, as it were, to responsibility, and to placing this conviction in the centre of my interpretational strategy for this book. If I then retain the pleonastic doubling of “responsibility” by “political” in the title, it is exactly to insist on this perspective that I adopt on Levinas’ work and that will remain the direction in which I shall attempt to think “after Levinas”. The book is intended for specialists of Levinas and phenomenology, however scholars of the ethics of responsibility, of post-colonial studies and of the issues engaged with in the humanism/anti-humanism debate, as well as readers of political thought in Weber, Apel and Ricoeur, will hopefully find the book useful too.

A number of people who have discussed this project with me while the manuscript was in preparation deserve special mention: Olivier Abel, Jeffrey Barash, Rodolphe Calin, Michel Deguy, Maria Dimitrova, Alfred Hirsh and Jörn Rüsen. While thanking them cordially for their input, I need to exculpate them in the same breath from any complicity in the creation of the insufficiencies that the reader will probably find in the text.

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