

## Chapter 5

# Levinas' post-anti-humanist humanism: *Humanism of the other*<sup>1</sup>

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One's first impression in searching for help from Levinas in reflecting about humanism might be one of joy. Remarkable as it may be, here is a French author, well informed about his contemporaneous philosophical scene, who in 1972 publishes a book on humanism: it is entitled *Humanism of the other*. One's joy will be quickly attenuated, though, on opening the book. Not only is there no definition or description given of what the author understands by "humanism", not only is the anti-humanism dominant in the early 1970s French – or even simply "Parisian" as Levinas says<sup>2</sup> – philosophical scene presented as the essential point of reference, but the aim of the book, in apparent disdain for its title, is indicated not as the foundation of a new humanism, but as a research on a kind of meaning to be found in the "proximity of the one-for-the-other"<sup>3</sup> of which the preface gives a brief sketch. The same kind of disappointment will be the fate of the reader seeking insight into notions like "self", "other", "identity", "culture" and a string of other notions that we so direly need to reflect on in the world that is ours and from which one would expect a humanism to provide philosophical and cultural-political guidance.

To be precise, these notions are not absent from Levinas' work. Not only are they present as terminology in his texts, but the terms (as they are traditionally used) are to be found at the very origin of the statement of Levinas' problem. What makes access to Levinas' work difficult is exactly the way in

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1 A slightly different version of this Chapter (up to §4) was published under the title "Rethinking the conditions for inter-cultural interaction. A commentary on Levinas' *Humanism of the other*", in a thematic issue on "The interaction between self and the others in the age of globalization" (guest editor, Jörn Rüsen) in the *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 7/2, December 2010, pp. 113-147.

2 HO 58 / HH 95.

3 HO 3 / HH 7.

which he uses these words. Invariably, the notions that we would like to interrogate the philosopher on are used, but while crossing out, as it were, our common understandings of these notions. What Levinas says of the introduction of his book applies too for his use of traditional philosophical terminology: just as the preface is not only a repetition of the content of the book but a first “urgent” commentary on it so as to partially *undo* what is said in the book, so too when he uses terminology, he uses it in such a way as to *undo* something of what has been said about, or by means of, those terms by the tradition of philosophical reflection. If we then want to expose ourselves to the perspective that Levinas presents on humanism, we will have to examine this way of using terms and partially undoing them at the same time. One understands Levinas when one hears how a traditional philosophical term “rings” after its ringing has been interfered with in this way.

In accordance with the general concern of Levinas’ entire philosophy, one wouldn’t be able to appreciate much of the after-ringing or reverberation of the notion “humanism” without that of “identity” and “alterity” or “same” and “other”. This shouldn’t be much of a surprise, because if it is true that the stakes of *Humanism of the other* are the same as those of Levinas’ philosophy in general (as pointed out at the end of Chapter 4), then we need just recall what has been said about the general concern of this philosophy at the end of Chapter 2: Levinas’ entire philosophy is motivated by his concern about the threat of political disasters, which tend to manifest themselves in the form of identity-enforcing totalitarian violence and that of indifferent plurality. It was argued that his philosophical project is a quest for the source of a non-totalisable alterity, which would interrupt the force of identity and give orientation to the indifferent, multiple cultural renderings of Being. Furthermore it is of considerable importance to recall that it was concluded that this double political concern is responded to in Levinas’ philosophy by recourse to the big notions of metaphysics – “same” and “other” or “identity” and “alterity” – which are meditated in the register of ontology and ethics.

To appreciate Levinas’ use of these terms, and thus his contribution to our subject matter, one has to consider the conditions under which the ringing of these words and the interference with them were initiated, long before writing *Humanism of the other*. One finds the first embryonic expression of this quest in two related essays: “Some reflections on the philosophy of Hitlerism” [*Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l’hitlérisme*] (1934<sup>4</sup>) and “On escape” [*De l’évasion*] (1935). Read together, they reveal how Levinas situates his philosophical problem at a political as well as an ontological level, an understanding of which is indispensable for understanding what he has in mind in the humanism of the other.

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4 In IH 23–33.

## 1 FIRST ATTEMPTS AT A POLITICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL FORMULATION OF THE PROBLEM

Levinas never made a secret of the fact that his philosophical agenda was inspired by his personal experiences.<sup>5</sup> His concerns, political as well as personal, are such that the question of the self and the other is placed firmly in the centre of his philosophy: victim of anti-Semitism in Europe, Jew amongst Christians and atheists, Russian- and Hebrew-speaking in a French and German world, and reader of the Talmud in a world of Greek thinking. In other words, Levinas lived and worked in the tension between identity and alterity on the cultural, political, religious, ethnic, intellectual and language planes. When, in the early 1930s, he observed the rise of Nazism, this tension gave birth to a philosophical problem that, through various reformulations, will remain the major concern for Levinas throughout his way of thinking. This problem concerns the relationship between the subject and his/her history or, one could say, it concerns the place to be accorded to the different narratives (cultural, religious, ethnic, etc.) that constitute the identity and the manner of being of the subject. What Levinas considers to be the decisive core of this issue is our “conception of the human being”.<sup>6</sup> It is only when one considers this core, namely one’s conception of the human being, that one is able to recognise that whenever the tension between the self and the other arises, what is at stake is the very humanity of the human being (*l’humanité même de l’homme*).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, what Levinas considers philosophically interesting, or disturbing rather, in the “philosophy of Hitlerism” is that its rise in the political arena confronts one with the ineluctable task of contemplating the humanity of the human being. He does so in his essay by referring to a long and multifarious tradition of liberalism in Europe. Liberalism, that encapsulates for Levinas the essence of the European tradition of the conception of the human being, will be used by him in this essay as a standard against which to measure innovation or deviation. The most salient aspect of this tradition is its care for the idea of a human subject that disposes of one or another kind of liberty or freedom. Liberty is the capacity to make a present moment; it is the opposite of being drawn along by history. In fact, as Levinas states, in absolute terms

5 See for instance the first pages of *Ethics and infinity* and the autobiographical essay, “Signature” in DF 291–295 / DL 405–412.

6 IH 27 and repeated elsewhere.

7 IH 33. Here we find again the term introduced in Chapter 4, when its echo in *Difficult freedom* was considered under the terms of the “rescue of the Human being” (DF 286 / DL 398, my translation).

the free individual “has no history”,<sup>8</sup> though it is evidently not denied that the individual makes history.

When Levinas highlights the most important moments of this liberal tradition of the West, he insists on the golden thread or “leitmotiv”,<sup>9</sup> starting curiously<sup>10</sup> with Judaism, running through Christianity and taken up again in modern liberalism, that situates human dignity – the dignity of every particular human being – in the capacity of the soul to disengage itself of its own history, from whatever particular narrative that could singularise it, give it its particular identity.<sup>11</sup> Marxism seems to be a breach with this tradition in that it considers the consciousness to be determined by Being,<sup>12</sup> meaning that the life of the soul, in the great variety of its expressions, reflects the material conditions of being of the respective classes of society. However, even in Marxism the consciousness retains the capacity to throw off the effect of the material conditions, and this capacity is situated in the act of taking cognisance of the social situation.<sup>13</sup>

A real breach with the European notion of the human being would take place only if the historical situation, attachment or identity of the human being is not taken to be secondary to the free soul, but the very basis of it.<sup>14</sup> Such a notion of the human being would centre on the human *body*. Now, one should be very careful not to rashly identify the bearers of such a notion of the human being only with Hitler or the Hitlerians (as Levinas calls them). Sure enough, in the first sentence of the essay Levinas, in accordance with the title of the essay, speaks of the “philosophy of Hitler”.<sup>15</sup> But on that same page, he also claims that, in as far as this philosophy evokes the question of the relationship between the soul and reality (or history), the “philosophy of Hitlerism goes beyond the philosophy of the Hitlerians”.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the section of the essays that explains this new notion of the human being contains no more precise indication of its bearers than a reference to “modern

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8 IH 24.

9 IH 26

10 “Curiously”, not in the sense that the Jewish roots of Western culture are ignored, but in the sense that it seems more logical to situate that root in what is today called the Middle East.

11 Cf. IH 26: “The equal dignity of all souls, independently from the persons’ material or social condition, does not follow from a theory that maintains beneath the individual difference an analogy of ‘psychological constitution’. Equal dignity should be attributed to the power given to the soul to free itself of *what was*, from all that tied it, from all that engendered it”.

12 IH 27.

13 IH 28.

14 IH 28.

15 IH 23.

16 IH 23.

Germany”<sup>17</sup> and “the Germanic ideal of the human being”.<sup>18</sup> No “Hitlerian” author is cited explicitly or named (though the two references to Nietzsche are probably not incidental). I insist on this point because Levinas opens up an ambiguous space in which the reader should fill in a name of a bearer of such a philosophy in which history determines the fate of the human soul – and it is of crucial importance for the understanding of Levinas’ entire philosophical project that one fills in the correct name: next to that of whatever Hitlerian, the name of Heidegger. This is the person from whom Levinas learned more about philosophy than from anybody else (except perhaps Husserl); it is also the person that Levinas believes provides the most illuminating perspective on his contemporary intellectual environment.

What makes it difficult to see Heidegger in this text – apart from the fact that he is never named – is that Levinas already transforms Heidegger’s analysis of the human being (or rather, *Dasein*), at the moment he redeploys it. Levinas does what Heidegger avoided in *Being and time*: he identifies human existence with the fact of being a body. Between the lines of Levinas’ text, one reads that it is Heidegger’s philosophy of *Dasein* that would clarify what it means to be attached to one’s body. According to Levinas

“[t]he body is not only closer and more familiar to us than the rest of the world, it doesn’t only command our psychological life, our mood and our activity. Beyond these commonplace observations, there is the feeling of identity.”<sup>19</sup>

And he continues by stating that the adherence of the body to the self “is an adhesion from which one can’t escape” (*est une adhérence à laquelle on n’échappe pas*).<sup>20</sup> The echo of one of Heidegger’s most important statements is still audible in Levinas’ text:

“Dasein [Levinas says “the body” – EW] is ontically ‘closest’ to itself, ontologically furthest, but pre-ontologically nevertheless not foreign.”<sup>21</sup>

Just as, in the new (Germanic) conception of the human being, one is attached to one’s body,<sup>22</sup> so in Heidegger’s philosophy one is attached to

17 IH 33.

18 IH 31.

19 IH 29.

20 IH 29

21 Martin Heidegger, *Being and time*. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (transl.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell, [1962] 1988, p. 37 / *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, [1927] 1993, p. 16 (translation modified). A similar claim is made after the introduction of the notion of mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*) (*Being and time. op. cit.* p. 67–68 / *Sein und Zeit. op. cit.* p. 41–43), to which we turn next in our text.

one's own being; in fact, what Levinas is doing here is to reformulate the most significant ontological insight provided by the ontic specifics of human existence (as analysed in *Being and time*) by an introduction of the body: as far as he is concerned, your body is the way in which your being is your own. Being [*Sein, être*] is always yours, in such a way that you cannot rid yourself of it. This fact of "being that is always someone's", Heidegger called "mineness" (*Jemeinigkeit*) and this term forms the centre of Levinas' polemics with his former teacher.<sup>23</sup> In the opening sentences of § 9 of *Being and time*, entitled "The theme of the analytic of *Dasein*" Heidegger explains mineness in the following words:

"We are ourselves always the entities or beings to be analysed. The Being of this entity is *at every instant mine*. In their very act of being these entities are themselves related to their being. As beings of the event of Being, these entities are entrusted to or delivered to their own being. The being is the concern for these entities."<sup>24</sup>

For Levinas this summarises the essence of the new conception of the human being, a conception that breaks with the European tradition:<sup>25</sup> through my body, Being or history is so much mine, that I am subjected to what Being or history imposes on me, to the identity (*Selbsttheit, ipséité*) that is historically constituted – and from this there is no escape. The

22 "[D]ans cet enchaînement au corps [...] consiste toute l'essence de l'esprit" (IH 30), says Levinas.

23 I have argued this in *De l'éthique à la justice*, Chapter I.

24 Freely translated from *Sein und Zeit. op. cit.* p. 41–42: "Das Seiende, dessen Analyse zur Aufgabe steht, sind wir je selbst. Das Sein dieses Seienden ist *je meines*. Im Sein dieses Seienden verhält sich dieses selbst zu seinem Sein. Als Seiendes dieses Seins ist es seinem eigenen Sein überantwortet. Das *Sein* ist es, darum es diesem Seienden je selbst geht." / *Being and time. op. cit.* p. 67–68.

The link between Levinas' essay on Hitlerism and Heidegger's idea of mineness was affirmed much later (1990), when Levinas commented on his early essay: "This article proceeds from a conviction that the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism [...] is inscribed in the ontology of Being, concerned to be [...]." Cited from the "Post-scriptum", in *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hittérisme*. Rivages poche (Petit Bibliothèque) 1997, p. 25.

25 It is not clear why Levinas, in this essay, puts so much emphasis on the long, continuous Western/European tradition of the liberty of the soul and condemns the breach with *that* tradition. One should notice that it is somewhat problematic, in that he formulates an argument for a conception of the human being that is precisely *not* determined by his/her history. In order to maintain the coherence of the essay one would have to take Levinas' insistence on the continuity of this European tradition not as a legitimisation of his argument, but only as the historical background to his ideas of which he approves. However, it is clear that such a benevolent reading would be somewhat forced. That Levinas had a very positive image of European culture is no secret and, as we shall see, even appeared at certain instances in the form of a Euro-centrism.

human being's life is characterised by care (*Sorge*), but every caring action is one that has already been entrusted to or surrendered to Being, which draws it along. In other words: "The essence of the human being is no longer in freedom, but in a kind of enslavement [*enchaînement*]"<sup>26</sup> and one can do no more than to accept this fatality.

The political consequence of such a notion of humanity is the immediate exclusion of politics as a condition to which free spirits consent.<sup>27</sup> Instead of the free play of ideas that would make truly human politics possible, ideas are imposed on individuals by their belonging to consanguine groups (or ethnic, cultural, religious and other groups by extension) – and this necessarily leads to expansion and war: racism seeks universalism by means of conquest, according to Levinas. Or again in other words: a particular identity spontaneously seeks to impose itself on what doesn't conform to it; identity spontaneously seeks to impose itself on non-identity, on alterity. These are, according to Levinas in 1934, the terms in which to consider the humanity of the human being that is being put at risk.<sup>28</sup> We have also seen the extension of the same line of reflection on identity and alterity in Levinas' remarks on ethnography, in Chapter 2, and on colonisation, in Chapter 3.

Levinas' reaction to this problem will not consist of simply returning to the tradition of the free soul (although his writings up to *Totality and infinity* could be considered to be, to a certain extent, a reworked appropriation of this tradition). His philosophical project starts from accepting the terms in which Heidegger conceives of human existence, but attempts to go beyond the fatality he sees in them.<sup>29</sup> The first step was to advance the formulation of the problem in ontological terms. This Levinas did in the 1935 essay, *On escape*. Hence forth, the primary strategy by which to tackle the question of the tension between "identity" and "alterity", "self" and "other", will be a dispute with the Western tradition of thinking in which the question of Being is central. In other words, the contemplation of political catastrophes (or the threat thereof) is translated into ontological terms inherited and adopted from Heidegger.

If indeed "the essence of the human being is no longer in freedom, but in a kind of enslavement", if human existence is indeed first and foremost characterised by mineness, what would this entail for human existence? In *On*

26 IH 30.

27 IH 30.

28 The most important elements of the 1934 study will reappear in Levinas' later analyses of political and cultural events. See for instance "On the deficiency without care, in a new sense" [*De la déficience sans souci au sens nouveau*] (GCM 43–51 / DVI 77–89, my translation).

29 Again, it is the same notion of fatality that Levinas identified in "primitive" religion and the means by which he identified it in Heidegger – as argued in Chapter 2.

*escape* Levinas provides what could be considered as a counter *Daseinsanalyse* (ontological analysis of the human being), in which he attempts to show some of the implications of Heidegger's idea of mineness. Being means for the human that one's identity is firstly to be considered not in terms of the reflection of the subject to itself, but in terms of continued existence (ipseity or selfness) – the perseverance in one's existence (Spinoza's *conatus*, that the later Levinas likes to use to gloss the ontological identity). Being means for human existence to be or to exist in such an intimate circuit of "exchange" with Being (i.e., mineness), that one always understands (pre-predicatively) Being in the different ways in which one is. In fact, the entire human existence is a long happening of the understanding of Being, i.e., *ontology*.<sup>30</sup> With one's whole existence at every moment, one is a *logos*, a "discourse", concerning the different ways in which one conjugates, as it were, the meanings of "to be", that is, ways in which one understands Being. But whereas mineness is at the source of selfness and all understanding (as a subsidiary of the understanding of being), one is at the same time tightly – Levinas says brutally<sup>31</sup> – bound to Being. There is no escape; one is attached to being without any exit – hence the title of the 1935 essay. All understanding, and hence all *meaning*, is imposed on humans by virtue of the circulation of understanding in which they find themselves with Being. In the terms used in Chapter 2: for *Dasein*, to be means to participate.

Levinas proposes no solution to this dilemma in 1935. The hermeneutics of facticity of human existence offered in the analyses of shame and nausea sets out to express the need of the human being to escape from the apparently inescapable burden of one's own identity, that is

"to break the most radical, the most inexorable, enslavement, namely the fact that the self is itself".<sup>32</sup>

The urgent problem of "finding the way out" could also be formulated as a question: "is ontology fundamental?". In these words (the title of the seminal essay of 1951), Levinas restates the question of the escape: are all forms of *meaning* dependent on ontology, on one's always brutally belonging to Being? Does the human being exhaust the meaning of his/her humanity and

30 This is the centre of Levinas' appropriation of Heidegger: "The whole human being is ontology [*Tout l'homme est ontologie*]." (ENT 2 / EN 13, translation modified, similarly GDT 58 / DMT 68).

31 That this idea of being narrowly attached to Being is opposed to a tradition of liberalism is reaffirmed in the 1935 essay: "The revolt of traditional philosophy against the idea of Being, proceeds from the discrepancy between human liberty and the brutal fact of Being that strikes it." (EV 91).

32 "[D]e briser l'enchaînement le plus radical, le plus irrémédiable, le fait que le moi est soi-même" (EV 98).

selfness by articulating the event (*Er-eignis*) of being?<sup>33</sup> Is there not perhaps another form of meaning that transcends my attachment to myself, to my identity, to my body, to history, and ultimately to Being?

Levinas' project will consist of arguing that, next to ontological meaning, or rather more original than ontological meaning, there is a kind of *meaning* that arises between people that is not ontological and he will argue that it is *ethical* in nature.<sup>34</sup> The entire question of human diversity, of the tensions involved in the relation between identity and alterity is made dependent on Levinas' Heideggerian inspired notion of identity and an alterity that will infringe on that identity. Let it be stressed that the terms in which Levinas approaches this question are terms of *meaning* and not in the first place that of an economics or politics of difference. In fact, he explicitly states that the alterity in which he is interested, the alterity that makes an escape from the fatal violence of identity as perseverance in selfness possible, the alterity that would be at the root of a peaceful co-existence amongst the diversity of peoples, is to be understood in a very particular way: the other is other –

“[o]ther, not at all because he would have other attributes or be born elsewhere or at another time, or be of a different race [...]. It is not at all the difference that makes alterity; it is alterity that makes the difference.”<sup>35</sup>

I rephrase: it is not at all the difference of singularising attributes of identity (of a different culture, ethnicity, religion, etc.) that constitutes what is essential to alterity; it is the ethical meaning of alterity that makes the difference with regard to the ontological meaning of the relationships between people. The solution, or rather the response, that Levinas proposes to the problematic tension between identity and alterity, will not reside in an articulation of the differences susceptible to prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, inequity or

33 These terms are borrowed from a later text – GCM 46 / DVI 82: “man exhausts the meaning of his humanity and his ipseity in articulating the *Er-eignis* of being.”

34 These terms are to be found in “Ethics of the infinite”, in *Dialogues with contemporary Continental thinkers. The phenomenological heritage*. Richard Kearney. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 49–69, here p. 57 / “De la phénoménologie à l'éthique”, in *Esprit* 234, 1997, pp. 121–140, here p. 129, where Levinas explicitly states that “it is my own personal task to identify this dual origin of meaning – *der Ursprung des Sinnhaften* – in the interhuman relationship “, these two sources of meaningfulness being phenomenological or ontological and ethical, respectively.

35 “Autre, pas du tout parce qu'il aurait d'autres attributs ou serait né ailleurs ou à un autre moment, ou parce qu'il serait de race différente. [...] Ce n'est pas du tout la différence qui fait l'altérité; c'est l'altérité qui fait la différence.” Cited from the interview “La vocation de l'autre”, in *Racismes. L'autre et son visage*. Grands entretiens réalisés par Emmanuel Hirsch. Paris: Cerf, 1988, p. 92.

other forms of violence, but in indicating that there is something different to the other (and that is *not* reducible to the qualities of the other) and that the subject (or self) cannot be indifferent to this alterity of the other. The most profound alterity of the other is situated *not* in his/her perceptible difference, but in the *non-in-difference* that the self discovers regarding the other, whoever that other may be. This alterity as the non-in-difference that underlies all difference restores to humans the full sense of their humanity that is at risk in the ontological reduction prevalent, according to Levinas' reading, in the Western tradition of thought. In other words, reflection on the problematic tension between identity and alterity should in final analysis be referred back to what constitutes humanity, namely ethicity, and it is only from this perspective of ethicity that a measure, or common discourse, is discovered that sets a limit to the engagements imposed by what would otherwise be an absolute cultural relativism. This latter point is Levinas' major concern of the first essay in *Humanism of the other*, to which we now turn.

## 2 THE CRISIS OF HUMANISM

*Humanism of the other* is a collection of three essays (published respectively in 1964, 1968 and 1970) to which a preface has been added for the publication in 1972. It represents (especially in the first essay) Levinas' first attempts to go beyond what he considered the insufficiencies of his major work of 1961, *Totality and infinity*, but without rejecting the basic convictions defended in that book. *Humanism of the other* is part of the transition<sup>36</sup> to the second phase of Levinas' work in which *Otherwise than Being* (1974) stands in the centre and of which the central piece, the article "La substitution" (first published in 1968), is contemporaneous with *Humanism of the other*. However, in *Humanism of the other* Levinas takes up the debate with Heidegger in terms similar to those formulated three decades earlier and extends it to a debate with contemporary anti-humanism (or the crisis of humanism) in the social sciences. Let's explore this statement in more detail.

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36 In situating *Humanism of the other* within the development of Levinas' work, it is probably most prudent to insist on its place as a transitional collection. One should especially be careful not to be guided merely by the date of initial publication of the essay of HO, but to consider also the notes available for Chapter 1 in the recently published first volume of the *Oeuvres complètes*. The 28 ideas that are formulated under the title "Sens et signification" evidently prepares this Chapter and are, according to the editorial note, written on an invitation card of 1954. However, according to the editor of these notes, Rodolphe Calin, it is unlikely that they were made before 1960 (personal communication to author).

In *Humanism of the other*, Levinas still considers Heidegger's philosophy as the best key to understanding what is really happening in his contemporary intellectual and even political scene.<sup>37</sup> One could summarise Levinas' reading of Heidegger in this book as follows. Firstly, ontologically human existence is first and foremost characterised by mineness – in particular, Levinas twice cites the phrase by which Heidegger captures the essence of the identity of the human being as care: in human existence the happening of being is what is the concern for the human being.<sup>38</sup> Secondly, the existence, consisting of understanding Being, is at the source of all meaning.<sup>39</sup> Thirdly, Being is so much mine, that my existence brings potential meanings of being to expression; but actually, what happens (and this comes better to the fore in the second Heidegger, in Levinas' view) is that I am seized by being that expresses itself through me<sup>40</sup> (this seems to be the point of convergence between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger).<sup>41</sup> Fourthly, this perspective on human existence necessarily problematises a notion of subjectivity as interiority and reflection; the end of the subject dawns when, as apparently for Heidegger, “the subject has nothing interior to express. It is altogether thought from Being and the truth of Being.”<sup>42</sup>

The consequence of this is that

“it is not the human being, that has an I don't know what proper vocation that would invent or seek or possess the truth. It is the truth [of Being – EW] that arouses and holds the human being (without holding any commitment to the human being).”<sup>43</sup>

37 The philosophy of after the so-called *Kehre* is interpreted by Levinas as an extension of implications of what is already implicit in *Being and time*. He refers to Heidegger's philosophy as “the most influential philosophic thought of our century, which already tries to be post philosophic.” (HO 60 / HH 99). And after having reformulated what he considers the appropriate response to anti-humanism, Levinas confronts Heidegger directly so as to indicate the ambition of his reconsideration of ethics (HO 65f / HH 107f).

38 HO 25, 29 / HH 41, 48 and paraphrased HO 47 / HH 76.

39 HO 25 / HH 41. HO 49 / HH 79: “Action, freedom, beginning, present, representation – memory and history – articulate in various ways the ontological modality that is consciousness.”

40 Cf. HO 47f / HH 76 where one finds a succinct summary of Levinas' perspective on Heidegger: “Even if man's existence – the being-there [= Dasein – EW] – consisted in existing in view of that existence itself, that *ex-sistence*, all those movements and reversals arousing and situating the human would be dedicated to caretaking or illuminating or obscuring or forgetting Being [*l'être*], which is not in the being [*étant*]. Subjectivity would appear, in view of its own disappearance, a moment necessary to the manifestation of the structure of Being, of the Idea.”

41 HO 17 / HH 29 and cf. ENT 112 / EN 122.

42 HO 75 / HH 122n4.

43 HO 47 / HH 76 – translation modified – and almost the same wording in HO 59 / HH 97.

One could call Heidegger's position, summarised in these points, as one of the end of metaphysics, as far as metaphysics depends on the idea of the individualist, reflective and autonomous or free subject. But this end of metaphysics stretches much further than just the thinking of one philosopher. In fact, it encapsulates the state of affairs in the human sciences, dominated by structuralism, at the time Levinas writes,<sup>44</sup> in which the subject (or at least a certain notion of the subject) has commonly become suspect: just as in Heidegger, here too the subject is not considered to hold the truth, but the truth – in this case the structures directing human phenomena – expresses itself through the human being.<sup>45</sup> The social scientific theories that are in accord with Heidegger's end of metaphysics,<sup>46</sup> are sometimes typified as representing a same end of the subject, "end of humanism" or "anti-humanism". These could, in turn, all be considered symptoms of what is called in Nietzschean parlance the death of God.<sup>47</sup>

This anti-humanism is presented in *Humanism of the other* from three perspectives: (1) the end of the human being as subject,<sup>48</sup> (2) the putting to question of the human being as a "rational animal" by the political catastrophes of the twentieth century<sup>49</sup> and (3) the crisis of culture due to the diversity of cultural expressions without common measure for evaluation.<sup>50</sup>

## 2.1 End of the subject

The first aspect of anti-humanism – the decentring of the human subject – has already been presented as an introduction to the crisis of humanism. This decentring consists of adjourning the autonomous subject with its lucid, re-

44 HO 58 / HH 95.

45 HO 47, 72n3 / HH 76, 118n3. One should be vigilant when reading Levinas' renderings of the essence of structuralism. In HO 71f / HH 118n1 he refers with approbation to the essay of Michel Serres, "Analyse symbolique et methode structurale" (in *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 171, 1967, pp. 437–452), as an illuminating interpretation of structuralism. I suspect that a detailed research into the sources of Levinas' knowledge and interpretation of structuralism would show that he owes a lot to this essay, if not perhaps as much as to Merleau-Ponty, for the development of his perspective on cultural relativism. The importance of such a research could be indicated by contrasting Levinas' remarks on the profoundest nature of structuralism in *Humanism of the other* with his admission in an interview of 1987 that "even today I still don't understand structuralism" (EL 161).

46 E.g., HO 61 / HH 100.

47 HO 58 / HH 95.

48 HO 58–61 / HH 95–101.

49 HO 45–46 / HH 73–74.

50 HO 9–25 / HH 17–41.

flective vision of its own interiority, and considering the human being, consciousness and all, as subordinate to anonymous structures. The roots of this idea go back at least as far as Hegel.<sup>51</sup> There is a substantial convergence between the (contemporary, structuralist) human sciences and Heidegger on this point, which amounts to the negation of interiority,<sup>52</sup> reducing consciousness to an epiphenomenon (but also shepherd, poet or messenger)<sup>53</sup> of an underlying structural process. Emblematic of this change in paradigm is the decentring of the Cartesian *cogito* by psychoanalysis: what was supposed to be the substantial subject as fortress against the *malin génie*, is now reduced to a mask, a *persona*<sup>54</sup> of dark forces that has taken control of it.<sup>55</sup> The same holds for the practice of ethnography that describes the objective structures underlying cultural phenomena, even whilst obeying such a structure.<sup>56</sup> Of the transmitted safe fortress of interiority remains not much more than an exposure to the whims of unmasterable structures and forces. Or again in ontological terms: the subject, even whilst conjugating the verb *to be*, is so dominated by it that every conjugation is only an apparent mastery, only a being subjugated to a meaning imposed on it by Being.

## 2.2 Questioning the rationality of the *animal rationale*

This dissolution of the subject as master of itself is reflected in the political scene. The subject that would, as autonomous agent, embark on realising a pre-meditated project, seems in reality to be only rushed along to tragedies for others and for itself.

“[T]hat politics and an administration guided by the humanist ideal maintain the exploitation of man by man, and war”<sup>57</sup>

is a paradox that invites one to disbelieve and disqualify the causality of the human agent (which amounts to the rejection of the subject as *causa sui*). This tragic paradox becomes almost comical when one considers the unparalleled means over which humanity in the twentieth century disposes and the ambitions formulated by people. The human being becomes ineffi-

51 HO 72n3, 60 / HH 118n3, 97.

52 HO 60, 61 / HH 99, 100.

53 HO 61 / HH 100–101.

54 Levinas plays with the French word “personne”: meaning either “person”, “somebody” or “nobody”.

55 Cf. HO 45 / HH 74, which amounts to the rejection of the subject as *subiectum* or *hypokeimenon*.

56 HO 47 / HH 77.

57 HO 59f / HH 97.

cient to the point of being the toy of its technology and of its political programmes.<sup>58</sup> The very idea of the human being as *animal rationale* is thus thrown into a crisis.<sup>59</sup> The idea of the subject as master of his/her intentions is not capable of articulating the most pressing questions of the after war years; for Levinas' contemporaries the deepest anguish

“comes from seeing revolutions founder in bureaucracy and repression and of totalitarian violence passing for revolutions”.<sup>60</sup>

And one can imagine that when the word “totalitarianism” is used, for Levinas the reminiscence of Hitler and the camps would not be far away.

### 2.3 Cultural relativity or the death of God

Although Levinas doesn't call the third aspect of anti-humanism by this name, his presentation of it in a book on an alternative humanism as well as the exact equivalence in his way of countering it (equivalent to his response to the other elements of anti-humanism), allow us to name it anti-humanist. This problem, which takes up a very big part of the book,<sup>61</sup> also leads us to what Levinas considers the core of anti-humanism, namely the so-called “death of God”.

The first chapter of *Humanism of the other* thematises cultural relativity. As indicated above, Levinas will tackle this problem by referring it to the constitution of meaning. He proposes a basic introduction to the question of cultural relativity by translating it into ontological terms according to which Being itself comes to expression in the multiplicity of cultural expressions;<sup>62</sup> every cultural action or object speaks of Being. In this, according to Levinas, contemporary philosophy is radically anti-Platonic:

“for Plato, the world of significations precedes the language and the culture that express it; it [the Platonic world of meanings – EW] is indifferent to the system

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58 HO 45 / HH 73.

59 HO 45, 48f / HH 74, 78. But one should be very careful in stating this point. Whereas Levinas remains sceptical as to the restoration of the *animal rationale* in the sense of mastering praxis (as set out here), his entire philosophical enterprise could be considered as rethinking the definition of the human being as *zoon logon echon* (of which *animal rationale* is the traditional Latin translation). Heidegger already undertook such an enterprise and Levinas never rejected the idea that the entire human being is a *logos* on being; what he did was to relativise the ontological *logos* that one is oneself, by another *logos*, spoken by the face of the other (HO 31 / HH 51).

60 HO 60 / HH 98.

61 HH 9–25 / HH 17–41 – much more than the previous two.

62 HO 18 / HH 30.

of signs that can be invented to make this world present to thought. Consequently, it [the world of meanings – EW] dominates the historical cultures.”<sup>63</sup>

Contemporary philosophy, therefore, is anti-Platonic in the sense that it rejects outright any conception of such an ultimate and authoritative world of meaning behind the diversity of cultures, and subordinates meaning to the way in which it is expressed, in other words, all meaning is dependent on the culturally specific way of its expression; without this specificity there is no meaning. If this is accepted, it would mean that there is no way to judge or evaluate cultures, or at least there is no way in which to judge particular cultures, without the judging itself being at the same time an expression of a particular culture. There would be no super-culture that transcends its expression. That this is maintained in modern ethnology and is also reflected in the politics of decolonisation (which is nothing less than the historico-political manifestation of the rejection of a trans-cultural access of the colonising forces to a trans-historical human ideal) has been discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.<sup>64</sup> Even Marxist theories that attempt to introduce a cross-cultural criterion by reference to human needs, inevitably slide into this cultural relativism since the discourse on needs is motivated by the will to create a new society and, thus, the very formulation and manifestation of needs is culturally determined.<sup>65</sup>

What this leads to is what Levinas calls “the cultural, aesthetic notion of signification [*la notion culturelle et esthétique de la signification*]”.<sup>66</sup> Such a notion of signification or meaning inevitably slides into absurdity, according to him – not the absurdity of absence of any meaning (since every culture would still have its internal coherence of references that would serve to give meaning to every cultural act or object), but, the absence of ultimate, trans-cultural or super-cultural reference. Levinas certainly does not deny that one could establish criteria against which different cultures or cultural elements could be compared or graded (such as efficiency in the realisation of particular kinds of project, for instance), but such criteria would themselves be culture specific.<sup>67</sup> Besides, such criteria would not be sufficient to determine if elements of cultures are of value at all. As far as the ontological per-

63 HO 18 / HH 31. See again Chapter 3, § 2 on Platonism and colonisation.

64 Having presented this line of thought on the anti-Platonism of contemporary culture, one could again refer to the essential equivalence that consistently guides this reflection from the moment Levinas jotted down the preparatory notes for it (now available under the “Notes philosophiques diverses”): “9° Anti-Platonism. Disorientation. Equivalence. Decolonisation.” (CdC 263).

65 HO 21–22 / HH 35–37.

66 OH 22 / HH 38.

67 HO 37 / HH 59.

spective on cultural diversity is adopted no finality could be reached on the significance or importance of a culture or of the practices that constitute a culture.<sup>68</sup> Up to this point Levinas ascribes to a cultural relativism. What is lacking from this picture, according to him, is the meaning of meaning or rather the sense of signification (in the terms of the title of HO, chapter 1), i.e., that which would provide the cultural diversity with an orientation. This lack of orientation in the cultural diversity, which is inherent in the contemporary cultural and aesthetic notion of meaning, bears, since Nietzsche, another name in philosophy: the death of God,<sup>69</sup> Levinas also calls it “the crisis of monotheism”.<sup>70</sup>

Far from resuscitating a God from one of the world religions or one from the philosophical tradition (but not without being inspired by what he has learned from Judaism and from Western metaphysics), Levinas first contests the status of transcendence of such a “God”: he ascribes to the death of a certain God, but believes that if philosophy is to surmount the problem of

68 “Absurdity does not lie in non-sense but in the isolation of countless significations, the absence of a sense that orients them. What is lacking is the sense of the senses” (HO 24 / HH 40). This statement is never justified by its author. Let it at least be noted that an interesting avenue for reconstructing a dialogue between Levinas and the Frankfurt School is opened by this remark: cf. Jürgen Habermas, “Zu Max Horkheimers Satz: “Einen unbedingten Sinn zu retten ohne Gott, ist eitel”, in *Texte und Kontexte*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991, pp. 110–126. Levinas’ constant companion in the first Chapter of *Humanism of the other* is Merleau-Ponty. Although no explicit reference to any text of Merleau-Ponty is made, it is not too difficult to find significant elements of the “cultural notion of meaning”, for instance in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), where Merleau-Ponty elaborates not only on the unity and plurality of culture as an expression of the body (pp. 110–112) and the fact that one is, through culture, linked with others and even responsible for others (p. 121), but proposes nothing more than history as the judge between these different cultural expressions. Likewise, Levinas’ politico-cultural diagnosis (in the absence of recognition of ethical alterity) from the first Chapter of *Humanism of the other* is captured succinctly in Merleau-Ponty’s *Sens et Non-sens* (Paris: Gallimard, [1966] 1996), “In politics, finally, the experience of these thirty years obliges one also to evoke the background of non-sense against which all universal undertaking stands out and that threatens is with failure.” (p. 8).

69 It should be underscored that what is at stake here is first of all a crisis of the human sciences and of contemporary European culture, and only secondarily the question of the existence of a deity. Cf. Paul van Tongeren, *Reinterpreting modern culture. An introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy*, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2000, of which the main point is summarised as follows: “The main problem which Nietzsche confronts us with is not so much that God is dead but that we do not understand or do not admit what this means. [...] His critique of religion is a critique of modern a-religiosity, a diagnosis of modern culture.” (p. 285).

70 HO 24 / HH 40.

absurdity it must revert to the notion of God or at least the infinite.<sup>71</sup> The God whom Levinas, the philosopher, believes is dead is the God of ontology.<sup>72</sup> The “God” that could orientate the plurality of cultures, on whom all cultures depend for the significance of their meaning, is the God of ethics.

To summarise: cultural diversity and equivalence – to which contemporary philosophy, social science and political reality attest – lead to an absurdity without any transcendent, super-cultural source of meaning that could orientate them. This lack of transcendence is rooted in the ontological existence of the human being, to be precise, in the mineness, from which, as far as one remains Heideggerian (and if Levinas’ reading of him is accepted) there is no escape. The diversity of *logoi* that human beings are, all speak of Being (they are ontology), but without any escape from their disorientating diversity. Seeking a transcendent meaning or sense, means the same as seeking an escape from mineness, which also means the same as seeking to overcome the death of God. And this in turn means seeking to prevent humanity from getting lost by lapsing into absurdity. In the first chapter of *Humanism of the other* Levinas gives a formulation of his problem in terms of culture, ontology and meaning. However, in the second and third chapters of his book, he argues that it would be in vain to attempt to respond to this problem by recourse to the resources or the subject (as has been indicated above). Let it be stated clearly that Levinas accepts a good number of major anti-humanist ideas<sup>73</sup> – as long as one leaves out of consideration what he will defend as ultimate meaning or the sense of all signification, namely ethicity.

### 3 HUMANISM AND ETHICITY

The problem, and the reason why Levinas feels himself called to write on the humanism of the other human being, is exactly that an infringement is taking place on the humanity of the self and the other. This happens in a

71 Levinas refers to the Second World War as a “hole in history – [years] when all the visible gods had abandoned us, where god was truly dead or had gone back to his irrevelation.” (HO 28 / HH 46). Compare with HO 25 / HH 41: “We do not think that what makes sense can do without God [...]” and HO 36 / HH 57 where he refers to the necessity of philosophical meditation “to resort to notions such as Infinity or God.”

72 Furthermore, as has been shown in his commentary on the “primitive” religions, he considers the “gods” to be dead (Chapter 2), and his reservations about certain traditional forms of Jewish expression declare the traditional monotheistic God, at least for intellectual and ethical purposes, dead (Chapter 4).

73 See also OB 127 / AE 203.

contemporary discourse in the social sciences that is typified as anti-humanist. Levinas doesn't hesitate to link this fact to the name of Hitler,<sup>74</sup> which means that theoretical anti-humanism is not simply an academic debate, it puts in jeopardy again, as Levinas said in 1934, the very *humanity* of the human being (the book *Humanism of the other* ends on exactly the same idea as that of the essay of 1934).<sup>75</sup> But how does Levinas justify this idea? And what does his notion of humanity consist of?

It becomes clear, right from the preface, that Levinas' concern in this book is with political and human scientific events or tendencies that do violence to the humanity of the human being. To this he attempts to give a response, which one knows from the title of the book he will identify in some way as a "humanism", in particular a "humanism of the other human".

In the preface, Levinas qualifies the project of his book by the word "*inactuel*" or later "*intempestif*". Sure enough, one could take this to mean non-topical, untimely or misplaced, and Levinas recognizes from the first page that his use of the word "humanism" could, in 1972, be considered to be out-of-date. But "*inactuel*" and "*intempestif*" are more of those words from the Western philosophical tradition that Levinas tries to provide with an overtone or a different reverberation. "*Inactuel*" and "*intempestif*" are in fact the French words with which one translates the German "*unzeitgemäß*", in particular as in the title of Nietzsche's book *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*. Levinas implicitly presents his book *Humanism of the other* as an *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtung*, an untimely meditation or an unfashionable observation (as the title of Nietzsche's book has been translated in English).<sup>76</sup> What is more, he will do so by opening up a new meaning of the word "*inactuel*", non-actual.

"Here the non-actual [*l'inactuel*] signifies the *other* of the actual [*l'actuel*] rather than ignorance and negation of it; the other of what, in the high Western tradition, is commonly called Being-in-act [*être-en-acte*] [...] the other of *Being-in-act*, but also its cohort of virtualities that are potentials; the other of Being, of the *esse* of Being, of the gesture of Being, the other of *fully Being* [*pleinement être*] [...] stated in this expression *in act* [*en acte*]; the other of Being itself – the *untimely* [*l'intempestif*] that interrupts the synthesis of presents that constitutes memorable time."<sup>77</sup>

74 OH 6 / HH 11; and cf. "Hitlerism" HO 29 / HH 47 and the reference to Léon Blum's prison writings of 1941–42, HO 28 / HH 46–47.

75 Cf. HO 69 / HH 113.

76 It should be observed that there is no other text of Levinas in which references to Nietzsche take such a dominant place.

77 HO 3 / HH 7–8, translation modified.

Without going into the detail of this dense statement, one should at least see that what Levinas defines as non-actual (*inactuel* and *intempestif*) and that is equivalent to “the humanism of the other human being”, is that which is other to the whole Western tradition of thinking<sup>78</sup> – from Aristotle (cf. “Being-in-act”) to Heidegger (cf. “the *esse* of Being”<sup>79</sup>) – that places reflection on Being in its centre. As indicated above, in the book *Humanism of the other*, Levinas is still occupied with the fact of mineness, i.e., one’s attachment to Being without any exit (“Being without issue”).<sup>80</sup> Levinas is still concerned with the ontological issue of being drawn along fatally by Being. And his response is not of the order of Being, in fact it is foreign to Being in that he defends the case for a kind of meaning that emerges independently of ontology,<sup>81</sup> and that is, for this reason, independent of Being-as-act, and therefore in-actual. Levinas’ humanism is untimely, not because it was unfashionable in the 1970s to defend humanism in philosophy, but it is untimely since it draws its sources from what is absolutely foreign to Being as time, and thus to all ontological sources of meaning. It is in-actual with reference to the human being whose concern in being would be caring for Being. What is untimely is a consideration of humanism viewed as ethnicity (or what Levinas names “ethics itself [*l’éthique même*]”<sup>82</sup>) that is not reducible to the *logos* of *Being*, to the cultural, social, religious, ethnic or whatever condition of the human being – as is done, for instance, in Nietzsche’s *On the genealogy of morals* – but an untimely consideration of

78 Whereas Levinas will be inspired by another tradition – that of Judaism – his concern here is not to confront Western culture with another culture, but to confront it with what is not only the other of Western culture, but also of all other cultures, including Judaism. Though, rarely, if ever, does Levinas state it so categorically. This does, of course, not take away from the fact that Judaism could be valued as testimony to that non-cultural meaning, a possibility that in turn should not be denied *a priori* to any other culture.

79 Cf. “essence of Being” (HO 61, 63 / HH 100, 103, where “essence” is used as an abstract noun describing the very verblatity of *Being*). This use of the word “essence”, rather than the traditional use, is explicitly announced in the preface to *Otherwise than Being*.

80 As is said in HO 59 / HH 97.

81 “[I]t means casting doubt on *experience* as source of sense” (HO 6 / HH 11) and HO 36 / HH 57: “the ‘term’ of such a movement, both critical and spontaneous [...] is no longer called Being.”; HO 67 / HH 110: “Non-essence of man” (a parody of anti-humanist criticism of humanist essentialism, but Levinas of course means something different by “essence”). One here already recognises the theme that would be encapsulated in the title of the book *Otherwise than Being or beyond essence*.

82 HO 28 / HH 46.

ethicity as an irreducible imperative or putting to question<sup>83</sup> addressed *by the other human being* to the (mostly pre-predicatively stated) ontological identity of the self. That is, a meaning, a *logos*, that is not in the indicative, but in the imperative or interrogative.

If indeed such an originary ethical meaning is more than mere wishful thinking, Levinas would have to present it in such a way that this meaning is not dependent on any specific culture.<sup>84</sup> The essence of Levinas' justification of ethics now needs to be outlined; this will be done referring mostly to *Humanism of the other*.

Levinas never renounces the great lesson from Heidegger, namely that meaning originates in the act of Being. What he does question is that this exhausts human access to meaningfulness. His whole project consists in demonstrating another, and more originary, source of meaning that is ethical. This twofold meaningfulness of human existence is analysed under the name of ageing (*vieillesse*).<sup>85</sup> The human being might be considered to be persevering in his/her existence, or identity as selfness – of which the visible appearance is ageing – but at the same time, this perseverance is executed only despite oneself (*malgré soi*) or despite Being (*malgré l'être*),<sup>86</sup> since the more one exists the more one consumes one's existence. In ageing one sees existence as being gained and lost at the same time. This passivity from which one's active existence cannot be detached is not the passivity of undergoing an experience (since this is, phenomenologically seen, only another form of activity), but what Levinas calls "a passivity that is more passive than any passivity".<sup>87</sup> Levinas' wager is that this losing existence despite yourself, this extreme passivity, has its own meaning, namely one of inevitably ceding your existence to the other. What Levinas says about the contemporary consensus concerning language, and by implication about all signification, holds equally for Levinas' perspective on the human being as incarnate *logos* (i.e., the active aspect of existence): certainly one should insist on its hermeneutic (and therefore also its historically contingent)

83 Cf. HO 6 / HH 11, and Levinas insists that this questioning is "a challenge of consciousness, not a consciousness of the challenge [*la mise en question de la conscience et non pas d'une conscience de la mise en question*]" HO 33 / HH 53; and a slightly different wording in HO 36 / HH 57.

84 HO 6 / HH 11.

85 It is used only in passing in HO 65 / HH 106, but developed in more detail in OB 51–56 / AE 86–94. It has already figured in our discussion in Chapter 1. I should here remind the reader of Levinas' declaration that his philosophical objective was the justification for these two sources of meaning.

86 OB 51 / AE 86, HO 68 / HH 110 or HO 51 / HH 82.

87 E.g., HO 6 / HH 11.

structure and on the cultural determinedness of all expressions,<sup>88</sup> but, he adds, one should not forget that the *logos*, in all its diversity, is addressed at someone, in the sense of being *exposed* to the other.<sup>89</sup> Without consideration for this directedness of the *logos* that one is, its meaning will remain absurd, like the meaning of a turn of speech in a dialogue in which the fact of being addressed by and responding to someone is ignored. Due to the extreme passivity of one's existence, despite yourself, your whole existence, your entire perseverance in a particular identity is exposed to or addressed to the other. This holds equally for all cultural expressions or utterances, it also holds for all actions (the ontological *logos* as *praxis*). Pre-predicatively, the human being is not only a *logos*, a "statement", concerning Being, but the human being is such a *logos* always as directed to someone in a very particular way, namely as a response to the other, as "an offering of oneself" (*une offrande de soi*).<sup>90</sup> The other enjoys a primary place in my existence such that the *logos* that I am, is always only a response to the other. This aspect of responsiveness is a surplus of meaning or sense<sup>91</sup> over and above, or rather before, the meaning of the ontological existence. This surplus in the response is therefore characterised by Levinas as not ontological, as ethical, i.e., the response-character of my whole being constitutes my being as *responsibility* for the other. The same idea is expressed differently from the side of the other: the face of the other speaks;<sup>92</sup> it imposes on the self an inalienable task of responsibility. In fact the other elects the self, as it were, as unique to this responsibility. No one could replace the self in this task and the responsibility remains infinite. This ethical appeal from the other to the self invests it with the first meaning: mere formal ethicity. This non-ontological meaning is completely independent from all hermeneutic and cultural conditions, but determines the latter decisively, since these conditions come

88 HO 30 / HH 49–50.

89 HO 63 / HH 104. "[B]efore it is celebration of Being, expression is a relation with the one to whom I express the expression and whose presence is already required so that my cultural gesture of expression can be produced. [...] The other] is, primarily, *sense* because he [or she] lends it to expression itself, because only through him [or her] can a phenomenon such as signification introduce itself, of itself, into Being." (HO 30 / HH 50).

The subject is thus not only decentred by the structures identified by the human scientists and thus exposed to the exterior rather than collected in its own interiority (as described above), but also, and Levinas would say most importantly, one is exposed to the other. This exposure is the advent of ethicity.

90 HO 75n4 / HH 122n4, my translation.

91 HO 69 / HH 113.

92 HO 31 / HH 51.

only “after” ethnicity.<sup>93</sup> This is the meaning and sense of all culture, it is the “God” that Levinas believes is to be salvaged.<sup>94</sup> The world may be de-Westernized, but not dis-orientated, according to Levinas’ play on words<sup>95</sup> – a new form of Platonism is introduced in which the entire trans-cultural hinterworld consists only of the Good beyond Being.<sup>96</sup>

This ethnicity thus resides in an “intrigue” or “plot”<sup>97</sup> that “occurs” between the self and the other: the alterity (of the other) is not to be understood as the difference of the other with respect to the self (since this would make it a relative alterity); it is the other *putting to question* the self (the ontological identity), making an *appeal* to the self for his/her responsibility, and thus investing the self with the most decisive mark of identity: being elected to respond to the other. This obligation of the self towards the other is a duty

“that did not ask for consent, that come into me traumatically, from beneath all memorable present, an-archically [used in the etymological sense of “not-foundationally” – EW], without beginning. [The duty] came without being offered as a choice, came as an election where my contingent humanity becomes identity and unicity, through the impossibility of escaping from election.”<sup>98</sup>

Thus is answered what the title of the book means: humanism is a discourse on humanity, but in which humanity, even though it says something about the unity of all human beings<sup>99</sup> transcends the idea of “humanity” as indication of a genus of animal – humanity contains an inherent asymmetry: it doesn’t mean the same for the other and for the self. For the *other* “being human” means to exert a pre-predicative imperative or questioning on the self (i.e., neglecting the ethical alterity of the other equals infringing on that person’s humanity); for the *self* “being human” means to have one’s

93 HO 36 / HH 58.

94 But there is nothing obvious in this appellation: the Good, as ultimate sense of valuation, is a value “that, by abuse of language, is named. A value that is named God.” (HO 54 / HH 87 and see HO 56 / HH 89).

95 HO 37 / HH 60.

96 HO 54 / HH 86.

97 The term “intrigue” is not used in *Humanism of the other*, but introduced in “La trace de l’autre” (first published in 1963, DEHH 187–202) and is used to describe the originary ethnicity linking the self and the other in exactly the same terms as in the last part of Chapter 1 of HO. See also the use of “intrigue” in the definition given of ethics: “We call ‘ethical’ a relation between terms where both are linked neither by a synthesis of understanding, nor by a relation of a subject to an object, but where the one weighs on the other or is important for the other, or is meaningful for the other, where they are linked by a plot that knowledge can neither exhaust, nor sort out [*une intrigue que le savoir ne saurait ni épuiser ni démêler*].” DEHH 225.

98 HO 7 / HH 12–13.

99 HO 6 / HH 11.

identity before anything else in the assignment to respond to the other (i.e., removing from the self its obligation to the other is an infringement on the humanity of the self),<sup>100</sup> the *logos* (or identity) that the self inevitably, is, now is a *logos* addressed to the other, in response to the other, and to the benefit of the other. The identity of the self is a sign for-the-other.<sup>101</sup> Levinas' humanism is a humanism "of the other human being" in that it could not be a humanism of the single self. It is a humanism that depends on the other, it is "anchored" in alterity, and thus it is a humanism to which the other has the right, it is the other's humanism and thus a humanism for the other.<sup>102</sup> But the humanity of the other and the humanity of the self imply one another mutually in an inseparable way. If this is what Levinas understands under his "humanism", then it is this double decentering of humanism – its orientation from the other (rather than from the self) and from alterity (rather than from ontology) – that warrants qualifying Levinas' stance as that of a *post-anti-humanist humanism*.

#### 4 "ETHICAL CULTURE" AND THE "CULTURAL AND AESTHETIC NOTION OF MEANING"

In the circumscription of humanism in the opening paragraphs of this Part the very important place of cultural products in the life of humanism has been pointed out. Yet, from the preceding discussion, in which it was shown how Levinas renews the notion of humanism with recourse to the context-independent meaning of the appeal to responsibility, imposed by the other on the self, it is still not indicated in what way the ethical would "make sense" of the plurality of cultures. Levinas therefore needs to explicate the tensions between these two positions. To be true, Levinas doesn't conclude the discussion of the "cultural and aesthetic notion of meaning" without reinvesting the very notion of culture with a new meaning:

100 HO 66 / HH 109. One sees this asymmetrical, but linked, salvaging of the self and the other in different terms also in the preface to *Totality and infinity*, amongst others.

101 HO 7, 75n8 / HH 13, 122n8.

102 See also Levinas' clarification: "I don't affirm human saintliness; I say that man cannot question the supreme value of saintliness. In 1968, the year of questioning in and around the universities, all values were 'up for grabs', with the exception of the value of the 'other man', to which one was to dedicate oneself. [...] Man is the being who recognizes saintliness and the forgetting of self [*l'oubli de soi*]. [...] Man is not only the being who understands what beings means [...]" (A&T 180 / AT 181).

“We will conclude by saying that before signification is situated in Culture and Aesthetics it is situated in Ethics, presupposition of all Culture and all signification. Morality does not belong to Culture; it allows us to judge, to uncover height. Height ordains being.”<sup>103</sup>

In a paper published in 1983, “The philosophical determination of the idea of culture”<sup>104</sup> he takes this perspective on culture further by calling this ethics an “ethical Culture”. This notion seems to be justified by the fact that ethics, as the fact of always responding to the other, gives rise to a new notion of spirit/mind (*esprit*)<sup>105</sup> that is defined by this responsibility to the other rather than by expressions in art and poetry. It is a culture that is defined in opposition to barbarism, but where barbarism is implicitly defined by the reduction of the human being to Being (one could recall the remark of Levinas’ in *On escape* that “every civilization that accepts Being, the tragic despair that it entails and the crimes that it justifies, deserves the name of barbaric”).<sup>106</sup> The culture that is ethics is the

“breach made by humanness in the barbarism of Being, even if no philosophy of history guarantees us against the return of barbarism”.<sup>107</sup>

One might perhaps reformulate that this “ethical culture” is a humanism without an optimism of progress. It would also be a humanism without any *Bildung* or cultural formation towards a pre-established model of an ideal human being, but rather a humanism or an ethical culture that is constantly questioned by the other’s appeal to responsibility. In this respect, the humanism of *Humanism of the other* differs from the two essays on education and humanism in *Difficult freedom* (see Chapter 4) and especially the earlier one, in that the philosophical text makes no plea for a humanistic study of certain cultural traditions of reflection on ethics (although it certainly doesn’t exclude it).

But *Humanism of the other* gives us a better, albeit surprising, idea of what such an ethical culture is, that transcends all particular cultures and in the light of which all cultural events – including all forms of relationships and interactions between the self and the other – could be judged. Like all cultures, ethical culture identifies the self. But in Levinas’ notion of ethical culture this happens in a very paradoxical way. What is most intimate about one’s identity, the very non-founded foundation thereof, is the unique election to be responsible for the other (and in this notion the phi-

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103 HO 36 / HH 58, translation modified.

104 ENT 179–187 / EN 185–194.

105 ENT 187 / EN 193.

106 EV 127.

107 ENT 187 / EN 194.

losophical re-appropriation of humanism is very close to that of the two texts from *Difficult freedom*). One's identity is the other in the self, to the point where the meaning of my identity depends decisively on me being for-the-other, as if I were a sign for the other.<sup>108</sup>

"To be Me/Ego, thenceforth signifies being unable to escape from responsibility, as if the whole edifice of creation stood on my shoulders."<sup>109</sup>

And this meaning that constitutes the identity decisively undermines my ontologically constituted identity. The most intimate of the identity of the self is the other that invests it with an infinite obligation. Consciousness, and for the same price, the whole existence of the self "loses its first place",<sup>110</sup> since it is disturbed by an originary alienating proximity of the other.<sup>111</sup> And since the other has the primacy in the identity of the self, Levinas expresses this inversion (or substitution as he also calls it)<sup>112</sup> with a grammatical imagery, claiming that

"[t]he active I [*Moi*] returns to the passivity of a *myself* [*soi*], to the accusative of the *me* [*se*] that is derived from no nominative, to the accusation prior to any misdeed."<sup>113</sup>

This form of identity in the accusative is expressed in a Biblical formula by which to declare one's ethical availability: "Me voici!" ("here I am!"), and that Levinas frequently cites<sup>114</sup> (the English, "Here I am!" unfortunately restores the nominative form of the personal pronoun). I am *me* before I am *I*, because of the originary exposure to the other.

My identity is thus not that last stronghold of my being-at-home in the world; it is rather the fact that as

"[f]oreign(er) to itself, obsessed by others, un-quiet, the I is hostage, hostage in its very recurrence of a "me" endlessly failing to itself".<sup>115</sup>

108 HO 7 / HH 13, as stated above.

109 HO 33 / HH 53.

110 HO 32 / HH 53.

111 "[I]n the approach to others, where others are from the start under my responsibility, 'something' has overflowed my freely made decisions, has slipped into me unbeknownst to me, alienating my identity." (HO 62 / HH 102).

112 HO 6 / HH 111

113 HO 64 / HH 105, similarly HO 68 / HH 111, translation modified.

114 Although this formula is used in numerous places in the Hebrew Bible, it is perhaps not insignificant to consider the note in the *Carnets de Captivité* where Levinas expresses his appreciation for the place that this formula has in the story of the calling of Samuel (CdC 78, 83). The child Samuel, who had not yet learned to hear the voice of God, thinks that it is the priest Eli that calls him. Although Levinas doesn't explicitly say so, the confusion of the call of God and the call of the other, is probably what makes this passage exceptional.

115 HO 67 / HH 109, translation modified.

In fact the self's identity consists originarily in being without identity,<sup>116</sup> since its very identity is constituted by a difference:

"The difference that gapes between ego and self, the non-coincidence of the identical, is a thorough non-indifference with regard to people."<sup>117</sup>

Levinas shares the anti-humanist liking for the line of Rimbaud "Je est un autre" ("I is another");<sup>118</sup> he fully embraces a decentering of the subject, but in terms of his own, claiming to be even more radical than the other anti-humanist theorists.

This is the identity with which the super-cultural ethical culture stamps all agents.<sup>119</sup> It is also the conviction with which Levinas challenges Heidegger<sup>120</sup> and with him the entire Western tradition of philosophy and culture (in accordance with what has been stated from the outset – see §1, above). However, in this particular part of Chapter 3 of *Humanism of the other* (§IV entitled "L'étrangeté à l'être", strangeness or foreignness to Being) Levinas clearly sets up two traditions against one another: on the one hand the tradition of the pre-Socratics, Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Heidegger (and the latter's readings of Hölderlin and Trakl) are named and referred to by the "être" (Being as a verb or *to be*) in the section's title; on the other hand, representing the "étrangeté à ..." (strangeness to ...) is the Bible,<sup>121</sup> more precisely the *Tanakh* (that is also referred to as the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament) and the tradition of its interpretation (that echoes the citation of the Babylonian Talmud as epigraph to this chapter of *Humanism of the other*), of which the books of Genesis, Leviticus, Lamentations, Jeremiah and the Psalms are named. This opposition advances the idea of ethics as a strangeness to Being (that I have explained above; see also the discussion of the in-actuality of ethics, above). Not only is one's identity originarily not determined by your place in the world or in history, but since the self is a stranger to himself/herself nobody is (originarily) at home (*Personne n'est chez soi*).<sup>122</sup>

116 HO 68 / HH 110.

117 HO 66 / HH 108–109, translation modified.

118 HO 60 / HH 97 and especially HO 62 / HH 103.

119 And the other is as if in the image of God – not an icon of God, but as it were, a trace of God (HO 44 / HH 69).

120 HO 65ff / HH 107ff.

121 As Levinas says in HO 66f / HH 108, 109.

122 HO 66 / HH 108. With the theme of being a stranger Levinas implicitly polemicalises with Heidegger as the author of texts like *Wohnen, Bauen, Denken* and especially the *Brief über den "Humanismus"* (compare for instance the ethical strangeness with Heidegger's idea of homelessness [*Heimatlosigkeit*] that is constituted by a forgetting of being [*Seinsvergessenheit*], as expressed in P 258 / W 339). A careful comparison of these two texts on humanism would bring a myriad of such implicit references to the fore. That would, however, make a

However, this opposition suggested by Levinas evokes two important questions: firstly, if it is true that the second of these traditions does better justice to ethical alterity, how should its relationship with the dominant Western tradition in Europe be considered? This is an intra-cultural question. The second question, which is trans-cultural, is the following: how could Levinas justify using a *particular culture* to present the case for the trans-cultural ethical culture?

- (1) Western culture is dominated by ontology or what Levinas elsewhere calls gnoseology.<sup>123</sup> The practice of placing this form of signification centrally and maintaining its dominance is possible only by forgetting the ethical meaning of people and veiling this meaning in philosophy.<sup>124</sup> Levinas is probably thinking of the Jews in Europe (but not exclusively of them) when he indicates the price of this forgetting and this veiling – the meaning of their suffering, the meaning that considers ethics to be primary and of which their writings testify “is not a philosopher’s construction; it is the unreal reality of persecuted people in the everyday history of the world”.<sup>125</sup>

Suppression or violence on the level of ontology, reducing ethical meaning to ontology, is reflected in violence in political reality – such is the relation of the Jewish tradition to the Western world in which it has had to cope with a long history of adversity. Yet, as significant as the suffering of Jews in Europe might be for such a reflection on the political consequences of covering up ethical meaning (a claim that seems to support Levinas’ “humanism of the suffering servant” from *Difficult freedom*), this does not amount to any conclusion regarding the desirability of either a Hebraic humanism or a humanism of patience. In other words, the reminder of Jewish suffering in the philosophical

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separate study. Behind these polemics is a favourite image of Levinas – opposing Ulysses that returns to his *patria* to Abraham that forever leaves his behind – as symbols guiding Western civilization and Judaism respectively, but also as narrative reflection of the logic of ontology and ethics respectively.

- 123 OB 64 / AE 104: “Western philosophy has never doubted the gnoseological, and consequently ontological, structure of signification.”
- 124 HO 67f / HH 110.
- 125 HO 67f / HH 110, translation modified. Compare with the remark in the essay in *Difficult freedom* on anti-humanism and education (and the discussion in Chapter 4) where Levinas underscores the fact that Jews in Europe have had a foretaste of the “crisis of the human ideal” (DF 281 / DL 391). Furthermore, the Biblical theme of the suffering servant that Levinas interprets as a symbol of all the conquered and suffering that demand justice (DF 287 / DL 399 and discussed in Chapter 4) is echoed here.

text doesn't permit us to settle the unresolved state in which Levinas' humanism of *Difficult freedom* has been left at the end of Chapter 4.

- (2) But Levinas' way of going about this matter should retain our attention. I have said that the third aspect of Levinas' problem with anti-humanism is that of cultural relativism and that this could be solved only if a super-cultural point of orientation could be found. However, it is impossible for Levinas to do so in a way other than culturally determined: he attempts to develop a discourse on ethics that would be acceptable within the discourse of Greek thinking, i.e., Western philosophy. The choice of discursive partner or opponent is easily imposed by the historical contingency of Levinas' life, but also the dominance of Western civilisation in recent world history. He polemicalises with this form of discourse exactly for its forgetting of a kind of meaning in the name of which Levinas challenges Western thinking, that is, in obedience to this primary meaning. That meaning, Levinas finds better attested to or more sensitivity shown for, in the tradition of Jewish thought. But one should be careful to understand correctly what he does. On the one hand Levinas explicitly does not want to challenge philosophy with recourse to the authority of religion.<sup>126</sup> On the other hand, Levinas is aware that his very allegiance to the game rules of Western philosophy becomes a question in the light of the theme of his philosophy, namely the primacy of ethics. This question opens up a space for introducing "the other" (written in inverted commas, since it is meant in the minor sense of cultural difference<sup>127</sup>) of Western philosophy, namely Jewish thought. And why not, asks Levinas, draw on texts that are equally part of the European cultural heritage as those of Hölderlin and Trakl commented on by Heidegger, namely the books of the Jewish Bible?<sup>128</sup> The whole question of the relation between Judaism and the West, between religion and philosophy, is put in to play here. Is the other tradition of the West just associated with it by accident, is it only a monster, a historical freak, that places Judaism as an

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126 HO 66 / HH 108: "Biblical verses do not function here as proof but as testimony of a tradition and an experience." Compare this declaration with the conclusions concerning the form of authority of religious scriptures supposed by Levinas from the readers of his essays on humanism in *Difficult freedom* (Chapter 4, above).

127 A tension in this minor use of the term "other" should be noticed: Judaism cannot simply be considered the other of Western culture if it is at the same time claimed that it is part of the European cultural heritage. Its otherness is rather of the nature of having been partially absorbed, mostly through Christianity, into the Western heritage and in this way to a certain extent obscured.

128 HO 66 / HH 108.

annex to the West?<sup>129</sup> Or is the presence of Judaism testimony to the insistence of the appeal of the other (in the context of the West), and of ethnicity in the face of the other (testimony to it, but not the appeal itself!<sup>130</sup>)? Jewishness by its existence of living without a State (up to 1948), i.e., living the condition of being a stranger or foreigner to the world, and bearing the consequences thereof, and by its primacy accorded to ethics *testifies* to the non-Being or beyond Being<sup>131</sup> suppressed by the West in culture, as in politics.

Of course there is a question of cultural specificity in *Humanism of the other*. But the choice of the cultural specifics of his polemics is determined by the contingency of the author's historical situation; and the choice for Judaic inspiration is never justified by a supposed superiority of that culture. For Levinas, the "Jewishness" to which the Biblical citations and Talmudic references in his philosophical thought solicits some consent, *does not* simply mean believing in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it does not require being a child of Abraham, or being a protagonist for Zionism or living in the State of Israel, it doesn't mean speaking Hebrew (though it doesn't exclude these either) – it means having in final analysis, in what ultimately counts, no identity: being someone else, being without a homeland.<sup>132</sup> For Levinas

"Israel, beyond the Israel of flesh and blood, encompasses all people who refuse to accept the purely authoritarian verdict of History."<sup>133</sup>

129 HO 66 / HH 108.

130 Although – and we shall see this problem in Chapter 6, §1 as exposed by Robert Bernasconi – doesn't Levinas say that there are people (Jews as he implies) whose very existence is one of non-essence or beyond Being (HO 67f / HH 110)? As far as this is insinuated, Levinas infringes on his own notion of the alterity of the other as not determined by ontological givens. In saying this, one should however not forget the close link between the mortality of the other (and thus his/her suffering), which is a non-ontological "phenomenon" and alterity.

131 HO 54, 67 / HH 86, 110

132 And to an important extent, this is true also for Levinas' Judaic writings – as was argued in Chapter 4. The relation between philosophy and Judaism in Levinas' work is quite complex and there exists up to now no clear consensus amongst scholars as to how one is to conceive of the articulation between the two elements. I have presented and motivated my own view on this issue, beyond what is possible to do here, in "Giving up your place in history. The 'position' of Levinas in philosophy and Jewish thought", in *Journal for Semitics* 16/1, 2007, pp. 180–193.

133 OS 65 / HS 88. This kind of expression of a universal, anonymous Israel, of which one finds also a "European" equivalent in Levinas, poses problems that will be exposed in Chapter 6. The important point is that whatever excellence can be attributed to Israel or the Jewish religious community, cannot be denied *a priori* in other religious or cultural forms.

And in this sense do not dwell in Being, as Heidegger would have it. But since Levinas draws his inspiration from the Jewish testimony and formulates his plea in the language of Western philosophy – both of which are manifestations of Being – he is obliged, in obedience to originary ethnicity, which is the theme of his plea, to cross out as it were everything he says. Hence the central importance of the first paragraph of the preface of the book, in which this crossing-out of what follows in the book, is announced (as discussed in the introduction to the current Chapter). The text in which Levinas pleads for the recognition of the originary ethnicity of the other, is inevitably expressed in a particular cultural discourse and thus constitutes the risk that it might at the very moment of testifying to the other, be the first step to its veiling and forgetting. If this holds for Levinas’ philosophical text, it would likewise hold for his Talmudic readings and, in fact, for the Rabbinic literature itself. The humanism of the other, as the “ethical culture” of responsibility for the other, draws all of its meaning from a Talmudic-independent resource. No philosophical justification can be given for a Hebraic humanism or for a humanism of patience in which the study of the Talmud is central. However, if it can be argued that the Talmud testifies truly and effectively to the “unique sense” that is the ethical alterity of the other, then it can be recommended for study by all people, independent of their cultural background – but this, together with the study of any other text that could plausibly be claimed to have the same merits.

Thus we return to the preface from which the exploration of *Humanism of the other* was launched. Having followed the complex flow of arguments of this book, the examination of its import can be further examined by a strategy of comparison.

## 5 “REAL HUMANISM”: AN UN-LIKELY FAMILY PORTRAIT

Already from the title of the book, it is clear that Levinas is looking for a humanism that takes full cognition of the ambient anti-humanism. This humanism should be a defence of the (other) human being or of humanity, but in such a way that it could critically respond to anti-humanism.<sup>134</sup> Levinas’ humanism is presented as a radicalisation of and a going beyond anti-humanism, since it commences as the question:

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134 HO 69 / HH 112.

“couldn’t humanism take on some sense if we thought through to the very limit the denial that Being inflicts on freedom? [...] Couldn’t this sense be found without getting pushed to the “Being of beings”, to system, to matter?”<sup>135</sup>

This question could function as a point of departure, since Levinas accepts and appreciates to a certain extent the criticism of subjectivity inherent in all anti-humanism:

“Its inspired intuition is to have abandoned the idea of person, goal and origin of itself, in which the ego is still a thing because it is still a being.”<sup>136</sup>

However, his anti-humanism respecting humanism consists of conceiving differently the subject (as is programmatically stated in the preface to *Totality and infinity*) and the humanity of the human being.

Our understanding of Levinas’ enterprise can be advanced by comparing his humanism to the ideas on the same subject in the work of some of his contemporaries – and assuming the risk that the shortness of presentation may entail simplification.<sup>137</sup> The ideas of Sartre, Heidegger and Althusser naturally spring to mind for this kind of exploration, as these authors were some of the most significant contemporary contributors to the debate on humanism.<sup>138</sup> The aim of this sub-chapter is not to show

135 HO 49f / HH 80.

136 OB 127f / AE 203.

137 One could certainly choose a number of different ways to situate the philosophy of Levinas in general and of *Humanism of the other* in particular. Phenomenology, Marxism, postcolonial studies or the liberalism-communitarianism debate could equally provide a background against which to interpret this book of Levinas.

For all that follows Tom Rockmore’s *Heidegger and French philosophy. Humanism, anti-humanism and being*. London and New York, Routledge, 1995 (especially chapters 5, 6, 7 and 9) may be consulted. The older essay of Eugenio Garin, “Quel ‘humanisme’? (Variations historiques)” (*Revue internationale de philosophie*, 85–86/1968, pp. 263–275), gives a still very useful contemporary orientation to the humanism debate. A good overview of the French debate can be found in Sean Homer “Humanism and anti-humanism” in *Encyclopedia of modern French thought*. Christopher John Murray (ed.). New York and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004, pp. 331–334.

138 The list is of course in no way exhaustive. For example, the position of Lévi-Strauss is especially interesting in this context, but, being spoiled for choice, he is left out, having already figured in Chapter 2. For a valuable overview of Lévi-Strauss’ position on humanism see Denis Kambouchner, “Lévi-Strauss and the question of humanism (followed by a letter from Claude Lévi-Strauss)”, in *The Cambridge companion to Lévi-Strauss*. Boris Wiseman (ed.). Cambridge, et. al.: Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 19–38. First markers for a comparison of humanism in Merleau-Ponty and Levinas are given by Robert Bernasconi, “One-way traffic: the ontology of decolonization and its ethics”, in *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (eds.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990, pp. 67–80.

that Levinas is always right, but simply to draw more sharply the contours of his humanism of the other human. A critical view on Levinas' thought will have to wait till Chapter 6.

## 5.1 Sartre: humanism as existentialism

Existentialism was a humanism, and for that reason also (ever since Heidegger's *Letter on "humanism"*) bore much of the brunt of anti-humanism. In reading *Existentialism and humanism*,<sup>139</sup> it becomes clear very quickly that, compared to Sartre, Levinas is much closer to anti-humanism.

Sartrean humanism takes as its point of departure the human subject.<sup>140</sup> This subjectivity reveals itself in action and is determined by no essence, according to the well-known formula "existence precedes essence [*l'existence précède l'essence*]"<sup>141</sup>. In this undeterminedness resides the most profound dignity of the human being.<sup>142</sup> The human being is nothing but that which he/she has made himself/herself to be,<sup>143</sup> and has therefore to take responsibility for what he/she is.<sup>144</sup> In freedom, one doesn't only create or choose oneself, but also creates an image of what the human being could be.<sup>145</sup> The conscious, willed project of self-creation is, however, to be executed without recourse to any pre-established set of principles. In this sense, Sartre swears his allegiance to the death of God. And since there is no God to guarantee transcendent principles,<sup>146</sup> the human being is condemned to freedom, condemned to invent humanity at every instant of acting.<sup>147</sup> Matters are thus as the human being decides them to be<sup>148</sup> or again, "the destiny of the human being is in himself/herself".<sup>149</sup>

139 For an engaging reading of Sartre's earlier philosophy in which the question of humanism takes an important place, see Alain Renaut. *Sartre. Le dernier philosophe*. Paris: Grasset and Fasquelle, 1993.

140 E&H 26, 44, 52 / EH 17, 63, 84.

141 E&H 26 / EH 17.

142 E&H 28, 45 / EH 22, 65.

143 E&H 28, 41, 50 / EH 22, 55, 78.

144 E&H 29 / EH 24.

145 E&H 30 / EH 27. Cf. E&H 29 / EH 24–25: "Subjectivism means, on the one hand the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. [...] For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be."

146 E&H 33 / EH 35.

147 E&H 34 / EH 37–38.

148 E&H 41 / EH 54.

149 E&H 44 / EH 62.

That such a declaration of the death of God accompanied by a strong, free, autonomously acting subject would seem, from an anti-humanist perspective, nothing more than mere lip service doesn't surprise us. In the place of the dead God arises the Sartrean subject that is (as Sartre himself recognises) in continuation with the Cartesian *cogito*.<sup>150</sup> Existentialism reconstructs, in the centuries old tradition, humanism on the foundation of a metaphysics of the subject.<sup>151</sup> The self-conscious and free subject is the basis of truth, also of the truth of existentialism as a humanism and this is the very foundation of human dignity. Sure enough, there is an attempt by Sartre to overcome what he conceives as a solipsistic pitfall in the *cogito*: I need the other to become conscious of myself<sup>152</sup> and it is in a "world of inter-subjectivity" that the human being decides what he/she and the others are.<sup>153</sup> But this social *cogito* leaves intact the individual self. Besides, despite the absence of a universal human essence, there is a universal human condition that makes it perfectly possible for any human being of any culture to understand the projects of others of other cultures<sup>154</sup> – cultural diversity is no obstacle in the world of inter-subjectivity. No wonder then that ethics could be envisaged from the point of authenticity, from the fact of living according to human liberty that gives morality a universal form, even though the content of it may vary.<sup>155</sup> Such an authenticity would imply the compatibility of all people's liberties.<sup>156</sup> Any resistance to this universally accommodating liberty would be an infringement on authenticity, i.e., acting in bad faith.

Thus Sartre rejects an older form of humanism that takes as its basis a universal human essence,<sup>157</sup> but espouses one in which the human being is still to be created.<sup>158</sup> Despite this apparent uncertainty, and despite the death of God, humanity is not at stake, provided that the universality of human freedom embedded in the projecting character of the *cogito* is recognised.

It should be clear that Levinas would consider such a humanism as irrevocably outdated. Sartre's notion of the subject lives in the naivety of before any recognition of the decentering of the subject in the human sciences.<sup>159</sup>

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150 E&H 45 / EH 64.

151 E&H 44 / EH 63.

152 E&H 45 / EH 66.

153 E&H 45 / EH 67.

154 E&H 46 / EH 69–70.

155 E&H 52 / EH 85.

156 E&H 52 / EH 84.

157 E&H 55 / EH 92.

158 E&H 55–56 / EH 92–93.

159 One could characterise this perspective as "naive" in the light of Freud's famous 1917 essay "Eine Schwierigkeit der Psychoanalyse", in *Gesammelte Schriften*

Sartre resuscitates God (as a unified point of reference, or foundation, for all value and meaning) under the name of the free subject. If Levinas then still declares that he considers his own humanism as a way of taking the Sartrean notion of “being condemned to be free [*être condamné à être libre*]”<sup>160</sup> further, it is only to radicalise that condemnation – not in the same sense as the way in which Being or structures condemn human beings to not being free, but rather as condemned to serving the other. For this condition of condemnation to freedom, he uses the term “hostage” (*otage*).<sup>161</sup> the self is the hostage of the other, the self is irremissibly in “enslavement” or “subsistence” (*asservissement*)<sup>162</sup> with regard to the other and this condemnation exceeds whatever liberty the self might have<sup>163</sup> – even to the point of being responsible for the responsibility of the other<sup>164</sup> – in the sense of decisively determining the meaning of the liberty of the self. And it is only as such – invested and commanded by the other, “vulnerable” to the appeal of the other – that Levinas would ever contemplate the significance of the freedom of the self. There is still something of a universality in Levinas’ ethics, as will be indicated later, but even if such be the case, ethics always refers back to an originary asymmetry. And it is this very asymmetry that makes of the other not a foundation of meaning, but an an-archic or non-foundational source: the other is not God, but lives in the trace of an ever already-passed “God”.<sup>165</sup>

## 5.2 Heidegger: “humanism” in the extreme sense

Just like Sartre, Heidegger also distinguished two forms of humanism in his “Letter on ‘humanism’” (1946).<sup>166</sup> The deciding factor in distinguishing his

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von Freud, zehnter Band. Leipzig, et al.: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, pp. 347–356 – Sartre still considers the subject to be the “master of his/her own home”.

160 HO 73n13 / HH 120n13, my translation.

161 HO 57, 67, 58 / HH 91, 109, 110, 111.

162 HO 53 / HH 85.

163 Cf. “a responsibility overflowing freedom” (HO 53, 54 / HH 85, 86).

164 HO 68 / HH 111.

165 HO 44 / HH 69.

166 P 236–276 / W 313–364. On the historical unfolding of the conflict between Sartre and Heidegger on humanism, see Dominique Janicaud, *Heidegger en France*, tome I: *Récit*. Paris: Albin Michel, 2001, chapter 4: “L’humanisme dans les turbulences”. A valuable overview of the meaning and reception of the *Letter on Humanism* is provided by Dirk Mende in “‘Brief über den ‘Humanismus.’” Zu den Metaphern der späten Seinsphilosophie”, in Dieter Tomä (ed.), *Heidegger-Handbuch. Leben-Werk-Wirkung*. Stuttgart and Weimar: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2003, pp. 247–258. For an interpretation of this text within the broader frame-

two forms of humanism is the question of metaphysics: typical of the history of metaphysics is that it is, according to Heidegger's reading, the history of forgetting<sup>167</sup> and hiding the fact that Being is a verb (it happens) and not a noun (a thing).<sup>168</sup> Subsequently there is (1) a metaphysical humanism that reduces the human being to the noun-character of Being whilst ignoring that Being is first of all a verb and (2) a non-metaphysical humanism that realises the importance of the verbal character of Being and gives it priority over the noun-character in matters human.<sup>169</sup>

In the first of these approaches to the human being, of which Sartre would be a late representative, one sees that it is exactly in the notion of the subject that one could identify the metaphysical character of the first humanism. It obstructs the urgent question of Being that determines humanity, and instead presents the human being as *animal rationale*,<sup>170</sup> which inevitably leads to the error of thinking

“the human being from out of the *animalitas* instead of thinking towards the *humanitas* of the human being”.<sup>171</sup>

What gets lost in the process is the “essence” of the human being. This essence is the fact that the human being is the place where the difference between the noun-character (*Seiende*) and the verbal character (*Sein*) of Being is made; this happening of differentiation in Being being called existence.<sup>172</sup> This understanding of the “essence” of the human being doesn't so much negate the humanist idea of the human being as *animal rationale*, rather, it puts that idea in the right perspective<sup>173</sup> by thinking more originarily about humanity.<sup>174</sup> In fact – and this is where the second or true humanism

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work of Heidegger's work and his intellectual environment, see Gianni Vattimo: “La crise de l'humanisme”, in *Exercices de la Patience* 5, 1983, pp. 19–30.

167 P 253 / W 332.

168 P 255 / W 334.

169 Cf. P 246 / W 322. See also P 245 / W 321: “Every determination of the essence of the human being that already presupposes an interpretation of beings without asking about the truth of Being, whether knowingly or not, is metaphysical.”

170 P 246 / W 322f.

171 P 246f / W 323, translation modified. Heidegger doesn't reject the Greek antecedent of the Latin *animal rationale*, but fears that its true meaning has been covered up by the history of metaphysics (cf. P 245f / W 322, also *Being and time. op. cit.* p. 208 / *Sein und Zeit. op. cit.* p. 165).

172 P 248 / W 325.

173 P 251 / W 330.

174 Cf. “more primordially” P 267, *anfänglicher*, W 351.

according to Heidegger comes in<sup>175</sup> – the highest determination of the essence and dignity of the human being can be thought only when the human being is considered as belonging to Being.<sup>176</sup> Heidegger's idea of true humanism consists of evacuating the place accorded by the first humanism to the subject and restoring it as the place of Being; and it is only when this perspective on the human being is adopted that real humanity comes to light: the human being lives in the proximity of Being, which means that humanity has an opening in which meaning could unfold.<sup>177</sup> This is equivalent to saying that humanity consists originally of being addressed by Being;<sup>178</sup> it is Being that gives content to the formal ek-sistence of human beings. Humanity exists in the service of thinking the truth of Being.<sup>179</sup> Language is the place in which the truth of Being unfolds itself, it is the "house of Being".<sup>180</sup> This address and the meaning in which the human being dwells do not lead to an ethics. Heidegger will even claim that what he is thinking is neither ontology (in the traditional sense), nor ethics. All that his considerations about humanity would lead to is a letting go with reference to the task of constructing rules and values (since these inevitably presuppose a fixed notion of the subject on which they are founded) and an existence of letting Being be.<sup>181</sup> As such it thinkingly constructs the house of Being,<sup>182</sup> it arranges the space in which one existingly dwells and thus, according to Heidegger, one is already busy with the original ethics.<sup>183</sup>

175 This is a "humanism" that thinks against humanism or that contradicts all previous humanisms (P 251; 263 / W 330; 345), but without falling into an inhumanity (P 265 / W 348). At the same time Heidegger claims that it restores the essence and dignity of the human being to such an extent that what he presents is nothing else than "'Humanism' in the extreme sense" [*'Humanismus' im äußersten Sinn*] (P 261 / W 342 and see the following page for a definition of Heidegger's humanism). Heidegger, however, concedes that this is a humanism of a peculiar kind (P 263 / W 345).

176 P 252 / W 330.

177 P 261 / W 342–343, also P 254 / W 333–334.

178 Cf. P 246 / W 323.

179 Cf. P 268 / W 352.

180 Refrain of the whole *Letter*, e.g., P 254 / W 333. And this is Heidegger's rendering of the *zoon logon echon*: "the human being is not only a living creature who possesses language along with other capacities. Rather, language is the house of Being in which the human being ek-sists by dwelling, in that he belongs to the truth of Being, guarding it." (P 254 / W 333)

181 P 272 / W 358.

182 P 272 / W 358.

183 Cf. P 271 / W 356: "If the name 'ethics,' in keeping with the basic meaning of the world *éthos*, should now say that ethics ponders the abode of the human being, then that thinking which thinks the truth of Being as the primordial element of the human being, as one who eksists, is in itself originary ethics."

It would not be possible to go into the detail of the relationship between Levinas' humanism text and that of Heidegger, since even a superficial comparison would quickly show that the former was written in constant critical reference to the latter. This is no surprise if one considers on the one hand the determining influence that Heidegger has had on Levinas' way of thinking, and on the other hand, the massive wave of appropriation of Heidegger in French philosophy since the 1960s.<sup>184</sup> What deserves our attention is that Levinas' humanism is designed to take Heidegger's criticism of humanism as a metaphysics seriously and to sidestep the pitfalls thereof.<sup>185</sup> Levinas never lets go of the *ontological difference*, which he learned about from Heidegger; he claims only that this is not the most decisive thing about humanity. He does so, as we have seen, neither by restoring subjectivity, nor by rehabilitating the human being as *animal rationale*, but by claiming that more primordially, before the human being dwells in the truth of Being (if this is indeed the case), he/she is expelled, homeless, in a meaning imposed from beyond Being. Levinas would claim that Heidegger, whilst breaking with a certain tradition of Western thinking, perseveres in another, namely that of the forgetting of the *ethical difference*: the human being as the place in which the non-in-difference between the self and the other is decisive for all meaningful existence. Levinas' idea of the self is consequently stamped by heteronomy, by an imposition of responsibility by the other, and what is the most humane about humanity is not the subject, nor is it Being as Heidegger claimed, it is the other. Therefore ethics or rather ethicity is what is to be thought primarily in a consideration of humanism. And this is to be done in response and obedience to the appeal from the other. One could, thus, call Levinas' humanism a post-metaphysical humanism. And this post-metaphysical humanism directs its criticism to the Heideggerian "humanism". The latter is not only insufficient, but dangerous, for reasons that have been expounded and of which the main thrust could be summarised as follows:

184 Cf. D. Janicaud, *Heidegger en France*, *op. cit.* p. 132: "The Letter is indeed the text of Heidegger that has probably had the greatest influence in France, especially in the 1960s".

185 This is clearly attested to in Levinas' lecture of 6 February 1976, entitled "The radical question: Kant against Heidegger", where Levinas presents a short interpretation of the "Letter on 'humanism'" (especially GDT 58 / DMT 68). One reads his concern to take the main tenets of Heidegger's later philosophy in general seriously in PN 127f / SMB 10f.

“There is in Heidegger the dream of nobility of blood and sword. But humanism is something completely different. It is more a response to the other that lets the other go first, that yields to the other instead of fighting the other.”<sup>186</sup>

### 5.3 Althusser: humanism as ideology

Putting aside the circumstances that provoked Althusser to write his 1963 essay “Marxism and humanism”,<sup>187</sup> he starts off by describing the fate of humanism in Marx’s intellectual itinerary: from humanist or practitioner of a “philosophy of the human being [*philosophie de l’homme*]”<sup>188</sup> to a radical anti-humanist. It is especially this second phase of Marx’s philosophy and Althusser’s interpretation thereof that is important to us. The anti-humanism of Marx’s second phase breaks with the former thought as based on a notion of the essence of the human being in that

“the essence criticized [and by implication humanism – EW] is defined as ideology, a category belonging to the new theory of society and history.”<sup>189</sup>

Thus, according to the subsequently formulated theoretical anti-humanism, in order to understand the human world and possibly to change it, one should depart from a strategy based on a quest for the essence of the human being:

“It is impossible to *know* anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes.”<sup>190</sup>

However, it is of central importance to note that this reduction of humanism to ashes, on the level of theory, doesn’t mean the negation of the practical reality of humanism, namely in the form of *ideology*.<sup>191</sup> Having knowledge of this ideology doesn’t amount to making it evaporate. Rather, the knowledge of the ideology of humanism sought by Marx (according to Althusser) is knowledge of the conditions of the necessity thereof, conditions that also determine the Marxist response to this humanism.<sup>192</sup>

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186 IH 186.

187 FM 221–247 / PM 227–248. One could consult Vincent Descombes. *Le même et l’autre. Quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)*. Paris: Minuit, 1979 (especially “La querelle de l’humanisme”, pp. 124–130) for elements of a historical orientation to the anti-humanism debate in France. A useful discussion of Althusser’s position is Kate Soper’s *Humanism and anti-humanism*. London, *et al.*: Hutchinson, 1986, pp. 96–119.

188 FM 226 / PM 232, translation modified.

189 FM 227 / PM 233–234.

190 FM 229 / PM 236.

191 FM 230 / PM 236.

192 FM 230–231 / PM 236–237.

Gaining knowledge of humanism as ideology in this manner entails the development of theoretical anti-humanism. Therefore, it is essential to understand what “ideology” is. An ideology, Althusser summarises,

“is a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society”.<sup>193</sup>

Every society, even the ultimate communist society, bathes within ideology.<sup>194</sup> To be precise, the “mode of existence” of ideology (and thus, by implication, of humanism as discourse based on a notion of the essence of human beings) is not a matter of consciousness, but of unconsciousness, and that in a very particular sense: ideology imposes itself on people as “structures”,<sup>195</sup> it is formed by the historical conditions in which people live. That means that the representations of which ideology is a system,

“are perceived-accepted-suffered cultural objects and act functionally on men by means of a process that escapes them. Human beings ‘live’ their ideologies [...] *not at all as a form of consciousness, but as an object of their ‘world’ – as their ‘world’ itself.*”<sup>196</sup>

The very manner in which people live their lives and their relation to their world is ideologically mediated and incarnates ideology. This could be illustrated by a topical example:

“In the ideology of *freedom*, to be precise, the bourgeoisie *live* their relation to the conditions of their existence, in other words, *their* relation that is real (the law of a liberal capitalist economy) *but invested in an imaginary relation* (all men are free, including the free labourers). Their ideology consists of this play on the word *freedom*.”<sup>197</sup>

From this one could see that the person, or rather the class, that uses ideology is itself being used by ideology.<sup>198</sup> It is only by means of such a theory, an anti-humanist theory, that strategies could be adopted to transform society, to transform the conditions that produce a humanism, which functions as legitimisation of the bourgeoisie.<sup>199</sup> And such strategies could not exclude adopting in practice one form of humanism or another.

It is clear that Althusser’s anti-humanism draws the human being, consciousness and all, into the non-masterable flow of history. Agency and con-

193 FM 231 / PM 238.

194 FM 232 / PM 239.

195 FM 233 / PM 240.

196 FM 233 / PM 240, translation modified.

197 FM 234f / PM 241, my translation.

198 FM 235 / PM 242.

199 FM 241 / PM 249 and Levinas implicitly refers to the Althusserian critique of this ideology in GCM 3 / DVI 18.

sciousness are decentred, and humanism is withdrawn from anthropology and relegated to strategy. Levinas, in so far as he accords a place to ontology, would be willing to agree with this perspective, in fact, in his reading this anti-humanist theory would be nothing more than another mode of appearance of the domination of the human being by Being as described by Heidegger. As such it has, as do the other theories of the decentred subject, a descriptive potential with regard to the terrifying history of human “deficiency” in the twentieth century.<sup>200</sup> Levinas would even agree with Althusser that if there is to be a transformation of society, it would not draw its resources from a theory of the human essence, but from a source that decentres the self. However, for Levinas, beyond the decentring of the human being by social and historical conditions, and therefore more intimate and determining for the self, is the decentring by the alterity of the other, by the ethical appeal. It is not from a theory that social transformation could be energised, but in the obedient response to the appeal for responsibility to the other. That theory, class struggle, or whatever Marxist notion of transformation could be incorporated into such an obedient response, is not excluded – neither is any other idea about social justice *a priori* excluded.<sup>201</sup>

200 GCM 47–49 / DVI 83–85.

201 But Levinas’ affinity for Marxism should not be overlooked. In an important passage from the Talmudic reading “Judaism and revolution” (BV 94–119 / DSAS 11–53), Levinas illuminates his remark “Authentic humanism, materialist humanism” (BV 97 / DSAS 16) as follows: “Our old text upholds the right of the person, as in our days Marxism upholds it. I refer to Marxist humanism, the one which continues to say that ‘man is the supreme good for man’ and ‘in order that man be the supreme good for man he must be truly man’ and which asks itself: ‘How could man, the friend of man, in specific circumstances, have become the enemy of man?’ [...]” (BV97f / DSAS 17). This passage ends with the decisive affirmation that the other is the basis of humanism (BV 98 / DSAS 17), an idea that will find its way to the title of *Humanism of the other*. But apart from the explicit remarks, it is significant to take note of his (quite rare) reference to contemporary academic articles. A footnote after the phrase “Marxist humanism” (in the citation above) gives two essays as valuable for understanding Marxist humanism, both from the *Revue internationale de philosophie* 85–86/1968 – a volume that was dedicated to the question of the crisis of humanism and to which Levinas contributed the essay that became Chapter 2 of *Humanism of the other* “Humanism and an-archy” (pp. 323–337 in the journal). The first article recommended by Levinas is Jacques D’Hondt’s, “La crise de l’humanisme dans le marxisme contemporain” (pp. 369–378), an unambiguous rejection of Althusser’s anti-humanist reading of Marx. “Would Marx have been mistaken about the meaning of his own work?” asks D’Hondt (p. 378) and thus supports the traditional humanist reading of Marx. The second article recommended by Levinas is Jean Lacroix’s “L’humanisme de Marx selon Adam Schaff” (pp. 379–386). Lacroix challenges Althusser’s “evocative and deep, but also questionable interpretation” of Marxism (p. 379) by recourse to that of

Having devoted this fifth Chapter to a scrutiny of Levinas' philosophical articulation of his post-anti-humanist humanism, it should now be submitted to critical examination. This is the goal of the next Chapter.

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Adam Schaff (in *Le Marxisme et l'Individu: Contribution a la philosophie marxiste de l'homme*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1968; Polish original published in Warsaw, 1965) that insists on Marxism as the sole integral humanism. Lacroix doesn't go as far as a critical comparison of Althusser and Schaff, but keeps to a sympathetic presentation of Schaff's humanist Marxism as a realistic and liberation-oriented theory of human existence. It is from a citation by Lacroix of Schaff that Levinas draws the "assertion of Marx that the human being [*l'homme*] is the highest good for humanity [*pour l'homme*]" (p. 386), to which he refers in the citation above.

It seems reasonable to believe from this information that Levinas finds himself in agreement with the spirit of Marxist humanism, although he questions the capacity of Marxism to provide the ultimate orientation in cultural diversity (HO Chapter 1) and although he embraced, to some extent, the notion of anti-humanism. Furthermore, these references make us attentive to the fact that Levinas' reflection on humanism and anti-humanism constitutes one of the important *loci* for his positioning with respect to Marxism.

