Levinas's Politics

Justice, Mercy, Universality

Annabel Herzog

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For my children

Mon rapport au Talmud est donc un rapport européen, vous comprenez, c'est très important.

And so, my relationship to the Talmud remains very European; please understand, it is very important.

—E. Levinas

כִּי אִם עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהַצְנֵעַ לֶכֶת עִם אֱלֹהֶיךָ מיכה, ו:ח

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:8)

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

A and A'	Derrida, J. *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*. Paris: Galilée, 1997. Trans. P. A. Brault and M. Naas, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).
ADV and BTV	Levinas, E. *L'Au-delà du verset: Lectures et discours talmudiques*. Paris: Minuit, 1982. Trans. G. D. Mole, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
AE and OB	Levinas, E. *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990. Trans. A. Lingis, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).
AHN and ITN	Levinas, E. *A l'heure des nations*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1988. Trans. M. B. Smith, *In the Time of the Nations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).
AT and AT'	Levinas, E. *Altérité et transcendance*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1995. Trans. M. B. Smith, *Alterity and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
BPW	Levinas, E. *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*. Ed. A. T. Peperzak, S. Critchley, and R. Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.)
CDC	Levinas, E. *Œuvres 1: Carnets de captivité et autres inédits*. Ed. R. Calin and C. Chalier. Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle/IMEC, 2009.
CP	Levinas, E. *Collected Philosophical Papers of Emmanuel Levinas*. Trans. A. Lingis. Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1987.
DD and OG	Levinas, E. *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*. Paris: Vrin, 1998. Trans. B. Bergo, *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).
DE and OE	Levinas, E. *De l'évasion*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1998. Trans. B. Bergo, *On Escape* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003).

DL and DF	Levinas, E. *Difficile liberté*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1988. Trans. S. Hand, *Difficult Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
DO	Levinas, E. *De l'oblitération, entretiens avec F. Armengaud*. Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1990.
DSS and NTR	Levinas, E. *Du sacré au saint*. Paris: Minuit, 1977. Trans. A. Aronowicz, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
ECM and AVM	Derrida, J. "En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici." In *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 1998, 159–202. Trans. R. Berezdivin and P. Kamuf, "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," in P. Kamuf and E. Rottenberg, eds., *Psyché: Inventions of The Other* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 143–190.
ED and WD	Derrida, J. *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris: Seuil, 1967. Trans. A. Bass, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).
EDEHH	Levinas, E. *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris: Vrin, 2001.
EE and EE'	Levinas, E. *De l'existence à l'existant*. Paris: Vrin, 1998. Trans. A. Lingis, *Existence and Existents* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995).
EI and EI'	Levinas, E. *Ethique et infini*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992. Trans. R. A. Cohen, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985).
EN and EN'	Levinas, E. *Entre nous*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1998. Trans. M. B. Smith and B. Harshav, *Entre Nous* (London: Athlone Press, 1998).
HS and OS	Levinas, E. *Hors sujet*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1987. Trans. M. B. Smith, *Outside the Subject* (London: Athlone Press, 1993).
IEL	Interview with Emmanuel Levinas, translated from French to Hebrew by Ephraim Meir, in the Hebrew translation of *Ethics and Infinity*. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995, 89–97.
IEP and EP	Levinas, E., and A. Finkielkraut. "Israël: Ethique et politique." *Les Nouveaux cahiers* 18:71, 1983, 1–8. Trans. J. Romney, "Ethics and Politics," in S. Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 289–297.

II and II'	Levinas, E. "Idéologie et idéalisme." In E. Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*. Paris: Vrin, 1998, 17–33. Trans. B. Bergo, *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), 3–14.
LPI and STI	Levinas, E. "La laïcité et la pensée d'Israël." In *Les imprévus de l'histoire*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 2000, 155–173. Trans. N. Poller, "Secularism and the Thought of Israel," in *Unforeseen History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 113–124.
NLT and NewTR	Levinas, E. *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1996. Trans. R. A. Cohen, *New Talmudic Readings* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999).
NP and PN	Levinas, E. *Noms propres*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976. Trans. M. B. Smith, *Proper Names* (London: Athlone Press, 1996).
PM	Levinas, E. "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas." In *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, trans. A. Benjamin and T. Wright, ed. R. Bernasconi and D. Wood. London: Routledge, 1988, 168–181.
PP and PP'	Levinas, E. "Paix et proximité." In J. Rolland, ed., *Les cahiers de la nuit surveillée n. 3, Emmanuel Levinas*. Lagrasse: Verdier, 1984, 339–346. Trans. P. Atterton and S. Critchley, "Peace and Proximity," in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. A. T. Peperzak, S. Critchley, and R. Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 161–170.
QLT and NTR	Levinas, E. *Quatre lectures talmudiques*. Paris: Minuit, 1968. Trans. A. Aronowicz, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).
QRPH and RPH	Levinas E. *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l'hitlérisme*. Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1997. Trans. S. Hand, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," *Critical Inquiry* 17:1, 1990, 62–71.
RO and RS	Levinas, E. "La réalité et son ombre." In *Les imprévus de l'histoire*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 2000, 107–127. Trans. A. Lingis, "Reality and Its Shadow," in *Collected Philosophical Papers of Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: M. Nijhoff, 1987), 1–14.

TA and TO	Levinas, E. "La trace de l'autre." In E. Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris: Vrin, 2001, 261–282. Trans. A. Lingis, "The Trace of the Other," in M. C. Taylor, ed., *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 345–359.
TI and TI'	Levinas, E. *Totalité et infini*. Paris: Livre de Poche, 1992. Trans. A. Lingis, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

On occasion, I have amended the published translations of Levinas's writings. The translations into English of the scholarship written in French and Hebrew are mine.

INTRODUCTION

The Argument

It could be claimed that Levinas's breathtaking ethical theory is reduced to nothing when confronted with the political question, and that this confrontation is intrinsic to his philosophy. To put it bluntly, Levinas's ethics seems to be doomed from inception because of the political.

Levinas's ethics describes the encounter with the other, that is, with any other human being, which takes place on a level distinct from both cognitive reason and aesthetic experience. This face-to-face encounter consists not of acknowledging the other but of being called to responsibility for the other. In ethics, the subject *substitutes* itself for the "face," a metaphor for the infinite otherness of the other[1]—that is, that which cannot be grasped by concepts, represented by memory, or felt by emotions.[2] It is a relationship "beyond essence" in which the ego is commanded by a transcendent order to take responsibility for the other person.

Politics, on the other hand, is an ontological praxis of mediation among at least three people: the ego, the other, and any third party (*le tiers*).[3] Among three people, however, nothing can ever be absolute or transcendent; everything is thought, represented, or felt. It follows that while the ethical substitution has the authority of a religious command (TI 30, TI' 40; AE 139, OB 87) and implies the all-encompassing responsibility of the ego for the other, the relation between the ego and *several* others raises questions about duties and rights, namely, about sharing responsibility. Put simply, the presence of two people facing the ego inevitably leads to a calculation of what is due to each of them. Or to put it yet another way: ethical responsibility is anterior to all questions; politics means the emergence of questions about responsibility, and about everything else. The connection among three or more people "interrupts the face to face of a welcome of the other person, interrupts the proximity or approach of the neighbor" (AE 234; OB 150). In Levinas's oft-quoted words,

> The third party [*le tiers*] is other than the neighbor but also another neighbor, and also a neighbor of the other. . . . What am I to do? What have they already done to one another? Who comes before the other in my responsibility? What, then, are the other and the third party with respect to one another? Birth of the question. The first question of the interhuman is the question of justice. Henceforth it is necessary to know, to become consciousness. Comparison is superimposed to my relation with the *unique* and the incomparable. (PP 345; PP' 168)[4]

It is difficult to grasp what appears to be the passage from the ethical relationship to the political situation. Indeed, "the entrance of the third party" seems to undermine everything Levinas has said about ethics. Why spend so many pages describing the unquestionable and absolute responsibility of the ego for the other when the ineluctable arrival of *le tiers* will necessarily break all ethical constructs, leaving us full only of questions about who is responsible to whom and who comes first? When, at the end of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas says "Justice is necessary [*Il faut la justice*]" (AE, 245; OB, 157)—that is, responsibility must be shared—readers may feel they have been wasting their time. The "entrance of the third party," as such, brings a disturbing anticlimax to Levinas's emphatic ethical extremism. Not only does social life—even in its most harmless forms—put ethics in jeopardy, Levinas does not even seem to regret the entrance of the third party and the return of the ontological questions he attacked with such zeal in his ethical analysis.[5] If all things are eventually reducible to ontological questions, why start by proclaiming a radical break from all ontological questions?

However, the problem with the "entrance of the third party" is not only one of chronology. In many texts Levinas affirms that *le tiers* is already present in the meeting with the other.[6] In his words: "The third looks at me in the eyes of the other" (TI 234; TI' 213). And: "It is not that the entry of a third party would be an empirical fact, and that my responsibility for the other finds itself constrained to a calculus by the 'force of things.' In the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me, and already this obsession cries out for justice, demands measure and knowing; it is consciousness" (AE 246; OB 158).

For Levinas, therefore, the framework of all relationships can be considered to be always, and necessarily, political. There is no passage from the ethical duo to the political trio, because the trio exists from the very beginning. As Madeleine Fagan puts it, "Ethics and politics are not separable realms that corrupt one another but are necessarily inseparable and contained within

one another."[7] If so, we are tempted to ask again, why bother with ethics at all?[8] If the basic structure of human existence is *sociopolitical* life, namely, if life consists of ontological relationships between three or more people, why focus on the ethical face to face and define it as *preceding* all relationships? There seems to be a serious contradiction or paradox here, one that is acknowledged by Levinas himself: "If everything terminates in justice, why tell this long story about the face, which is the opposite of justice?" (PM 175). Levinas offers three reasons for this contradiction:

> The first reason is that it is ethics which is the foundation of justice. Because justice is not the last word; within justice we seek a better justice. That is the liberal state. The second reason is that there is a violence in justice. When the verdict of justice is pronounced, there remains for the unique I that I am the possibility of finding something more to soften the verdict. . . . The third reason is that there is a moment when I, the unique I, along with other I's, can find something else which improves universality itself. (PM 175)

In this book, I take as a starting point Levinas's three answers to the paradox of the "entrance of the third party" and discuss them in light of a close reading of the Talmudic readings—that is, Levinas's "Jewish" works. I argue that this procedure is effective because it is precisely in his Talmudic commentaries that Levinas developed the implications of these answers. There may be many reasons—historical and philosophical—for Levinas's choice to confine the gist of his political thinking to this unfamiliar genre. Here, I suggest the following: (1) for Levinas, the questioning that characterizes the Talmudic hermeneutic is, by definition, political; (2) the Talmud provides Levinas with paradigmatic cases that give his abstract ethics a concrete substrate; and (3) in Levinas's *œuvre*, the readings constitute a different kind of writing, which disturbs his ethical philosophizing: as such they are, in themselves, political. The first two reasons will be elucidated all along the book. The third is developed in the first chapter.

A Critique of the "Religious" Readings of the *Readings*

Until a few years ago, scholars of Levinas tended to separate his work into two corpuses, the philosophical-phenomenological and the Talmudic.[9] One group regarded Levinas as a philosopher and focused on his philosophical

books, turning occasionally to the Talmudic readings for an illustration. The other saw him as an exegete of the Holy Scriptures, responsible for a renewal of theological concerns in the secularized Judeo-Christian world.[10] Some radical readers, like Benny Levy, even contended that the philosophical and the Talmudic works contradict each other.[11]

In response to this polarization of Levinas studies, recent publications have argued for reading all of Levinas's works together. According to this new understanding, the differences between the two sets of works are matters of style, not of essence. That is, beyond the formal differences in language and style that differentiate philosophical treatises and textual exegesis, there is no contradiction between the two corpuses, which convey convergent meanings, supporting and completing each other.[12] Indeed, for this scholarship, Levinas's purpose was precisely to give modern expression to the concord between philosophy and Judaism. Levinas himself left the question open, claiming that both corpuses are philosophical,[13] yet insisting on the distinction between them, as expressed in his choice of different publishers for the two bodies of work and in his calling the readings his "confessional" writings.[14]

I propose to reconcile these divergent views. It is clear to me that for Levinas, there is no irreducible difference between the philosophical and Jewish traditions, and that for him, they differ primarily in the realm of style and language. For Levinas, philosophy speaks Greek, by which he means both Western philosophical language and an interest in essence or ontology. By contrast, the Jewish tradition speaks Hebrew, by which he means both the rabbinic mode of interpretation and a concern for transcendent otherness, which he called "ethics." Both philosophy and the Jewish tradition, however, deal with the relationship between the thrust toward sameness and the concern for otherness, that is, between ontology and ethics. At the end of the day, their central questions are very close. For instance, Levinas underlined the ontological necessity perceptible in Scripture when he wrote, in the first pages of *Difficult Freedom*, "Here Judaism feels very close to the West, by which I mean philosophy. It is not by virtue of simple chance that the way towards the synthesis of Jewish revelation and Greek thought was masterfully traced by Maimonides, who is claimed by both Jewish and Muslim philosophers; that a profound respect for Greek knowledge already fills the wise men of the Talmud; that education for the Jews merges with instruction and that the ignorant person can never really be pious" (DL 29; DF 15). However, he also pointed to the ethical anxiety perceptible in Plato: "It is true that in certain traits the Greeks were, if I dare say, 'biblical.' Plato . . . places Goodness above Being, which is extraordinary."[15] In other words, Levinas's claim to

"express in Greek those principles about which Greece knew nothing" (ADV 232–233; BTV 200) cannot be accepted uncritically.

This being said, it seems to me that Levinas's emphasis on the distinction between the two kinds of works should be taken seriously. For one thing, as Michael Fagenblat is right to remind us, in his phenomenological writings "Levinas accepted the rules of the game of French philosophy and went at lengths to downplay or even deny the religious element of his thinking."[16] Yet beyond the constraints imposed by the French tradition, there are positive, substantive reasons to distinguish between the phenomenological and Jewish writings. The difference between them is not a function of the difference between Greek and Hebrew, or between the philosophical and Jewish traditions. Rather, the difference relates to the distinction between two philosophical concerns, namely ethics and politics.[17] That is, the phenomenological books present a utopian and impracticable ethics, while the Talmudic readings reflect a political, and at times pragmatic, mode of thought.[18] In a quite paradoxical way, therefore, Levinas's ethical philosophy is formulated in what looks like a "Greek" body of work, whereas politics, which Levinas put in the category of the ontological, is conceptualized in writings that, at first sight, focus on texts that are very clearly "Hebrew."

This book is a study of Levinas's Talmudic readings from a political perspective. Seen from this perspective, the readings manifest a political thinking that challenges the ethical analyses offered in Levinas's phenomenological works—*Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise than Being*, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, and related essays. My claim is that there is a distance between Levinas's "ethics as first philosophy" and the political thinking underlying the readings.[19]

A few words about the body of work discussed in this book. In the corpus of Talmudic readings studied here I include *Difficult Freedom*, *Nine Talmudic Readings* (i.e., *Quatre lectures talmudiques* and *Du sacré au saint*), *Beyond the Verse*, *In the Time of the Nations*, and *New Talmudic Readings*. Some of the essays published in these volumes are not "Talmudic readings" *stricto sensu*, in that they do not analyze Talmudic extracts, but Levinas considered them to belong with his "confessional writings," the category in which he placed the Talmudic readings. I also include in this corpus several essays, such as "La laïcité et la pensée d'Israël" and "Idéologie et idéalisme," which were not published in volumes of collected readings but which discuss the Talmud. What I call the "Talmudic readings," then, is the body of texts related to the Talmud and other Jewish sources, which look different from Levinas's phenomenological work. I turn to the phenomenological books, namely *Totality*

and Infinity, *Otherwise than Being*, and *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, along with interviews and articles published in various volumes, to document my interpretations of the readings, thereby inverting the traditional approach to Levinas's work.

It should be clear from the start that this book challenges the common understanding of the Talmudic readings as "religious" texts, or as texts (re)introducing religion into Western thought.[20] This understanding pertains to both the phenomenological and the Jewish scholarly camps, as well as to those who have called for reading the two bodies of work together: all agree that the "Jewish texts" are *Jewish* and that Levinas's intention in writing and publishing them was to honor and follow the Jewish tradition. As a result, most studies of the Talmudic readings focus on the *Talmud*, wondering whether or not Levinas's interpretations were faithful to Judaism in terms of method as well as of content and trying to understand his claim that he was translating Hebrew into Greek.[21]

Of course, it is not wrong to say that Levinas's interpretations of the Talmud are Jewish. However, this should not be considered the only or even the main reason for their importance. Levinas repeatedly refused to be called a "Jewish thinker," acknowledging his Jewishness but firmly rejecting a formula by which "one understands something that dares to establish between concepts relations which are based uniquely in religious traditions and texts, without bothering to pass through the philosophical critique."[22] For him, the readings were a philosophical product. Moreover, while it has been rightly argued that Levinas popularized the Talmud by offering his readings to a public of intellectuals often ignorant of Jewish sources, it is also quite clear that the readings do not make the rabbinic method less opaque to the untrained reader. In fact, Levinas neither uses nor explains the rabbinic method, despite occasional comments on the context and method throughout the Talmudic readings and their prefaces. A student hoping to learn what the Talmud is all about would be well advised not to begin with Levinas. To put it differently, Levinas's project is not to make rabbinic literature accessible to a wide audience but to use this literature to say what he wants to say, using his own (i.e., not Talmudic) style: "We strive to speak otherwise" (DSS 9; NTR 92).[23] As Samuel Moyn claims, "For the dominant interpretation of Levinas's relationship to the Jewish past and the Jewish religion, the conventional wisdom presents it as linear and continuous. But it works only on the basis of mistaken assumptions, one about Judaism itself and the other about the nature of Levinas's biographical and philosophical relationship to it."[24] Indeed, Levinas's Lithuanian Judaism is, "if we may say, a 'metaphor'

which is not a *given* but a retrospective 'construct.'"[25] Levinas himself emphasized again and again that he studied Talmud only very late, after World War II, in Paris, with the mysterious itinerant teacher Chouchani.[26] He did not grow up in an atmosphere of Lithuanian rabbinic studies. One of the goals of this book is to determine what Levinas took from the Talmudic tradition and how he applied it to formulate his own ideas.

Commentary and Political Philosophy

In both *Otherwise than Being* and "Peace and Proximity," the appearance of the "third party" is accompanied by a similar phrase: "Birth of the question." The "first question," says Levinas, is the "question of justice," meaning the distribution and sharing of responsibility. Hence, the situation presented by Levinas is double: an ethical call of responsibility that exists without question; and a question that stems from the co-presence of a multiplicity of people to whom one is ethically responsible. This model of an absolute command (i.e., a command that brooks no question) met by a body of questions about that very command is the model of the written Torah (the Bible) versus the oral Torah (the Talmud): the Talmud is a collection of interpretations of the divine apodictic law.

I believe that Levinas had this model in mind when he drew the distinction between his two sets of works, the phenomenological books and the interpretive Talmudic readings. The ethical philosophy published in the phenomenological books expresses an unconditional and immemorial call that can be considered "prophetic."[27] One hears the call and accepts it as it is. The readings are commentaries that question, discuss, and catalogue the possible meanings of the call. As Levinas wrote, "Bible and Talmud, prophecy and critical spirit" (ADV 76; BTV 58). The irony, of course, is that the Talmudic readings are commentaries on the *Talmud*, namely, commentaries on commentaries, as well as commentaries on Levinas's own ethical works.

It has been argued that Levinas's hermeneutics is "ethical," namely, that his commentary is a way to face the other, meaning the innumerable other meanings of a given text.[28] As Levinas wrote in his 1974 reading "The Will of God and the Power of Humanity," "the adventure of the Midrash [Talmudic commentary], the very possibility of hermeneutics, in its rigorously formal advance, do they not already belong to the very way in which another voice is heard among us—the very way of transcendence?" (NLT 32; NewTR 68). At the same time, however, the formulations "birth of the question"

and "critical spirit" add complexity to the ethics of hermeneutics. Indeed, for Levinas everything that has to do with questioning, with critique, and, accordingly, with "comparison, coexistence, contemporaneousness, assembling, order, thematization, the visibility of faces, and thus intentionality and the intellect, and in intentionality and the intellect, the intelligibility of a system" (AE 245; OB 157) is related *not to ethics* but to *ontology*. Interpretation is therefore an ontological means to defy the infinite and the transcendent. The recourse to the Talmud as a framework for a set of commentaries is recourse to a set of questions as a framework for a new set of questions; hence, it is redundantly concerned with ontology. In contrast to Robert Bernasconi, who argues that in the philosophical writings "the ethical is always associated with a certain questioning that extends even to morality itself, but, even though that dimension is not absent from the confessional writings, it is less pronounced there,"[29] I show in this book that the Talmudic readings are permeated with endless questioning in which ontology and politics are no less central than ethics.

Is this to say that, for Levinas, *any* corpus of questioning, *any* hermeneutic system, would be political, at least in part? The answer is yes, by definition. Moreover, the two questioning systems with which Levinas worked—the Talmud and the philosophical tradition that issued from the Platonic dialogues—were political, or more exactly, they were the only "politics" left to two elites that had lost concrete sovereignty: Plato founded the Academy after giving up all hope of reforming the polis, and the rabbis wrote down the oral law after losing all hope of reestablishing political power in the Land of Israel. One could here object that given these conditions both the Talmud and philosophy are eminently non-political, or even anti-political.[30] Even a superficial reading of Levinas's work, however, makes clear that he puts philosophy and politics in the same ontological category. Similarly, his insistence on the political character of basic questioning, at least from a certain point of view, puts the Talmud—by contrast with prophetic ethics—in the same category as politics. This explains Levinas's choice of the Talmudic commentaries to convey his political thinking, but only partly, because traditional philosophy is also a questioning system. Thus, we need to inquire into other possible explanations.

The Talmud, as Whitehead might put it, is a commentary on the Torah somewhat in the way that European philosophy is a commentary on Plato. The Talmud, however, does something that philosophy often neglects: it examines the law in the light of particular cases. The Talmud confronts the apodictic law with *concrete situations*. As Levinas writes, "The Talmud,

according to the great masters of this science, can be understood only from the basis of life itself" (QLT 20; NTR 8). As such, Talmudic commentary does not merely explain the Law but deconstructs it, tests it, strengthens it, and sometimes overturns it. Likewise, Levinas's Talmudic commentaries reinforce and confront the ethical call with particular situations.[31] Levinas calls this method "paradigmatic modality": "Without fading before their concepts, things denoted in a concrete fashion are yet enriched with meanings by the multiplicity of their concrete aspects" (ADV 127; BTV 103).[32] The readings ask the question: What does ethics mean in situations that involve more than the ego and the other? What does ethics mean, therefore, in concrete situations that are, by definition, non-ethical? Levinas chose not to take his examples from contemporary everyday life but borrowed cases drawn by the rabbis from the everyday life of their time or from their imagination. For Levinas, these cases become *paradigms*.

In short, another reason Levinas focuses on the Talmud to formulate his own political thought is his need for paradigms: specific cases that he can use to concretize and test—or try—his absolute ethics. This *trial of ethics* is of the utmost importance. According to Levinas, general and absolute ideas must be tested by particular cases in order to avoid becoming ideologies:

> The great strength of the Talmud's casuistry is to be the special discipline which seeks in particular [cases] the precise moment at which the general principle runs the danger of becoming its own contrary, namely, [the discipline that] watches over the general in light of the particular. This protects us from ideology. Ideology is the generosity and clarity of the principle, which have not taken into account the inversion that awaits this generous principle when it is applied. (ADV 98–99; BTV 79)

The pages that follow constitute a commentary on Levinas's commentary on another commentary. My approach is textual and interpretative more than historical; I search for the "overall unity" and the "central ideas" (NLT 11; NewTR 50) of Levinas's thinking in the readings. As he said about his own reading method, "Our first task is therefore to read [this corpus of work] in a way that respects its givens and its conventions, without mixing in the questions arising for a philologist or historian" (QLT 15; NTR 5). Through this process, I will aim to elucidate Levinas's often obscure language in the readings and show that despite many digressions and contradictions, the readings display a coherent political thought.

Overview of This Book

As noted earlier, I take as a starting point Levinas's three answers to the paradox of the "entrance of the third party" and discuss them in light of a close examination of the Talmudic readings. I show that the Talmudic readings embody a political pragmatism that complements, revises, and challenges the utopian analyses offered in Levinas's phenomenological works, namely, in his ethics.

Levinas's first response to the paradox of the "entrance of the third party" is that ethics is the "foundation of justice" and the source of a "better justice" to be found within justice. This point raises the question of precedence: Who comes first—the ego, the other, or the third party? But also what comes first—ethics or politics; transcendence or essence? Throughout his work, Levinas makes it clear that precedence does not mean temporal anteriority, because ethics is a relation to an "immemorial past" (TA 277; TO 355). In other words, the precedence of ethics does not contradict the chronological anteriority of ontological questions. Levinas's originality lies partly in his moderating chronological anteriority by ethical precedence. He is also original in his ability to moderate ethical precedence by chronological anteriority. Indeed, if, in the phenomenological works, ethics always seems to be stopped or reduced or, at least, put to trial by the entrance of the third party, in the Talmudic readings ethics most often appears within the framework of politics' chronological anteriority.[33] In the readings, I show, Levinas tried to do two things that he could not do in the phenomenological books: first, prevent politics from bringing about the failure of ethics; and second, construct politics positively, and not as the interruption and collapse of ethics.

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 analyze the main processes in this construction of a concept of politics that uses ethics but goes beyond it. In Chapter 1, I deconstruct Levinas's writing endeavor and show that in the context of his thought, the readings have the function of "the other writing." Having in his youth ventured into literature, and then chosen philosophy to express the rupture of ontology, Levinas still felt the need for a mode of expression distinct from that of traditional philosophical works, one that would disturb ethics itself. This is, therefore, a third reason why Levinas chose the Talmud to express his political thought: the readings constitute a genre subject to different constraints and impositions compared with Levinas's phenomenological style. This disturbance in form sustains a disturbance of content: the readings are political, and interrupt ethics.

Chapter 2 formulates Levinas's conception of the political in the Talmudic readings. The political is viewed as concern for the other's hunger, a concern

that Levinas associates with the "liberal state." To a large extent, however, this concern constitutes a reversal and a criticism of the liberal problematic of rights, and leads to the expression of another kind of social contract, based on Levinas's idiosyncratic understanding of justice. For Levinas, justice, politics, and the law sometimes seem almost synonymous. It is important to note, however, that Levinas's understanding of justice changed from the time of *Totality and Infinity* to that of *Otherwise than Being* (PM 171). In the earlier texts, justice means the ethical relation, namely, the infinite responsibility of the ego for the other. In the later texts, justice means the consideration of the third party, namely, the calculation of what is owed to and expected by each side in the relationship. Justice in the Talmudic readings, however, is synonymous with neither ethics nor politics but consists in the relationship between the two. Therefore, it does not constitute a fixed category but rather forms an evolving correlation, the process of a "justice which desires a better justice" (PM 177)—an equitable order responsive to particular cases—that I will call a *non-indifferent* or *merciful justice*.[34]

In Chapter 3, I establish the distinction between Levinas's conception of politics and his understanding of the social. In his resolute criticism of the social, Levinas strongly condemns certain aspects of the liberal tradition and of the indifferent individualism that characterizes modern urban life. Politics, however, appears to be the only possible solution to the anonymity and absence of solidarity that pervade the social.

Levinas's second response to the paradox of the "entrance of the third" is that justice contains a necessary violence. In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I analyze Levinas's understanding of political violence, which is distinct from the evil that appears in various situations of collective life and in nature—from political domination to the vegetal and animal indifference to suffering. Chapter 4 shows that, in the Talmudic readings, Levinas is no pacifist: political violence—expressed in *repression* and *thematization*—is never evoked as a reason to reject political institutions, which are necessary to build a society promoting a non-indifferent justice: a justice that will moderate its own violence. By contrast with violence, however, evil, in the readings, is resolutely rejected as the manifestation of injustice and as the impossibility of justice. As I argue in Chapter 5, political violence contributes to fighting evil and must not be confused with it. Evil, in the Talmudic readings, appears in three contexts: (1) it is related to a certain conception of deprivation and privacy, namely, it is identified with a misappropriation of homes and nations; (2) it is related to deception, namely, to ideology and idolatry; and (3) it is linked to animality, namely, to a certain idea of essence. In Chapter 6, we see how

Levinas's understanding of evil in nature may help us build what we can call a cautious environmentalism. It enables a reassessment of our relationship to nature that avoids both egoistic anthropomorphism, which destroys nature, and the romantic enthusiasm that regards all things natural as more "authentic" and morally superior to anything made by human beings.

Levinas's final answer to the paradox of ethics and politics involves the possibility of "improving universality itself." At stake here is the relationship between the conception of a non-indifferent justice and the self-definition of political entities—namely, the link between non-indifferent justice, general laws, and national aspirations. Chapters 7 and 8 focus on these questions, first through the highly debated question of how Levinas understood Zionism, and then through the general issue of political messianism, which includes Levinas's treatment of the concepts of Law and History. In both chapters, I show that Levinas's political thinking is indebted to Hegel and, indeed, that Levinas's conception of messianism is the foremost expression of his dialogue with Hegel.

The final chapter sums up the original political story told in the Talmudic readings. Here, I discuss the possible links between this story and the two major political trends of modernity, socialism and liberalism. I conclude by arguing that Levinas's political thinking was a reconceptualization of the French notion of *laïcité*, reworked by Levinas's idiosyncratic understanding of religion.

A Technical Note on the Talmud

This book deals not with the Talmud per se but with Levinas's work and rhetoric, and deep knowledge of the Talmud is not a prerequisite for engaging with the following chapters. Nevertheless, a few words about the Talmud will be helpful for readers not familiar with this work.

The Talmud comprises two corpuses of texts—the Mishnah and the Gemara (both terms come from roots meaning "to study," in Hebrew and Aramaic, respectively). In the Jewish tradition, these texts are called the Oral Law, because they began as oral teachings that were written down and edited at a time of persecution and dispersion. The Mishnah, a restatement of biblical legal teachings, was completed at the beginning of the third century CE, and it consists of the teachings of generations of rabbinic sages called Tannaim. It is divided into six "orders" (*sedarim*), which themselves are divided into "tractates" (*mesekhtot*), then further subdivided into "chapters"

(*perakim*) and, within those, paragraphs called *mishnayot* (sing.: *mishnah*). Therefore, the term "Mishnah" means both the book itself and (with a small "m") its smallest unit, which consists of a specific idea or legal opinion with, sometimes, an accompanying terse debate.

The Gemara is a body of commentaries on the Mishnah. One version was written and redacted in the Land of Israel (the Jerusalem Talmud) and the other, better known and more studied, in Babylonia, modern Iraq (the Babylonian Talmud), by generations of sages called Amoraim. They were completed in the fifth and sixth centuries CE. In modern publications of that immense book, which comprise twenty huge volumes, the smallest unit is a double-sided printed page, or folio, identified by a page number with the letters a and b to indicate the two sides (recto and verso.)[35] The Gemara is organized as a set of commentaries on the various mishnayot, which are quoted within the text of the Gemara. These commentaries fall into two categories: *halakhah* and *aggadah*. The former is made up of law-oriented controversies aimed at delineating specific rulings, while the latter constitutes a corpus of stories, myths, folklore, and anecdotes. The two kinds of commentaries are interwoven within the text, and both often range far from the mishnah under discussion, sometimes contradicting it and frequently raising apparently unconnected themes.[36]

Another word readers will encounter in the following pages is "midrash." A midrash is an exegesis of biblical verses, whether in the realm of halakhah (where the midrash comprises a story that leads to a legal ruling) or aggadah (a story aimed at conveying a lesson or moral). Collections of midrashim exist outside the Talmud, but many midrashim can be found within the Talmud (i.e., the Gemara) itself, as part of both the halakhic and aggadic literature. The important point, as we look at Levinas, is that a midrash or commentary is never a paraphrase but a development of meaning that goes in unexpected directions.[37] As Levinas puts it:

> The strict contours of the verses outlined in the Holy Scriptures have a plain meaning which is also enigmatic. A hermeneutics is invited whose task is to extricate, from within the meaning immediately offered by the proposition, those meanings that are only implied. Do these extricated meanings have enigmas themselves? They in their turn must be interpreted on different modes. And in the search for new teachings, hermeneutics incessantly returns even to those verses which, though already interpreted, are inexhaustible. (ADV 7; BTV x)

CHAPTER 1

The Talmudic Readings

From Literature to Politics

Few philosophers produce multiple distinct kinds of philosophical writing. Some, like Maimonides and Camus, wear many hats, and under each one write a different body of work (Maimonides was a philosopher, a physician, and a rabbi; Camus was a novelist, a playwright, a journalist, etc.). Others, like Heidegger and Derrida, extend their philosophizing to the interpretation of literary texts or artworks, dealing with different disciplines but always in a philosophical way. Spinoza wrote philosophical treatises but also a Hebrew grammar, and we could jestingly imagine that, influenced by Levinas, he might have called this grammar and his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* his "confessional writings." Levinas is in the original situation of being defined by himself and others solely as a philosopher but having written and published two explicitly separate corpuses of work.

The Talmudic readings stand out in Levinas's philosophical corpus—some would say, *alongside* his philosophical corpus. Their peculiar position derives from three points: they were conceived as spoken lectures; they are commentaries on Talmudic texts rather than independent philosophical arguments; and these texts are aggadic narratives, namely, literary anecdotic stories. For these reasons, emphasized by the fact that they were published separately from the phenomenological books, the readings are unique in Levinas's work. In this chapter, I explore this difference and argue that the readings constitute Levinas's challenge to his philosophy. By this, I mean a double challenge, as in what Derrida calls a "double genitive":[1] Levinas's philosophy is challenged by the Talmudic readings, and itself presents a challenge, thanks to the Talmudic readings. This challenge will prove to be the substance of Levinas's political thinking.

In the first part of the chapter, I trace Levinas's positions on representation in general, and on writing in particular, to show that from his earliest to his latest texts, he reflected on the difference between philosophy and other mediums for expressing ideas. In the second part of the chapter, I focus on Levinas's distinction between "said" and "saying," which is arguably the most important but also the most tortuous conceptual distinction of his work. This distinction between "said" and "saying" explains the need, within Levinas's work, for *another kind of writing*. In the last part of the chapter, I show that the readings reflect the interplay of "said" and "saying" that characterizes, according to Levinas, a livable politics.

Levinas on Representation and Style

Levinas wrote few works on artistic representation and literature. Some are early, like the chapter titled "Exoticism" in *Existence and Existents* and the essay "The Other in Proust," both published in 1947 (EE 83–92, EE' 52–57; NP 117–126, PN 99–105); "Reality and Its Shadow," published in 1948 (RO 107–127; RS 1–14); and "Persons or Figures," published in 1950 (DL 170–174; DF 119–122). Later works include "The Prohibition Against Representation and 'The Rights of Man,'" published in 1984 (AT 129–147; AT' 121–130), and "De l'oblitération," published in 1990. The recent publication of the third volume of Levinas's diaries and unpublished manuscripts, *Eros, littérature et philosophie*, which comprises unfinished novels and poems written in Russian, helps round out our understanding of Levinas's position on art and literature.[2] From these texts emerges an ambivalent and even self-contradictory view of aesthetic representation.

On the one hand, Levinas expresses strong criticism of art, on the grounds that it is anti-ethical. In the most extreme formulation of this position, found in "Reality and Its Shadow," he rejects what he regards as the predominantly Hegelian conception of aesthetics, in which "artistic expression rests on cognition" and "is identified with spiritual life" (RO 107, 126; RS 1, 12).[3] Under this Hegelian conception, says Levinas, "what common perception trivializes and misses, an artwork apprehends in its irreducible essence. It thus coincides with metaphysical intuition. . . . Thus, an artwork is more real than reality" (RO 107; RS 1). Echoing Plato's condemnation of poetry, Levinas contends that this Hegelian notion is false: art is neither a super-reality nor even a form of knowledge. Moreover, echoing the biblical interdiction of idolatry,

he argues that art constitutes a "captivation [*ensorcellement*] or incantation" (RO 111; RS 4)—namely, a magic spell that does not open itself up to dialogue and, hence, impedes a subject's openness to the other (RO 109; RS 2).[4]

What Levinas means here is that works of art impose feelings and impressions on people, who receive them passively and egoistically. Art does not lead to interaction with others, and, hence, engaging with a work of art is an act of disengagement and disinterestedness.[5] It is also a "stoppage [*arrêt*] of time" (RO 119; RS 8). That is, the act of giving one's attention to a work of art creates a category of time that is "below" time, "an interruption of time by a movement going on the hither side of time" (RO 109; RS 3), in which fate replaces freedom (RO 121; RS 9–10). In engaging with art, people lose their agency in time, or their freedom, which is a condition of being open to the other. For Levinas, therefore, the Hegelian conception of art is problematic from both an epistemological and a moral point of view. It pretends that art is more real than reality when, in fact, it resides in reality's shadow; and it "liberates the artist from his duties as a man" (RO 109; RS 2). As a result, art is always a form of idolatry: "The petrification of the instant in the heart of duration . . . is the great obsession of the artist's world, the pagan world" (RO 123; RS 11).

On the other hand, Levinas's own work is full of literary references, which he employs for emphasis or to illustrate ethical situations and arguments. He admired the works of Shakespeare, Proust, Dostoyevsky, and others, and there is reason enough to suppose that he enjoyed music and painting no less than other philosophers and intellectuals of his time. Last, his own flourishing and emphatic style seems at times more poetic than strictly "philosophical." In this, he reminds us of Plato, who condemned the poets but had his own poetic style—and of Socrates, who rhetorically rejected rhetoric.

To explain the contradiction between Levinas's positions on art, some scholars have claimed to discern an evolution in his views, from a negative perception of art in the early texts to a reevaluation of it in the mature body of work.[6] It has also been argued that Levinas seems to make a distinction between literature and fine or visual art. The former, this argument goes, would avoid artistic idolatry because it is made of language, which constitutes the relation to the other.[7] Yet Jill Robbins observes a tension that operates "*within* each of [Levinas's] texts about art," from the beginning to the end of his philosophical journey.[8] Regardless of any possible evolution of his views or any distinction between (visual) art and literature, Levinas's writings reflect a real conflict between two opposing conceptions of art, one that sees art as ethical and one that sees it as anti-ethical.

Robbins shows that Levinas's criticism of idolatry (also called "the mythical" or "the mystical," and sometimes "the magical") in art is consistent throughout his entire work.[9] But what do these terms (idolatry, the mythical, the mystical, and the magical) actually mean? To answer this question, let us turn to the Talmudic reading "Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry," published in *In the Time of the Nations* in 1988. In that late text, Levinas explains that idolatry was conceptualized for the first time in the book that defines itself precisely against it, the Hebrew Bible or Torah, which created both the category of idolatry and that of its opposite, "religion."[10] Idolatry, in this context, means closure—"some secret closing up of the soul": the impossibility or the interdiction of exegesis (AHN 70; ITN 57). It consists of clinging to the immanence of meaning and refusing to look for what transcends it through commentary and dialogue. Idolatry is therefore the adoration of sameness. What idolaters see in every image, in every event, and in every word of God is, in effect, what they want to see, namely, themselves.

By contrast, "religion" or Torah is the possibility or even the requirement of interpretation, which is the ability to go beyond one's own cognition or understanding. Interpreting means, if you will, leaving the mind's comfort zone, the place where everything makes immediate sense. It consists of letting the text uproot the reader from what was meaningful in the first place. If so, the Torah contests not only idolatry but also the activity of essence or *ontology*, which in all situations aims at finding resemblances and at ascertaining sameness. "Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry" is arguably Levinas's clearest explanation of the similarity, and perhaps equivalence, between idolatry and ontology. Like idolatry, ontology functions in an immanent dimension (AT 130; AT' 122), and it seeks to transform difference into sameness. Ethics (the aspect of Torah that combats idolatry) is therefore openness to transcendence and otherness, while ontology is closure within presence.

To return to Levinas's formulation in "Reality and Its Shadow," ontology, like idolatry, is a stopping, or arrest, of time. Or as he says in later texts, ontology is "synchrony" while ethics works as "diachrony" (EI 48; EI' 56). Diachrony is the possibility of transcendence in time, a "disjunction of identity where the same does not come back to the same" (AE 88; OB 52). In that context, the transcendence proposed (or created) by the Torah, that is, the openness to otherness and, hence, the possibility of interpretation, fractures idolatry and ontology both in relationships between human beings and in relationships between a reader and her book.[11] In both domains, the subject can be either petrified into presence and fate (RO 123; RS 11) or open to interpretation—that is, to the other.

Idolatry, meaning the petrification into presence and fate that occurs when we engage with a work of art, acts through rhythm. Rhythm is "the way the poetic order affects us. . . . Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it" (RO 111; RS 4).[12] By rhythm, Levinas does not mean a feature of music and sound but the essence of the aesthetic experience, in which the subject becomes passive and participates in the world like a thing: "[The subject] is among things as a thing, as part of the show." His or her consciousness is "paralyzed in his or her freedom" (RO 112; RS 4). Therefore, "art's bewitching [*ensorceleurs*] rhythms" are a prison that only ethics can break, because by definition ethics is the power of rupture (DL 408; DF 293).[13] We find the same rejection of rhythm and its partner, dance, in interviews of the late 1980s—one by Christoph von Wolzogen and the other by Raoul Mortley. In the latter interview Levinas declares: "I often say, though it's a dangerous thing to say publicly, that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. . . . All the rest—all the exotic—is dance."[14] We will return at the end of this book to this "frankly racist aside," as Critchley calls it, and to other similar comments by Levinas.[15] What interests us at this point is the distinction made between situations that generate active dialogue and interpretation, and experiences in which agency is transformed into passive involvement.

It is remarkable that in the texts cited above—both the early and the late—Levinas attacks "passivity," while in seminal texts he uses that word to celebrate the ethical attitude.[16] Ethical passivity, or "radical passivity," as Wall calls it, is the openness of the subject to otherness. In Levinas's famous expression, it is the "substitution for the other through responsibility" (AE 181; OB 114).[17] Hence, the notion of ethical passivity designates an *activity* of the subject on behalf of the other (AE 182; OB 115). However, there exists another passivity, which Levinas rejects as anti-ethical. This "inert passivity" (AE 181; OB 115) is that engendered by rhythm. It constitutes an anti-ethical attitude because, in it, the subject withdraws from his or her responsibility for the other.

In sum, there are two kinds of passivity and disinterestedness: the ethical kind, which is responsibility for the other, and the artistic kind, which constitutes a withdrawing from responsibility. We can now understand better Levinas's criticism of art in "Reality and Its Shadow." It is through rhythm that art leads to inert passivity, namely, to disengagement from responsibility. This view is found not only in Levinas's early texts but throughout his entire body of work, up to his 1988 interview with Francoise Armengaud, published in *De l'oblitération*, which deals with Sosno's sculptures. There Levinas says,

"Beauty's perfection enforces silence without taking care of the rest. It is the guardian of silence. It lets things happen [*il laisse faire*]. Here are the limits of the aesthetic civilization. . . . [Here is] what makes people indifferent to the suffering of the world and keeps them in this indifference" (DO 8). But does this imply that *all* art leads to anti-ethical indifference? Does art always generate inert passivity?

In *De l'oblitération*, Levinas answers that art can lead either to inert passivity or to "obliteration." Obliterative art shows the incompleteness of reality (DO 18). It "denounces the easiness or light insouciance of beauty and recall[s] the damage [*usures*] attendant on being, the 'repairs' that cover it and its crossings out [*ratures*], visible or hidden" (DO 12). Obliterative art, like Sosno's sculptures, shows the "secret" of being, its "drama," namely, the fact that being is open to otherwise than being (DO 30). It can therefore be regarded as a "window" onto ethics (DO 26).[18] As Levinas puts it, "Obliteration interrupts the image's silence." Thanks to its incompleteness, such art leads to dialogue and breaks the closure of idolatry. It transforms the synchronic arrest of time into diachrony. As a result, "obliteration leads to the other" (DO 28).

We should not be too quick to conclude that for Levinas there are two kinds of art, one that is good (because it leads to ethics) and one that is bad (because it is idolatry). In *De l'oblitération*, Levinas explains that obliteration is the opposite of the "magical operation" of art. But he still wonders whether obliterative art can ever have the same ethical depth as a human face (DO 20). Put differently, uncertainty remains even about obliterative art. Art of such a kind might be a window onto ethics, but Levinas is not sure that this is so. This uncertainty recalls an earlier ambivalence in the 1947 essay "The Other in Proust." As Robbins shows, Levinas's distinction between idolatry and art leading to ethics is conceptualized there as the contrast between poetry and prose: "Neither poetry nor prose represents for Levinas a genre of art but originary experiences, for the prose in question is nothing other than the sobriety, the gravity of ethical language."[19] In "The Other in Proust," Levinas compares "poetic" incantations negatively to the "prose" of philosophy (NP 118; PN 100). However, Levinas seems to hesitate. When he finally calls Proust a "poet of the social" (NP 121; PN 102), he concludes that his poetry situates "the real in a relation with what forever remains other—with the other as absence and mystery. [Proust's most profound teaching] consists . . . in inaugurating a dialectic that breaks definitively with Parmenides" (NP 123; PN 105).[20] Therefore, poetic incantations are now regarded as ethical. While in *De l'oblitération* Levinas is uncertain about the ethical aspect of obliteration,

in "The Other in Proust" he is uncertain about the magical aspect of poetry. From the beginning to the end of his œuvre, Levinas wonders whether works of art lead to ethics or to idolatry, and never reaches a final decision.

This indecision stems from the fact that, for Levinas, all forms of art include an idolatrous and an ethical side, or, rather, an idolatrous danger and an ethical potentiality. Indeed, "two sides" may be too strong a term. One could argue that these are not two distinct and competing aspects of the work of art but two ways of approaching the selfsame attribute: the same feature leading to two possible behaviors. In "Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry," Levinas says that the Torah is at the same moment an affirmation of "religion" and a rejection of idolatry. One could infer from this that the Bible describes ethical moments alongside unethical ones. However, Levinas immediately rejects this reading and formulates a more radical thesis: there is a risk of idolatry toward the Torah itself. The Torah that denounces idolatry can itself become an idol. Therefore, "Torah" means "the reading or study of a text that protects itself from eventual idolatry of this very text, by renewing, through continual exegesis—and exegesis of that exegesis—the immutable letters and hearing in them the breath of the living God" (AHN 71; ITN 59). Idolatry is not a defined set of events and rituals distinct from an ethical set of events and rituals but a way of approaching something that can also be approached ethically.[21] As Levinas writes in another Talmudic reading, "The question of ontology will thus find its answer in the description of *the way* Israel receives the Torah" (QLT 90; NTR 41). There are different ways to receive the Torah, of which two are ethics and the "idolatry of the letter" (QLT 19; NTR 7).

Does this mean that the Torah and the work of art contain a similar ambivalence? It certainly does not mean that art and Torah are the same thing. Torah is the truest expression of the fight against idolatry, while art can lead to either idolatry or ethics. The Torah stands against an idolatry that menaces everything including itself, while art is a priori indifferent to its possible ethical or non-ethical effects. However, the comparison between art and Torah is fruitful in making us realize that ethics and idolatry are intertwined. Their knot constitutes the greatest challenge of Levinas's philosophy, as he will have to avoid the risk of idolatry and ontology in his own writing.

Levinas and Writing

Avoiding the risk of idolatry means avoiding closure. In Levinas's terminology, it means disrupting the "said."[22] By "said" (*dit*), Levinas means the linguistic

expression of things—the manifestation of presence through discourse. Given that the other interrupts presence and, accordingly, cannot be grasped by concepts, the ethical relationship between the ego and the other is not a "said" but a "saying" (*dire*). "Saying" recovers both the intentionality of language toward the other and the difference between this intentionality and the ontological "said."[23] "Saying" is "dedication to the other" (AE 223; OB 143). It is a form of language that does not reduce the other to known categories and, hence, does not turn otherness into sameness.[24]

However, a philosophical text is, by definition, a "said." Put differently, in his work, Levinas necessarily employs ontological language—language that creates closure. To express the distinction between "saying" and the "said," and to emphasize the ethical facet of "saying," he must use concepts, namely, a "said." This paradox is central in his work and acknowledged at length in *Otherwise than Being*: "Every contesting and interruption of this power of discourse is at once related and inverted [*invertie*] by discourse. . . . In relating the interruption of the discourse or my being ravished from discourse, I retie its thread. . . . Are we not at this very moment in the process of deleting the exit that our whole essay is attempting to take, thus encircling our position from all sides?" (AE 262; OB 169).[25]

If so, the core of Levinas's philosophical project will be the attempt to write in a way that interrupts the "said," while knowing that the "said" must have the final word.[26] Two questions must be asked: (1) How does Levinas interrupt his own "said"? (2) What is the status of the final word of his "said"? To the two already mentioned levels on which ethics may have the power to shatter ontology—the relationship between human beings and the relationship between a reader and her book—we must add a third: the relationship between a writer and his writing. We may therefore wonder whether Levinas's effort to interrupt his own "said" is congruent with ethical practice *in general*. More exactly, we wonder whether ethics as *philosophy* (what Levinas does in his written works) and ethics as meeting the other (what people do when they encounter another human being) are the same. To explain this point, I will focus on three commentaries of Levinas's distinction between the "said" and "saying"—those of Derrida, Nancy, and Ricœur.

In "At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am," Derrida asks how Levinas "manage[s] to inscribe or let the wholly other be inscribed within the language of being, of the present, of essence, of the same, of economy etc., within its syntax and lexicon, under its law" (ECM 166; AVM 150). He answers that the solution need not involve going beyond language. Indeed, Levinas's writing is open to the other, "in such a way that it is less a matter of

exceeding that language than of treating it otherwise with its own possibilities." In a close reading of *Otherwise than Being*, Derrida shows how Levinas uses repetitions that dis-locate discourse both spatially and temporally. These spatial and temporal moves create a series of tears (*déchirures*), knots, and hiatuses, which Derrida calls a *seriasure* (series and erasure) (ECM 182; AVM 167). In such a process, each philosopheme is "disarticulated, made inadequate and anterior to itself, absolutely anachronic to whatever it said about it" (ECM 185; AVM 170).

Derrida's reading of Levinas's literary style echoes his own description of *différance*: "Différance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be 'present,' appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element."[27] For Derrida, Levinas's literary style is a kind of hyperbolic *différance*. It is thus no surprise that he calls it a "performative without present" (ECM 187; AVM 173), which echoes Derrida's own "performative to come," also called "the messianic."[28] By this, Derrida refers to the creative part of writing, namely, what "overflows" language and generates the displacement of meaning.[29] If so, Levinas's writing not only describes the openness of the subject to the other but exhibits it in its own form.

In "L'intrigue littéraire de Levinas," which prefaces the third volume of the recently published *Œuvres*, Nancy reiterates Derrida's understanding of Levinas's style as made of tears. Nancy calls this style an "intrigue," pointing not only to the intricacy of hiatuses and knots between the same and the other but also to the use of literary schemes in Levinas's writing.[30] Nancy stresses that Levinas's first works, unpublished until recently, were pieces of poetry and fiction. In other words, Levinas's rejection of literature (in texts such as "Reality and Its Shadow") should be seen against the backdrop of the fact that Levinas had previously sought to express "the truth" in novels.[31] The young Levinas, Nancy says, had a "disposition" or even a "drive" toward literature, which was from the beginning intimately tied in with his philosophical project.[32] He "saw in literature the place that would perhaps be most suited to presenting the intrigue of the other and relationships, approach and contact."[33] Later on, Levinas changed his mind, or at least he abandoned his efforts in fiction, and aimed instead to reflect the "intrigue of the other" through literary "twists, manners or behaviors" in his theoretical style.[34]

In *Autrement: Lecture d'*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence *d'Emmanuel Levinas*, Ricœur comments on the correlation between "saying" and "said" in *Otherwise than Being*.[35] He shows that this correlation is

described in a declarative tone reinforced by an insistent use of hyperbole. By contrast with Derrida, who focuses on Levinas's repetitions and erasures, and Nancy, who underlines Levinas's use of literary strategies, Ricœur insists on Levinas's use of "extremes" and his "increment of pathic in pathetic and pathologic."[36] The "excessive" gesture culminates in Levinas's "substitution," or sacrifice for the other, which is so extreme that it cannot be expressed in words and is only approximated in a "crescendo: persecution, outrage, expiation." Ricœur suggests: "Is this not the admission that ethics disconnected from ontology has no language that would be direct, proper, appropriate?"[37] The notion of a "saying" that will never become a "said" leads to a hyperbolic argumentation that constitutes "verbal terrorism."[38]

However, says Ricœur, it is this verbal terrorism that generates the necessity of the "said" expressed by what Levinas calls the "entrance of the third party" (AE 245, OB 257; PP 345, PP' 168). The "entrance of the third party" is not an event but the fact that "in the proximity of the other, all the others than the other obsess me" (AE 246; OB 158). The ego never faces one single "other" but many; there are always multiple people to take into account at the same time. Therefore, on the substitution of the ego to the other is superimposed the question of the possible substitution to *other* others, called by Levinas "the third party." The ego compares the third with the other and weighs its responsibility in light of the needs of these different others. The question and comparison implied by the expression "the third" (or "the entrance of the third") constitute a reenactment of the "said," which is ineluctable.

For Ricœur, these processes mean that Levinas, a philosopher who writes philosophical books, speaks from the position of the third—the position that introduces questioning and comparing.[39] A philosopher, says Ricœur, cannot be satisfied with statements about ethical responsibility. He or she must *question* ethical responsibility. If so, the "said" is an interruption of "saying" no less than the opposite. That is, in Levinas's writing, "saying" interrupts the "said" but the "said" also interrupts "saying." However, the latter is not a simple "return" to ontology that would destroy the ethical "saying." The disturbance of ethics by the "said," claims Ricœur, is a special case of ontology interrupted by ethical responsibility. Ricœur calls this "a post-ethical quasi-ontology."[40] In other words, for Ricœur Levinas describes three distinct situations: (1) pure ontology (or idolatry), namely, the mechanism of presence and sameness; (2) pure ethics, namely, the rupture of presence induced by responsibility for the other; and (3) post-ethical quasi-ontology, which comes with "the entrance of the third party."

No doubt, Levinas's formulations lead to much confusion. At first sight, it seems that ethics comes to interrupt ontology: the other is a "stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [*le chez-soi*]" (TI 28; TI' 39). If such is the case, ontology precedes ethics. However, Levinas makes very clear that ethics precedes ontology. It is to emphasize this point that he formulates "the entrance of the third party" in a theatrical way, as if the third were entering a scene where the ego and the other are already present: "The third party introduces a contradiction in the saying whose signification before the other until then went in one direction" (AE 245; OB 157). However, this chronology is broken as soon as it is announced because, as recalled, the third appears in the face of the other. It is impossible to establish a chronology in which ontology and then ethics, or ethics and then ontology, combine into what Ricœur calls a "quasi-ontology." I argue that there is only *one* phenomenal situation in Levinas and that it is neither pure ethics, nor pure ontology, nor any process that would lead to a combination of the two. Reality consists through and through of an *interplay* between "said" and "saying."[41] It is such a quasi-ontology that, as we shall see, will prove in the Talmudic readings to be an original conception of "justice."

The Talmudic Readings as Quasi-Ontology

In a 1942 diary entry, Levinas planned his work-to-be as a triptych of philosophy, fiction, and literary critique.[42] As we know, fiction and critique were subsequently abandoned. However, the fact that Levinas wrote two kinds of discourses, the philosophical books and the Talmudic readings, makes us wonder whether the dislocated intrigue of ethics as first philosophy in the phenomenology books is open *enough* to the other. Indeed, it is the need for a writing different from the traditional philosophical kind that is perceptible in the production of the readings, which Levinas began to publish in the 1960s.[43] Therefore, in Levinas's work, the readings have the function of "the other writing," and as such are a disturbance. Their relationship to the "philosophical" books parallels the intricacies of "saying" and "said" in Levinas's philosophy. Moreover, the readings themselves display the interplay of "said" and "saying." Put differently, the readings manifest the relationship between "said" and "saying" at both a micro level (within the readings themselves) and a macro level (in the context of Levinas's entire œuvre).

Levinas emphasizes that the Talmud is a "living speech" embodying an "openness" and a "challenge" that "cannot be summarized by the term

'dialogue'" (DSS 7; NTR 91). To put it differently, the Talmud expresses a "saying" that is graspable by no kind of "said." As such, Levinas claims that traditional philosophy, including those works that, like the Socratic dialogues, are open to otherness (thanks to their dialogical form), is always more a "said" than the Talmud. Indeed, the Talmud is a collection of oral "sayings" that were not intended to become "said" and were written down only "accidentally" (QLT 13; NTR 5).[44] They seek always to remain "gesture," a "non-writing [*non-écriture*]" (DSS 7; NTR 91), a "literature before the letter" (ADV 8; BTV xi).

Interestingly, Levinas finds support for his understanding of the Talmud as "saying" in the composition of the Talmud itself. An important component of the Talmudic discussions is their use of *beraitot*—an Aramaic term referring to opinions professed by the sages of the Mishnah, the Tannaim, but that were not included in the Mishnah itself or in any other written source. The Amoraim (sages of the Gemara) reference beraitot in their discussions of the Mishnah just as they do mishnayot (the written opinions of the Mishnah), giving equal status to both. The Amoraim thus have access—or present themselves as having access—to knowledge that, without their intercession, would have been lost to later (medieval or modern) readers of the Talmud or of Jewish literature more generally. Put differently: to comment on a written text (the Mishnah), the sages of the Gemara use the remembered opinions of sages who lived several hundred years before them and that, more likely than not, were never written down until the Gemara itself was put to writing in a later stage of its development. Levinas thus sees the "trace" of absolute otherness in the very structure of the Talmud: the beraitot—"left-out sayings" that "open new horizons" (QLT 11; NTR 4)—are a "beyond-the-text" that makes the text possible by opening it up into its exteriority. Like the "trace of the other,"[45] they point to a non-written origin, which obtains its status as origin only in the "saying" of the Gemara sages that became "said" in the redaction of the Talmud.

This openness of the text, perceptible in its very fabric, is expressed also in its content: "The respect for the stranger and the sanctification of the name of the Eternal are strangely equivalent. And all the rest is a dead letter. All the rest is literature. The search for the spirit beyond the letter, that is Judaism itself" (QLT 61; NTR 27–28). Put differently, Judaism is about the relationship to the wholly other, stranger or God. This core notion takes place "beyond the letter." Everything else must be considered a "dead letter" or literature, built on rhetoric, which "from the depth of all language, throws up its bewitching [*ensorceleurs*] illusions and warps the woof of a text" (DSS 7; NTR 91). The adjective "bewitching," used here as it was in "Signature" of

Difficult Freedom to describe art's "bewitching [ensorceleurs] rhythms" (see above), underlines the inert passivity that can be induced by literature. By contrast, the Talmud is an enterprise of "demythification" (DSS 10; NTR 10). By this Levinas does not mean that there are no myths in the Talmud, or that the Talmud aims to dismiss or invalidate myths, but that the Talmud reflects an active exegesis of myths rather than a passive acceptance of their "sacredness" (DSS 89; NTR 141). Every religion, every culture, and every ideology is founded on myths. The "holiness" of the Talmud comes from the fact that it goes beyond them through commentary (DSS 89; NTR 141).

Before we go on, it will be helpful to consider how Levinas himself read the Talmud. Levinas was not a trained Talmudist, and he did not use the traditional methods of Talmudic exegesis employed by the later rabbis in their own commentaries (and commentaries of commentaries) on the Talmud. He also refused to use any of the modern academic approaches to the study of the Talmud, whether based on philological science or structuralist analysis (QLT 14–15, DSS 8; NTR 5, 92). Instead he looked for *unity* in the disparate texts—the debates, opinions, ritual and legal rulings, and anecdotes—that make up the Talmud. In this endeavor, he hoped neither to understand the logic of the Talmud's approach to religious law nor to unravel its historical composition or mythical structure but to identify its "central ideas" (NLT 11; NewTR 50). This focus on unified and unifying ideas was *purely philosophical*. As such, he spoke "otherwise" than the Talmudic sages: "Traditional study does not always expose [*thématise*] the meanings that appear thus, or else it takes them for truisms that 'go without saying' . . . ; or else it states them in a language and in a context that are not always audible to those who remain outside. We strive to speak otherwise" (DSS 9; NTR 92). As a result, if the Talmud is made of non-thematized "sayings," Levinas's commentaries integrate these "sayings" into a thematized philosophical "said." (The term "theme" appears everywhere in Levinas's work, without being specifically defined anywhere. It means roughly "concept" and is often used as a synonym of "said." In his description of the "entrance of the third" [in AE 245; OB 157 and PP 345; PP' 168], it is used as a synonym for categorization.)[46]

This philosophical "said" is most clearly expressed in the bold universalism that permeates the readings. In his introduction to *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, Levinas emphasizes that "the chief goal of our exegesis is to extricate the universal intentions from the apparent particularism within which facts tied to the national history of Israel, improperly so-called, enclose us" (QLT 15; NTR 5). In other words, for Levinas the Jewish context has little value as *Jewish* context. It serves as grounds or material for an enlargement

to universal understandings, or *ideas*, which can be "said" and understood by all of humanity. Universalism has here two meanings. First, it defines Levinas's goal and methods, in that his textual commentary incorporates universal—that is, philosophical—considerations (QLT 106; NTR 48). Second, it demands that we redefine the word "Israel" to designate not a specific people but humanity in its entirety:

> I have it from an eminent master: each time Israel is mentioned in the Talmud one is certainly free to understand by it a particular ethnic group which is probably fulfilling an incomparable destiny. But to interpret it in this manner would be to reduce the general principle in the *idea* enunciated in the Talmudic passage, to forget that Israel means a people who has received the Law and, as a result, a human nature which has reached the fullness of its responsibility and its self-consciousness. (DSS 18; NTR 98)[47]

For Levinas, the meaning of the Talmud "is not only transposable into a philosophical language, but refers to philosophical problems" (DL 101; DF 68). This philosophical universalism is the reason why the spirit of the Talmud, which is "literature before the letter," is the basis of all literature: "No doubt there is instituted in this inspired essence of language—which is already the writing of a book—a commanding 'ontological' order . . . which all literature awaits or commemorates. . . . Hence . . . the eminent role played by so-called national literatures, Shakespeare, Molière, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe and Pushkin" (ADV 8; BTV xi). Note that from the general condemnation of art (or poetry) as idolatry that we saw at the beginning of this chapter, we have reached a point where great literature is lauded for its relationship to the Talmudic ideal—the antithesis of idolatry. More: this ideal, supposed to be a "non-writing" and a "saying," is now considered an "ontological order"—a universal "said."

The Talmudic readings were composed for a general audience (i.e., not an audience of philosophers), and they dealt ostensibly with matters of Jewish interest, certainly matters outside the philosophical tradition. Moreover, their universal "said" was pronounced as a "saying": they were prepared as oral lectures, and Levinas retained their spoken form when the readings were published (QLT 13; NTR 10). In each of the readings, Levinas addresses his audience as "you" and guides his listeners through the twists and turns of the rabbinic discussions. For all these reasons, the readings have long been regarded as part of the cultural and religious Jewish revival that transformed

and revivified the French Jewish community a few decades after World War II. However, while I do not contest the importance of Levinas's teaching for the French Jewish community, it seems to me that the lectures must be understood as part of a larger expression of the relationship between "saying" and "said," in which "saying" and "said" cannot exist without each other—indeed, must confront each other.

It is in this context of the necessary interrelation of "saying" and "said"—which, as we saw earlier, do not designate different entities but the same entities considered from different points of view—that the Talmudic readings make sense in Levinas's work. This interrelation takes the form of a repeated mise en abyme: as spoken lectures, the readings introduce a "saying" into the "said" of Levinas's body of work, which develops the idea of ethics as "saying." As texts, they translate that rabbinic "saying" into philosophical ideas, namely, into "said." The rabbinic "saying" itself had already become "said" in the written Talmud and was restored to its glory as "saying" in the lectures before being recrystallized as "said" in the published readings. The readings show the intricate scheme of "saying" and "said" at multiple levels of discourse.

The inseparability of "saying" and "said" comes from the concreteness of life itself, in which ethics and ontology develop together. It is the function of "phenomenology" to show their intrigue:

> Is this implication of ethical responsibility in the strict and almost closed saying of the verse . . . not the original writing in which God, who has come to the idea, is named in the Said? I am not just political and a merciless realist; but I am not . . . just the pure and voiceless interiority of a "beautiful soul." My condition—or my un-condition—is my relation to books. . . . Language and the book that arises and is already read in language is [*est*] phenomenology, the "staging" in which the abstract is made concrete. (ADV 9; BTV xii–xiii)

The readings are the mise-en-scène for the interaction of abstraction and concreteness, where, in this quotation at least, it appears that the former means pure ethics and the latter pure politics. However, in other texts Levinas posits that ethics is concrete and politics is abstract universalization: "The entry of the third is the very fact of consciousness . . . the finitude of essence accessible to the abstraction of concepts" (AE 246; OB 158). Here again, use of the same terms (abstract and concrete) for both ethical and ontological contexts may lead to confusion. We must therefore understand that "concrete" and "abstract" are synonymous neither with ethics nor with

ontology. What is "abstract" is anything considered from a philosophical point of view, while "concrete" refers to anything that is lived in real life. The readings are meant to join these two domains in a method that Levinas calls "paradigmatic," in which ideas are never separated from their examples (QLT 21, 48; NTR 8, 21): "My effort always consists in extricating from this theological language meanings addressing themselves to reason . . . it consists of being preoccupied, in the face of each of these apparent new items about the beyond, with what this information can mean in and for man's life" (QLT 33; NTR 14). We will now see in what follows how, in the Talmudic readings, this paradigmatic method allowed Levinas to elaborate on his conception of politics.

CHAPTER 2

Levinas's Conception of Politics in the Talmudic Readings

Much work has been dedicated to Levinas's shift from the dual relation between the ego and the other to the triangular relation between the ego, the other, and the third party—namely, from ethics to politics. It has been shown that Levinas seems to tell a story that starts with the face-to-face encounter and is then transformed by the entrance of the third:[1] "The responsibility for the other is an immediacy antecedent to questions, it is proximity. It is troubled and becomes a problem when a third party enters" (AE 245; OB 157). However, Levinas insists that the third has always been there. He or she is not an addition to the dual relation but materializes in the face of the other from the beginning. As Levinas writes, "The epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity" (TI 234–235; TI' 213).[2] Put differently, at one and the same time Levinas says that ethical responsibility is prior to the entrance of the third, and that the third appears with the other.[3]

One way to resolve this apparent contradiction is to argue that the "third in the face of the other" is a metaphor—that the existence of one other attests to the possible existence of *many* others. By this reading, the face of the other hints at the future presence of another other—it includes a third *in potentia*. In such a case, as Bernasconi puts it, "whatever political philosophy one finds in Levinas would be derived from his ethics as a modification of it."[4] Politics, as a potential or actual dis-location of the model of the ethical duo, would always be an interrupted ethics, a troubled ethics, a lesser ethics.

The problem is that this interruption is necessary and ineluctable. There is no way to remain—even for a minute—in the ethical face-to-face encounter because, as quoted above, "the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity." The idea of the "third in the face of the other" implies the impossibility of pure ethics and the inexorability of plural relationships. If so, Levinas's

conceptualization of unadulterated ethics may be considered a sterile game, and even a logical failure. What is the point of analyzing a situation that has never existed, and will never exist by definition? One could lament that Levinas did not spend less time on ethics and more time on its necessary "modification," which is our social life.

A second way to resolve the contradiction is to say that the appearance of the third takes place in parallel to the ethical meeting—that ethics and politics coexist but on different levels. In this case, however, one wonders how this coexistence allows for the "antecedence" of the ethical face-to-face. The purpose of this chapter is to offer a preliminary answer to this question, one that will become clearer over the course of the book.

I argue that in the Talmudic readings, ethics mirrors the Hobbesian state of nature. In so saying, I subscribe to C. Fred Alford's important claim that "from the beginning to the end, Hobbes shadows Levinas's project."[5] However, my understanding of how Levinas mirrors Hobbes is different from Alford's. For Alford, Levinas "collapses the state of nature, the state of war and the state itself."[6] The "place" that Alford chooses as a metaphor for this triply collapsed state is an apartment in which a doorbell rings: the other is at the door waiting to be met.[7] He defines Levinas's so-called state of nature as the "civilized" experience of urban individualism (which he calls "cosmopolitanism"), disturbed by the intrusion of the other. The ethical meeting constitutes the end of the state of nature, which was a sociopolitical state. For that reason, Alford interestingly refers to Levinas's political views as "inverted liberalism."[8]

While I agree that the apartment and doorbell make an excellent metaphor for Levinas's ethical meeting, my reflection on the "state of nature" in Levinas goes in another direction.[9] What I mean in saying that ethics mirrors Hobbes's state of nature is that like Hobbes's natural right, ethical responsibility is logically and normatively anterior to politics but not chronologically anterior to it. Indeed, it is manifested only in politics. It is an a priori purity that includes *in itself* its own impossibility as purity and that can be manifested only in its impure version, the political world. This is not to say that Levinas's ethics and Hobbes's state of nature are similar in content. To the contrary: their contents are opposed, and it is for this reason that I say that they *mirror* each other. I will here develop this argument, focusing principally on the Talmudic readings "Judaism and Revolution" (DSS 11–53; NTR 94–119), "Model of the West" (ADV 29–50; BTV 13–33), and "The Will of God and the Power of Humanity" (NLT 9–42; NewTR 47–77).

The Contract

"Judaism and Revolution" is a reading of a discussion found in the Talmudic tractate *Baba Metsi'a*, folio 83a–b.[10] The mishnah quoted in *Baba Metsi'a* 83a decrees that working hours and workers' meals should be regulated by local custom, that is, neither by arbitrary will nor by universal law. The mishnah declares: "He who hires workers and tells them to begin early and finish late cannot force them if beginning early and finishing late does not conform to the custom of the place. Where the custom is that they be fed, he is obligated to feed them; where it is that they be served dessert, he must serve them dessert."[11] The phrase "conform to the custom of the place" means that local custom limits the employer's generosity as much as his power, as is clear from a later part of the mishnah, which holds that promises to workers are also restricted by the custom of the place. Workers may expect neither less nor more than what custom dictates.

Understanding the text as being strictly oriented toward workers' welfare, Levinas infers that the mishnah is concerned with the "rights of *the other person*" (DSS 15; NTR 97; emphasis in the original). What Levinas means by "the other person" is that, in the Mishnaic text, the workers are considered not in terms of their objective status as persons or citizens but in terms of their relationship with the "I" or ego of the text, the employer. That is, the text is concerned with how we treat those whom we subjectively perceive to be outside ourselves, and whom we accordingly regard as "others." The phenomenological assumption that lies at the origin of the expression "the other" is that the reference is always the subject-who-perceives-the-other. In this context, Levinas's argument is that the Mishnaic ruling is not a general law about free, rational, and responsible members of the community but a law about the people that the subject perceives as his or her exteriority: "It is not the concept 'man' which is at the basis of this humanism; it is the other man" (DSS 17; NTR 98). That is, the law depends on the fact that people perceive others and turn toward them. Turning toward others (or *intentionality* in phenomenological language) lies at the basis of the ethical responsibility for the other.

In Levinas's thought, the ego is especially responsible for the other if the other is in a lower material position. As such, up to this point in the reading Levinas seems to be describing what he famously conceptualized as the ethical situation. There are two parties, employer and employee. The first has power and the other is poor: "The other as other is not only an *alter ego*. He is what I am not: he is the weak one whereas I am the strong one; he is the poor one, 'the widow and the orphan'" (EE 162; EE' 95). Consequently, the

worker's face expresses a demand that is a command, and the employer is infinitely responsible for him.

The mishnah continues with a story. Rabbi Yohanan ben Mathia asked his son to hire workers. The son promised "food" to the workers. When he came back, his father said: "Even if you prepared a meal for them equal to the one King Solomon served, you would not have fulfilled your obligation toward them, for they are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As long as they have not begun to work, go and specify: you are only entitled to bread and legumes" (DSS 17; NTR 98). The mishnah can be understood here in a simple and practical way: be precise in your contracts because if you are not, you risk a potential dispute. If you vaguely promise "food," your workers may demand the finest sirloin, arguing that that is what they understood by "food," or what they used to receive from their previous employer, or what they need for dietary or religious reasons. As the father tells his son, even a feast worthy of King Solomon would never be enough! Says the mishnah, since the father and son obviously cannot afford a meal fit for kings, they must make clear that the workers will receive the minimum prescribed by custom: bread and legumes.

This story, I suggest, illustrates the narrative of the "entrance of the third." Before, we had two parties, the employer and his employees, the former being responsible for the latter. The former, however, has now been divided in two—the employer comprises a father and son, who have individual desires and opinions. This division between different opinions is *in itself* the manifestation of a third party. Crucially, *the third party is not one of the three in particular*: it is neither the father, nor the son, nor the workers (seen as "the other"). Rather, the third party consists of the very condition of there being three voices in the story. The infinite demand of the worker/other perceived by the father and exposed in his conversation with his son generates the *question* of the limit and sharing of responsibility. The employer is not only defined by his responsibility for the welfare of his workers; he is also partly defined by his interest in his own welfare, or that of his family, or indeed of any other people. He must calculate what he can give to the worker/other.

To summarize the foregoing, the conversation between the father and son is a paradigm of the "entrance of the third" for three reasons. First, most simply, it introduces—or exposes—the presence of three parties in the interaction. Second, it raises questions about the degree of responsibility we hold toward others. Finally, it reveals the difference between ethics, as an infinite—or at least vague and open-ended—promise, and politics, as the calculation of what is possible. As such, in Levinas's philosophy, the "entrance of the third"

does not imply the actual presence of three parties: competing ways to treat the other appear "in the face of the other."[12] As Fagan writes, "The ethical realm relied upon is always already political within itself."[13] Moreover, if in the Talmudic story the conversation between the father and son comes after the meeting between the son and the workers, namely, after the pure "ethical" meeting, in real life this chronology is immaterial. While temporal order is unavoidable in a story, in real life the son, workers, father, and everybody else coexist from the beginning. Ethics is the focus on responsibility regarded as the core of all relationships *in a context in which all relationships already exist*. It is in this sense that Levinas's ethics is like the Hobbesian state of nature. Ethics is not a historical pre-political situation but that which gives meaning to the actual, phenomenal, political situation.

In short, calculations about how to treat the other—namely, the questions connected to the entrance of the third—are concomitant with absolute responsibility toward the other, though they are rhetorically expressed after it. For Levinas, the employer is and remains infinitely responsible for those who are under his or her authority. He rests this point on Rabbi Yohanan ben Mathia's reference to "the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." This formulation has two meanings. The first, universalistic, interpretation is that in the Talmud the people of Israel are "a people who has received the Law and, as a result, a human nature which has reached the fullness of its responsibilities and self-consciousness. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are human beings who are no longer childlike" (DSS 18; NTR 98).

The second interpretation is based on the well-known biblical story in which Abraham welcomes three strangers, giving them food and shelter, without knowing that they are angels, without inquiring who they are (Gen. 18:2–8). Indeed, Abraham's generosity toward his guests far exceeds his initial offer of plain bread and water (vv. 4–5); what he actually prepares is fine cakes, milk, curd, and a tender calf (vv. 6–8). As a result, Abraham's descendants are "men to whom their ancestor bequeathed a difficult tradition of duties toward the other man, which one is never done with, an order in which one is never free. In this order, above all else, duty takes the form of obligations toward the body, the obligation of feeding and sheltering" (DSS 19; NTR 99). However, is one infinitely responsible for others because these others are part of a tradition of infinite responsibility? Indeed, in the mishnah, it is the *workers*, not Rabbi Yohanan ben Mathia and his son, who are called "descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Levinas seems to understand the story as follows: The very presence of the descendants of Abraham reminds us of Abraham's

tradition of absolute responsibility. *Their* tradition of responsibility makes *us* responsible for them.[14]

Thus the presence of the other generates two parallel conditions. The first is based on the identification of the other—the workers in the mishnah—as descendants of Abraham. Abraham opened his house to his guests and, in his rush to serve them, offered even more than he had first proposed. This ancestry, according to Levinas, reminds us of our infinite responsibility toward others. In Levinas's reading of the Talmudic story, the son's approach to the workers is like Abraham's to his guests: what is owed to the other is undefined and can never be enough. From this, it can be derived that all relationships are like those of Abraham vis-à-vis his guests and the son vis-à-vis his workers, because all relationships potentially involve power. Ethical responsibility for anyone over whom the ego has power or potential power—that is, for anyone—is an irreducible fact: it has, and needs, no reason because it is the sign of the transcendence that constitutes the starting point of all human relationships.

The second condition is based on the identification of the other as people whose needs and will compete with the subject's own needs and will. When considered this way, our responsibility toward the other can never in fact be infinite, because we also have responsibility toward ourselves. The solution to this problem is a "contract" (DSS 20; NTR 100), like that in the Talmudic story, under which the workers are entitled not to "food," with an open-ended definition, but to *some kind of food*.[15] Within the bounds of this contract, Levinas insists that this food must be a decent, human meal, not food typically given to slaves or fit for animals.[16] That is, workers are entitled to meals that respect them as human beings. This idea returns in slightly different form in a section of the Gemara immediately following the mishnah. An employer offering a salary higher than prescribed by custom should not expect longer hours but better work from his workers. As Levinas comments, the contract must respect the human condition and people's need for sleep and free time: "The quality of my labor I am willing to discuss, but I will not bargain over my human condition, which, in this particular case, expresses itself as my right to get up or to go to sleep at the hour dictated by custom [*à l'heure coutumière*]" (DSS 23–24; NTR 101).

The contract is justified by the "human condition," that is, by the workers' "rights," or by the "rights of the other person" mentioned above. Levinas's use of the term "rights" here is atypical: Levinas usually describes the ethical meeting as a transcendent order that appears in the face of the other—namely, as something applied to or imposed on the *subject*, not as something

deserved or owned or received by the other.[17] Put simply, his ethics is formulated in terms of duties and not in terms of rights. In the sentence quoted above, however, Levinas clearly says that workers have a right to be protected. Even more, he speaks of "my right to get up," and so forth, using the first-person singular, claiming a right—"my right"—that seems to express the pure conatus of the self. How should we make sense of this selfish "right"?

In his 1985 essay "The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other" (HS 175–187; OS 116–125), Levinas defines the rights of man in a way that chimes with his definition of ethics:

> These rights are, in a sense, *a priori*: independent of any power that would be the original share of each human being in the blind distribution of nature's energy and society's influence. . . . Prior to all entitlement: to all tradition, all jurisprudence, all granting of privileges. . . . Is it not the case that the a *priori* may signify an ineluctable authority, older and higher than the one already split into will and reason . . . the authority that is, perhaps—but before all theology—*in* the respect for the rights of man itself—God's original coming to the mind of man. (HS 176; OS 116–117)

Here, Levinas brings together respect for the rights of man and the ethical command. He continues in the same vein: "The rights of man manifest the uniqueness or the absolute of the person, despite his or her subsumption under the category of the human species, or because of that subsumption" (HS 177; OS 117). The rights of man are synonymous with the infinite and divine command in the face of the other.

Returning to the workers of "Judaism and Revolution," we now understand that in using the vocabulary of the social contract, Levinas clarifies the relationship between ethics and politics. The workers' rights correspond to the ethical command in the face of the other. Like Hobbes's natural right, they are "anterior" to all human agreement. However, the contract—which, as in all contract narratives, follows the statement of rights—is the only guarantee of these rights. A natural right exists before any contract but cannot be fulfilled without a contract. Ethics—the workers' right to have someone take absolute responsibility for them and to receive unlimited food—is not *phenomenally* anterior to the contract that promises *some food* (but not "any food" and not "any quantity of food"). The worker's unlimited right to food cannot be implemented before being limited by a contract that stipulates *what kinds of food* and *how much food* will be offered.

Note that ethical responsibility can be found in both conditions—that is, in that which considers the workers as descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and that which treats the worker-employer relationship as requiring a contract. In the first case, however, ethical responsibility is "pure" but vague and unrealizable. An open-ended promise invites preposterous and unreasonable demands; "food" that means "all food" or "infinite food" also means, in concrete situations, "no food." In the second, ethics appears in the form of rights that are fulfilled thanks to the contract's specific clauses.

In short, like Hobbes, Levinas believes that sustainable life must be secured by a contract designed around the protection of rights. However, for Levinas the only way to truly protect rights is to focus first on the rights of the *other*. As he writes, "It is then not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled (and which is to be set up, and especially to be maintained) proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all" (AE 248, OB 159; PP 346, PP' 169). Against a conception of the contract meant to protect the subject, he proposes a contract that is meant to protect the *other*: "In opposition to the natural perseverance of each being in his or her own being (a fundamental ontological law), care for the stranger, the widow and the orphan, a preoccupation with the other person. A reversal of the order of things!" (AHN 74; ITN 61).[18] That is, according to Levinas a contract instituted by subjects fearing their own violent death will result in a society of egoists, while a contract aimed at protecting everybody's neighbors will result in care for *everybody*.[19] Interestingly, though, the Levinassian contract does not limit violence; rather, it limits charity and responsibility.[20] It does not end the terror that some people exert on others but the self-sacrifice of the ego to the other: "The contract does not put an end to the violence of the other. It does not abolish an order—or disorder—in which man is a wolf toward man. In the wolves' forest, no law can be introduced. But it is possible, when the other man is in principle infinite for me, to limit the extent of my duties to a degree, but only to a degree. The contract is more concerned with limiting my duties than with defending my rights" (DSS 20; NTR 100).[21]

We could say that in Hobbes's state of nature, natural rights are not respected enough, while in Levinas's ethics they are too respected. In both situations, however, the subject would not survive without a contract: In Hobbes's state of nature he would most likely be killed by his neighbor, while in Levinas's ethics, he would most likely sacrifice himself. In both cases the subject needs a contract that will secure his or her life. The contract that

safeguards and defends the neighbor is not only for the neighbor's benefit—it also protects the subject.

Non-Indifferent—or Merciful—Justice

At first sight, the Talmudic extract that Levinas examines in "Model of the West" is more esoteric than the passages he interprets in "Judaism and Revolution." The mishnah quoted in *Baba Metsi'a* 83a and the paragraphs from the Gemara that follow it deal with employment law; the extract that Levinas addresses in "Model of the West," from *Menahot* 99b–100a, focuses on the so-called showbread, or "bread of display"—the twelve loaves or cakes of bread that, according to the Bible, were to be displayed by the priests in the desert Tabernacle and then in the Temple in Jerusalem (Exod. 25:23–30; Lev. 24:5–9). The mishnah that introduces the Talmudic text details the weekly ritual in which the priests ceremonially removed the old loaves that had been displayed for the previous seven days on a table of gold and replaced them with fresh loaves. The mishnah ends with a few words about the rules for consumption of the old loaves by the priests. The Gemara then clarifies and expands on the Mishnaic introduction to the topic.[22] The digressions of the Gemara are as spectacular as in most parts of the Talmud and lead, among other things, to a reflection on Greek "wisdom" or philosophy.

It is in this context that Levinas's reading focuses on two interrelated topics: time and politics. After a brief introduction, Levinas starts the reading proper by quoting Exodus 25:30: "And on the table, you shall set the bread of display, to be before me always." It is this last word, "always," that prompts the first question raised in the Gemara: on occasion, time must have elapsed between the removal of the old loaves and their replacement by the new. How, then, can the bread be said to have been before God "always"? It is also this notion of "always" that captures Levinas's imagination.

To elucidate the meaning of "always," Levinas defines Jewish time as "permanence" (ADV 33; BTV 17), "duration which never wears out" (ADV 36; BTV 21). This he contrasts with the "'historical meaning' that dominates modernity" (ADV 33; BTV 17). Levinas adopts here the framework of Rosenzweig's critique of Hegel in *The Star of Redemption*. We will return to the influence of Hegel and Rosenzweig on Levinas in Chapters 7 and 8. Here, suffice it to say that Rosenzweig contests Hegel's fusion of spiritual and political existence in the historical process, and the universalization of that fusion. For Rosenzweig, Hegel's conception of history is relevant only for Christianity.

By contrast with the Christian presence in historical time, the Torah "lifts the people out of all temporality and historical relevance of life, it also removes its power over time." Therefore, the Jewish people "purchases its eternity at the price of temporal life."[23] The Jews have a spiritual, not temporal, life; they exist not in history but in eternity.[24]

Levinas echoes Rosenzweig's answer to Hegel already in the preface of *Totality and Infinity*, in which he famously acknowledges that Rosenzweig is "too often present in this book to be cited" (TI 14; TI' 28). In that preface, Levinas reflects on the opposition between war and peace, according to which war must be understood in the Hegelian context of universal History and peace as "eschatology" beyond history (TI 7–8; TI' 22–23). It is in "Model of the West," however, that Levinas explains the concrete implications of the ethical dimension of time, which are, unexpectedly, political. His rhetoric is hesitant, as if he were taking time to elucidate an argument that is far from clear:

> Does not Israel attach itself to an "always"—in other words, to a permanence in time. . . . And instead of remaining a word, a purely theoretical view or doctrinal affirmation . . . do not this predilection and this signification of the always call for a whole structuring of concrete human reality and a whole orientation of social and intellectual life—*perhaps justice itself*—which would render only such a signification possible and significant? But before entering into such a serious debate, I still owe an explanation to the critical minds present in this room, who might precisely be surprised that such serious and topical problems are being treated in the context of bread and tables. (ADV 33; BTV 17; emphasis mine)

If, as Hegel and Rosenzweig agreed, history and politics come together, and if, as Rosenzweig argued, the Jewish people lives in "eternity," can the Jewish people experience a "concrete human reality" and a "social and intellectual life"? Levinas's response is: such a concrete life with others will come precisely from that which is apparently most foreign to it—the ritual of the bread, symbolizing permanence. The abstruse details of the Temple ceremony become, in Levinas's reading, the key for building a well-organized society. Citing a midrash about the furnishings of the Temple, three of which had frames or "crowns," Levinas claims that the table on which the bread was displayed symbolizes political sovereignty: "The crown of the table is thus the royal crown. The king is he who keeps open house; he who feeds men. The

table on which the bread is exposed before the Lord symbolizes the permanent thought that political power . . . is vowed to men's hunger. . . . To think of men's hunger is the first function of politics. That political power should be thought of from the point of view of men's hunger is rather remarkable" (ADV 34; BTV 18).

Levinas has accomplished another "reversal of the order of things" (AHN 74; ITN 61), a reversal of both Hegel's and Rosenzweig's arguments. Reality *can* be dissociated from Hegelian history, which is a history of egos fighting for preponderance, namely, a history of wars. There can be a political order outside of this history—a political order Levinas founds on the rituals that Rosenzweig conceptualized as a-political eternity. However, having rejected both Hegel and Rosenzweig, Levinas reaches a conclusion that is not far from being Hegelian: the political life of the Jews realizes their spiritual life.[25] The table on which the ceremonial loaves are presented in the Temple represents both a spiritual (i.e., ethical) ideal and a political order together.

Politics is not defined here by its modern philosophical attributes. It is neither a monopoly of power, nor the guardian of individuals' natural rights, nor a national expression of the people. It is defined as concern and care for the people's hunger. This care is founded in a situation of "permanence" *beyond history*, namely, in offerings of bread presented to the other: "What should bread before the eyes of God do, if not look at men? What other purpose should it have, if not feed men?" (ADV 34; BTV 19). In the foreword to *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas develops this idea:

> Thank God, we are not going to offer up sermons on behalf of dubious crusades undertaken to "link arms as believers" and unite "as spiritualists" against rising materialism. As if we should present a front against this Third World ravaged by hunger; as if the entire spirituality on earth did not reside in the act of feeding; as if we had to salvage from the dilapidated world any other treasure than the gift of suffering through the hunger of the other. . . . The other's hunger—be it of flesh or of bread—is sacred; only the hunger of the third limits its rights; there is no bad materialism other than our own. (DL 10; DF xiv)

The core of all sociability is anxiety about the other's hunger, which is a "sublime materialism" (DSS 16; NTR 97). Such a sublime materialism is actualized in the reversal of the liberal problematic of rights: "A community must follow the individuals who take the initiative of renouncing their rights so that the hungry can eat" (DSS 77; NTR 133). What is remarkable in

this conception of "materialism" is that it includes all human relationships: the connection between spirit and power through the provision of food is the same as the connection between the ethical and the political (ADV 34; BTV 19). Contrary to the chronology of "the entrance of the third," the "parabolic exegesis of the rabbis" (ADV 34; BTV 18) adopted by Levinas in "Model of the West" emphasizes the interpenetration of all existing versions of being-together.[26] Care for the other's hunger is the principle of all human relations, from the primordial demand of the other to the public institutions of power. In fact, care for the other's hunger is the principle of *everything*. In his *Carnets de captivité* Levinas wrote: "At the beginning there was hunger—like an enormous spasm in being" (CDC 193). Here no less than Creation has been replaced by hunger. Hunger is the beginning, the starting point of the relationship between God and the world.

Ethics is the name of the principle by which the other has priority over the ego. However, the number of others limits our ability to satisfy their immediate and infinite hunger.[27] The only way to appease *some* of this hunger is through the practice of sharing and distributing responsibility and goods. That is, ethics calls for giving the other *everything*, now; through sharing and distribution, we can give the other *something* in a mediated way and at a postponed time. This practice is in itself an-ethical. Getting something at some point may sound less satisfying than the ethical everything-now; but since the latter is impossible, political mediation is the best we have *from an ethical point of view*. To put it differently, ethics alone has no materiality. It becomes material and receives meaning only in the form of something that is very different from—and indeed, opposed to—it: politics.[28] As Erika Weitzman puts it, "The entry of the *third* . . . brings the binary of the face-to-face encounter . . . into the phenomenal."[29] For Jean-François Rey, the entry of the third allows the "visibility" of humanness.[30] Note that this does not imply that politics is a compromise with reality and that an ideal world would be wholly ethical. Levinas does not imagine such an ideal world because it would be empty of people, except for the ego and the other (or, in fact, except for the other alone, because the ego would have sacrificed himself/herself to the other). Ethics is the principle of relationships in the real world, the world we know, populated by many others, and political by essence. *It is the principle of relationships in the political world, and politics is the performative of this principle, its appearance in the world in the form of a "sublime materialism."*[31]

This is certainly not to doubt or deny that politics can be a cause of hunger, of deprivation, and of persecution. But as "Model of the West" shows, the political *can* and *should* be thought of as a solution to hunger. Politics is

both the origin and the cure of hunger. As Levinas says to Richard Kearney, "Indeed, without these political and technological structures of organization we would not be able to feed mankind. This is the great paradox of human experience: we must use the ontological *for the sake of the other*; to ensure the survival of the other we must resort to the technico-political systems of means and ends."[32] Put differently, and contrary to a common misconception, Levinas is never "against" politics. He only fears "politics left to itself" (TI 334–335; TI' 300) because it is that which produces tyranny. It is from "politics left to itself" that emerged all those "millennia of fratricidal, political, and bloody struggles, of imperialism, of human hatred and exploitation up to our century of world wars, genocides, the Holocaust, and terrorism; of unemployment, the continuing poverty of the Third World; of the pitiless doctrines and cruelties of fascism and National Socialism, up to the supreme paradox where the defense of the human and its rights is inverted into Stalinism" (PP 340; PP' 163).

In practice, even "politics left to itself" is not completely devoid of ethics. According to Derrida, the "purely political" is "a fiction . . . which Levinas in fact . . . excludes the possibility of ever taking shape" (A 147; A' 81). As Levinas writes in "The State of Caesar and the State of David," "the City in its simplest sense is never this side of the religious" (ADV 215; BTV 183). "Religion"—as Levinas often calls ethics in his idiosyncratic manner[33]—always infuses politics *to some degree*. The question is, therefore, not whether ethics exists within politics but to what degree it does so.[34]

As can be seen in the statement from "Model of the West" quoted earlier, in the Talmudic readings Levinas uses the term "justice" for "concrete human reality and a whole orientation of social and intellectual life"—namely, for the connection of ethics and politics, which never fully synthesize but require, influence, and criticize each other. It has been argued that this concept of justice "is so undetermined that it has few rules to guide its exercise."[35] Levinas indeed never clearly defines justice, and rarely even attempts to do so by using concrete examples, or by describing just procedures or just decisions. However, justice conceived in this way is not a value to be defined but the relationship between ethics and politics. Therefore, the word "just" has no fixed meaning or content. There is justice in all concrete situations because justice is the ratio or "measure" of ethics and politics.[36]

As Gibbs accurately emphasizes, "The judge in the courtroom personifies or perhaps simply performs the complex relation of two and three, of infinite responsibilities and the claims of thirds and measured justice."[37] Or as Rey observes, "There is no figure of the Prince in Levinas, but there is a moment

of the judge."[38] Indeed, by contrast with the ego who sacrifices herself to the other, and with the Prince who rules by applying the impersonal and indifferent order of the laws, the judging of the judge is the unique moment in which the general law and the face of the other interfere with each other. As Levinas explains:

> In the State where laws function in their generality . . . once justice is said there is still, for the person as unique and responsible one, the possibility of or appeal to something that will reconsider the rigor of always rigorous justice. . . . It is in that sense that one has to speak of a return to charity and mercy. *Charity* is a Christian term, but it is also a general biblical term: the word *hesed* signifies precisely charity or mercy. There is appeal to mercy behind justice: this is how the necessity of the State is able not to exclude charity.[39]

The word "justice" is used here in its sense of the application of the general and impersonal law. Once expressed, however, such a rigorous justice must be followed by charity or *hesed*. But charity, mercy, or *hesed*—which can also be translated as loving-kindness or grace—comes through a "return." While the impersonal rule of law is, chronologically, the first moment in the process described, charity, mercy, or *hesed* already exists prior to it. We see here how politics (as rigorous general and impersonal justice) and ethics (as charity, mercy, or *hesed* applied to particular cases) obey different temporalities and interconnect with each other.

In "The Will of God and the Power of Humanity," a reading of an extract from *Makkot* 23a–24b, Levinas frames his discussion differently. The rigorous order of the law is now that of divine justice. Note that by "divine justice" Levinas neither formulates a theological ideal nor describes a kind of "deus ex machina" that would embody itself in the realm of human history. In Levinas's commentary on the Talmudic text, "divine justice" means absolute, unmitigated justice—a kind of justice that cannot and should not be realized in human existence. It is a justice so abstract and irrelevant for real cases that it constitutes a logical, hypothetical category related to the world to come. Indeed, the Talmudic text deals with transgressions that deserve the punishment of *kareth* or "excision"—death in the world to come. Rabbi Hananiah ben Gamaliel, however, asserts that in such cases a human tribunal can annul the divine sentence by administering a whipping. While flagellation may seem harsh to our modern sensitivities, by the Talmud's logic it is an immensely reduced sanction, "whose essence would consist precisely in touching the

intangible personal dignity of the neighbor" (NLT 18; NewTR 56). This means two things. First, a human tribunal's decision has the power to mitigate that of the heavenly court: a man flogged for a transgression punishable by *kareth* will not receive *kareth* in the world to come. Second, the justice pronounced by a human tribunal, which replaces the divine justice, is a ratio, a "differential," of pure justice and ethical love: "It is here that love of the neighbor must give all it can give, sanction without degrading, interfere in the affairs of the other without touching his freedom. Are not the court and justice this extreme measure of a difference which is a differential? Defined here by concepts as unpleasant as whipping, human justice substitutes itself for the rigorous verdict of the Absolute" (NLT 19; NewTR 57).

If the abstract category of divine justice, which is, by definition, always right, can and indeed should be moderated by a human justice infused with charity, how much more so human justice, namely, politics, which *is not always right*: "The immanent system of laws is weighed down and always overwhelmed by an exigency coming from elsewhere" (NLT 28; NewTR 65). The non-indifferent or merciful and differential justice that Levinas calls for consists of the application of the general law after it has been transfigured by responsibility for the particular person.

However, emphasizes Levinas, responsibility for the particular other is, in itself, a manifestation of God, understood now not as unmitigated justice but as unmitigated love. Hence, "God would be a mercy born in justice and in the rigor of justice, which signifies concretely: the mediation of an assembly of just men, the very possibility of such an assembly. And, inversely, the assembly of just [men] is not in itself the source of its own judgment. In it, another will is expressed; its judgment is inspired and exceeds the purely human condition" (NLT 28; NewTR 64–65).

The divine is both an outcome of human decisions, as mercy, and the source or principle of human decisions, as justice. It transcends the human, but it is only in an assembly of human beings—that is, of human institutions—that justice and ethical love come to phenomenal existence together, in non-indifferent justice, which is wholly human.

CHAPTER 3

Levinas's Critique of Social "Indifference"

In his phenomenological writings, Levinas drew no conceptual distinction between the social and the political; everything related to the "entrance of the third" is referred to as either social or political indiscriminately. Likewise, so far as I know, there is very little scholarship on the social per se in his philosophy. However, the Talmudic readings hint at a social domain that is different from both the political and ethical spheres. In this chapter, I read the "Messianic Texts" (DL 89–139; DF 59–96) and "Cities of Refuge" (ADV 51–70; BTV 34–52) to show that Levinas identifies the social with the shortcomings of contemporary urban life and the vain pursuit of a good life within that urban framework.

Cities

Levinas's description of the superimposition of political structures onto the ethical face-to-face encounter leaves little room for the conceptualization of any other kind of relationship. Everything that is not ethics is politics. Moreover, the repeated emphasis on the distinction between the absolute responsibility of the ego for the other and the realm of questions about responsibility seems to annul the need for distinctions within that latter category. Therefore, Levinas does not seem to define the "social" as distinct from the "political." He appears interested in one thing only: the distance between ethics and everything else, the latter being of no conceptual importance. It can be called the political or the social.[1] What matters is that it is not ethics.

In two cases depicted in the readings, however, Levinas seems to identify a social domain different from the political one, though he never acknowledges the implications of this distinction. Both lead—directly in one case, indirectly in the other—to the modern city.

The first, indirect, case is situations of economic oppression. In the "Messianic Texts" of *Difficult Freedom* Levinas quotes from tractate *Berakhot* 34b: "Between Messianic times and this world there is no difference other than the end of violence and political oppression, as it says: 'For the poor shall never cease out of the land' (Deut. 15:11)" (DL 93; DF 61). Interpreting this statement, Levinas explicitly distinguishes between two kinds of oppression—"One can indeed group the prophets' promises into two categories: the political and the social." In this context, social injustice consists of the "power the rich hold over the poor" (DL 91; DF 60) or, if we look at a later text, "the rich humiliating the poor" (AHN 118; ITN 103). This, in turn, constitutes the "capitalist paradise" (DL 93; DF 61) whose structural and geographical manifestation is the modern city, the "monstrous city of countless skyscrapers, the rabbinic doctors' futuristic nightmare of the Western world in its twentieth-century American realization. A city heaped with riches, a tiny fraction of which would suffice to feed the entire world. The accumulation of useless wealth. Nothing circulates, nothing is distributed" (AHN 112; ITN 96).

A second description of modern cities constitutes the framework of the other case in which Levinas seems to focus on the social as distinct from the political. Levinas is now speaking of modern cities that "rise from the void. They have no past. Within them, populations coming from everywhere are so mixed together and individuals so dispersed that all traditions are lost. Beings without history do exist" (DSS 30; NTR 105). The loss of traditions and of history sketches a wholly negative archetype of the social, here understood as those collective experiences that are related neither to ethical responsibility nor to political institutions. The social is a domain of dispersion and loss, a domain that is therefore neither ethical nor political. Indeed, this domain consists of neither infinite responsibility nor the implementation of those laws of justice that would transform the ethical demand into viable practices—practices that include the economic processes we usually understand as "social." In that purely "social" context, individuals without history or tradition "live in anonymity" (ADV 38; BTV 23). They feel bound neither to the ethical face-to-face encounter nor to political institutions.[2]

For Levinas, in modern society the ethical commitment to the other is forgotten or rejected. We are surrounded by others yet remain alone. In "The Pact," addressing a theme common to many students of Heidegger, Levinas mentions the "unease felt by man today in a society which has become, in a certain sense, planetary, and in which—owing to modern means of communication and transport, owing to the worldwide scale of economy in industrial society—everyone has the impression of being simultaneously related

to humanity as a whole, but also solitary and lost" (ADV 88; BTV 69).[3] What has been lost is the realization of concrete solidarity that helps us maintain our hold on everyday life, a solidarity that is ethical but that can be manifested only through politics. In "Model of the West" Levinas points to the metaphor of smoke used in the Talmudic discussion in *Menahot* 99b–100a. He interprets that smoke as "pollution," which he understands as the alienation of social life: "The metaphor of smoke which is used here to speak of hell is remarkable. It is not an eternal martyrdom through fire, it is pollution; a pollution not as a local and contingent problem but as modality of social life where one can no longer live. There is a lot of wood, there is all the paraffin you want, but it is to smoke out humanity" (ADV 49; BTV 32).

The lack of concern for the other and the subject's loneliness are connected. Together they constitute the social in its hellish version. Contrary to Sartre's famous dictum, "Hell is other people" ("L'enfer, c'est les autres"),[4] for Levinas hell is indifference to others, which leads to a social life of seclusion, a society of disconnected individuals. Such a society is exemplified in the diatribe against cafés of "Judaism and Revolution," in which Levinas brands cafés a symptom of social indifference:

> The café holds open house, at street level. It is a place of casual social intercourse, without mutual responsibility. . . . The café is not a place. It is a non-place for a non-society, for a society without solidarity, without tomorrow, without commitment, without common interests, a game society . . . it is because it is possible to go and relax in a café that one tolerates the horrors and injustices of a world without a soul. The world as a game from which everyone can pull out and exist only for himself, a place of forgetfulness—of the forgetfulness of the other—that is the café. (DSS 41; NTR 111)

The café, says Levinas, "proceeds from an ontological category" or, perhaps, from the category of the ontological—that of egoism and indifference to the other. Therefore, it is not the café per se but the hedonistic character of contemporary civilization that Levinas criticizes. The café is the paradigm of the liberal democracy's craving for a state of pleasure and self-realization that has become synonymous with freedom. What was once reserved for a small elite is now open to a whole society of privileged people. To be a free citizen means having the right not only to vote but also to pursue self-realization without limit. But for Levinas, this is not the culmination of a meaningful life: the freedom and equality of opportunity offered by modernity should

lead to solidarity, not to self-realization. What seems to be a peculiar and overstated rejection of a very innocent leisure-time pursuit is in fact a way of denouncing the prioritizing of the self that has become the essence of Western culture.

It must be emphasized here that Levinas is not condemning individualism. His philosophy is individualist through and through. However, for Levinas individualism leads to responsibility for the other, not to self-enhancement.

A Critique of Liberalism

Levinas's critique of the social as a non-responsible culture of the self is developed from another perspective in "Cities of Refuge," in which Levinas deconstructs the inner mechanisms of liberalism. A reading of an extract from tractate *Makkot* 10a, "Cities of Refuge," refers to a biblical institution appearing in Numbers 35, Deuteronomy 4 and 19, and Joshua 20. In Numbers 35, God tells the people that once the conquest of the promised land is complete, they must build six "cities of refuge" in which "unintentional" or "involuntary" killers can seek shelter. Involuntary killers are those who inadvertently cause someone's death, as when "an axe-head comes away from its handle during the work of the woodcutter and deals a mortal blow to a passer-by" (ADV 55; BTV 39). Under biblical law, such involuntary killers are not to be prosecuted. However, it is expected—indeed, is perceived as appropriate—that a relative of the victim will take upon himself to avenge the death. The involuntary killer has no option but escape to a city of refuge, where the avenger has no right to pursue him. The extract read by Levinas is part of a long Talmudic discussion on the configuration of the cities of refuge and on the legal definition of "involuntary homicide."[5]

Levinas begins his reading by pointing out that escape to a city of refuge is both a protection and an exile, namely, a punishment: "In the city of refuge, then, there is the protection of the innocent which is also a punishment for the objectively guilty party. Both at the same time" (ADV 56; BTV 39). Voluntary and involuntary crimes should not be treated in the same way; yet involuntary crimes that cause suffering and death deserve some kind of penalty. Levinas emphasizes that the absence of legal guilt does not mean the absence of all guilt. The woodcutter did not plan or wish to kill the passerby; yet he did so. He is a murderer "by negligence," says the Hebrew—by virtue of the fact that he failed to pay sufficient attention to his work or to the state of his tools (i.e., ensuring that his ax head was fully secured to the handle). Levinas

remarks, "Is our responsibility limited by negligence and lack of care? Are we conscious enough, awake enough, men already men [*sic*] enough?" (ADV 56; BTV 39). Or a few pages later: "The person who commits a murder through negligence is certainly not a criminal, but he is nevertheless not a worthy man. . . . The continuity in the scale of murderers is affirmed from now on . . . there would be only one race of murderers, whether the murder is committed unwittingly or intentionally. Our conscience is not yet wholly conscience. . . . We are not awake enough" (ADV 60–61; BTV 43).

It is from this point that Levinas develops his criticism of the social. In contrast to premeditated crimes—which have as their goal power and destruction—social injustice kills without intention, as if by "negligence" and "lack of care." It kills by indifference. In our Western society, "free and civilized, but without social equality and a rigorous social justice," are we not—asks Levinas—involuntarily but objectively guilty of the suffering and death of so many? Are we not guilty "by negligence," like the woodcutter of *Makkot* 10a? Does our society not neglect people without even being conscious of it? Is our wealth not the origin of "wars and carnage" in many places in the world? (ADV 56; BTV 40).

Responsibility for the suffering caused by the ego's indifference is a recurrent theme in Levinas's ethics, which he enlarges here to the responsibility of the satiated West toward the hungry parts of the world.[6] But he continues in an unexpected way: our Western, liberal cities are cities of refuge in which we find protection from the anger of the poor—namely, from the avengers of the blood that we spill "by negligence."

Levinas here reverses the logic of the biblical cities of refuge. The intention of that institution was to create shelters for unintentional killers, the half guilty. From this, Levinas infers that the inhabitants of contemporary Western cities—namely, the members of modern liberal society in its entirety—are, in some way, unintentional killers, half guilty. More: being unjust and indifferent to social despair, the city is at one and the same time the refuge and the crime. The rights and protection enjoyed in liberal society are both the result and *the essence* of our half guilt: we need protection because we have benefited from a protection that others did not receive, a protection that perhaps indirectly harmed them. The defense against the avenger is not only a right bestowed a posteriori by the city but also the essence of our guilt: our liberal rights, liberties, and protections are unintentional crimes against the poor who never received such privileges, and they are our protection against their revenge.

Levinas's inversion of the logic and purpose of the biblical cities of refuge allows him to unmask the circular logic of modern liberalism.[7] The

rights that protect modern subjects against brutality by their neighbors manifest their *conatus essendi*—the struggle that is at the essence of being.[8] For Levinas, this is equivalent to saying that they manifest the ego's selfishness and indifference to others. Then the angry poor want to avenge this crime of indifference—and the subject needs the protection of rights against them:

> The cities in which we live and the protection that, legitimately, because of our subjective innocence, we find in our liberal society . . . against so many threats of vengeance fearing neither God nor man, against so many heated forces—is such protection not, in fact, the protection of a half-innocence or a half-guilt, which is innocence but nevertheless also guilt? Does not all this make our cities cities of refuge or cities of exiles? And while it is a necessary defense against the barbarity of heated blood, dangerous states of mind, and threatening disorder, is not civilization—our brilliant and humanist civilization, Greco-Roman civilization, our wise civilization—a tiny bit hypocritical, too insensitive to the irrational anger of the avenger of blood, and incapable of restoring the balance? (ADV 57; BTV 40)

"Cities of Refuge" is not Levinas's first or only explicit criticism of modern liberalism. In his 1990 letter to the journal *Critical Inquiry*, which prefaces the English translation of his 1934 short essay "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," Levinas rhetorically wonders whether "liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject" (QRPH 26; RPH 63). However, here, in "Cities of Refuge," he goes further: our liberal rights constitute a "half-guilt," as does the protection offered by the city. The question raised, therefore, is not the "commonplace" (ADV 88; BTV 69) criticism of modern social indifference. More deeply, it is that of liberalism's self-legitimization. The city is not simply a domain of indifference toward the other: it is a domain that justifies its indifference as a means of protection. We do not open our doors to the poor, homeless, and stateless who could harm us—but, says Levinas, do we not see that the poor, homeless, and stateless are threatening us outside because our doors are closed? Social violence is not the manifestation of a universal original sin or of an evil inclination on the part of specific individuals. It is a *reaction* to the fundamental wrong that characterizes modern liberal society and that is a combination of the two situations that, as I argued earlier, are in Levinas's work defined as purely social: economic inequality and the anonymity of life.

In *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, the sociologist Loïc Wacquant presents an argument that enters into dialogue with Levinas's. Wacquant focuses on the recent "irruption of the penal state" in America and in those nations that draw inspiration from American neo-liberalism.[9] According to Wacquant, the reinforcement of penal policy in the First World responds not to rising criminality but to the rising social marginality and insecurity that neo-liberalism itself has spawned.[10] Wacquant describes the intricate relationship between three processes: the "commodification of public goods and the rise of underpaid, precarious work"; the collapse of social protections, "leading to the replacement of the collective right to recourse against unemployment and destitution by the individual obligation to take up gainful activity"; and the "reinforcement and extension of the punitive apparatus."[11] That is, neo-liberal society at the same time both creates poverty and delegitimizes it, leading to a broad consensus in favor of punitive policies "boosted by the tenacious blurring of crime, poverty and immigration in the media."[12]

Levinas's cities of refuge function very much like the neo-liberal society described by Wacquant. The relationship between the city and its margins is not that between law-abiding citizens and a few destructive individuals; rather, the actions of the former are the cause of the anger and behavior of the latter, who have no share in the general good (ADV 57; BTV 40). It is a relationship between one group that has wronged another and that wronged group, from which the former must now seek protection. However, contrary to the neo-liberal society of Wacquant, the Talmudic cities of refuge, in Levinas's interpretation, do not delegitimize the avenger's feelings. The accent is exclusively on the protection of the half guilty, while the avenger retains the moral right to resentment.

Continuing his discussion of the Talmudic extract on the cities of refuge, Levinas goes on to consider aspects of their organization and planning. According to the Talmud, a city of refuge cannot be too small, because the avenger could easily slip in without being challenged. It cannot be too large, because the avenger would go unnoticed in the crowd. To be effective, a city of refuge must be of medium proportions. It must be reasonably populous, so that the killer by negligence can call for help if he is attacked. It must be close to a water supply and have markets, so that the killer by negligence will lack nothing. However, weapons and trap gear must not be sold there, so that the avenger will not be able to purchase or even walk unnoticed with a weapon. In addition, the city must preserve the structure of a normal Jewish society: if the town lacks priests (*cohanim*), Levites, or Israelites—the three religious

categories of Jewish life—then these must be brought in (ADV 58–59; BTV 41). In the same vein, if a student is exiled, his master is exiled with him; if a master is exiled, his students are exiled with him. Levinas comments: "Can one live without culture? Can one truly live without Torah? And so the Torah makes its appearance in the city of refuge" (ADV 60; BTV 43).

In Levinas's reading, the Talmudic discussion concerning the size and organization of the cities of refuge points to two things. First, the city is organized to offer thorough protection. That protection is not legal—the avenger's desire for revenge is morally and legally legitimate—but material: the city of refuge is designed specifically around the practical exigencies of the manslayer's circumstances. Second, the protected person has the right to a good life, both materially and spiritually: "life in the full sense of the term: exile, of course, but no prison, no hard labor, and no concentration camp. Life which is life. The humanism or humanitarianism of the cities of refuge!" (ADV 59; BTV 42). What Levinas here reveals is that in focusing on the protection of the half guilty, the Talmud defines the characteristics of a good social life *in general*—which is made clear by the surprising mention of the potential exile of masters and students. A good social life requires meeting not only a person's physical needs, of which the foremost is safety, but his or her cultural needs as well.

Note, however, that the regulations enabling that good life, that "humanitarian urbanism" (ADV 59; BTV 42), are for the benefit of "killers by negligence." The urban planning that Levinas finds in the Talmud, and which he celebrates as "humanism," is not conceived for the victims, for the poor, for those in need, but for the rest of us: the half guilty. A good city is a place where people who have done bad things can live a safe and meaningful existence, protected from intrusion by the avenger—the angry mob, the suburban delinquents who are also at the center of Wacquant's analyses. As noted earlier, biblical law does not penalize the avenger; yet neither does it offer the avenger satisfaction. That is, biblical law says nothing about those who have been fatally wronged "by negligence," and Levinas does not seem to have anything to add on the topic. How should we understand this?

We should remember that Levinas never focuses directly on the other, or on what should be done so that the other can have a better life. Levinas does not define the other, or deal with the conditions under which the other lives, because the other is precisely that which is exterior to all definitions and conditions.[13] The other escapes all attempts to encapsulate him in words and concepts, all efforts to grasp him in a "said" (AE 43–99; OB 23–60). As Levinas famously put it, "The best way of encountering the other is not even

to notice the color of his eyes" (EI 79; EI' 85). As a result, Levinas's focus is exclusively on the subject who faces the other and the third: the half guilty, the citizens of the liberal or neo-liberal society. In this context, Levinas can only tell us that the half guilty are entitled to a good life. However, their protected life in the city does not wipe out their wrongs: "There are cities of refuge because we have enough conscience to have good intentions, but not enough not to betray them by our acts. Hence the manslaughters" (ADV 68; BTV 50). The victims remain victims, the avengers await revenge, and the good life granted by the city of refuge does not obviate the basic fact that "nothing could silence the demand for justice" (ADV 63; BTV 45).

The social domain, for Levinas, is thus the setting of an inexorable conflict between two groups: those who are oppressors by negligence—the "half-guilty"—and those who are wronged or oppressed. In the best of cases—described in "Cities of Refuge"—it allows a comfortable life for those who manage to protect themselves from the angry avenger. More often, the protection offered by the city in its modern form is accompanied by loneliness and anonymity. Either way, however, Levinas seems to take for granted that the poor remain poor. His focus on the half-guilty ego as the only conceptualized actor (as the only "responsible" individual) and his identification of the other with the non-defined poor and destitute prevent him from theorizing any possible change that could come from the poor, or also from the poor. As a result, the social domain will only and indefinitely repeat its own conditions. There is nothing else to expect from it. Or to put it differently, the social consists of an "entrance of the third" that never leads to justice. Accordingly, Levinas responds to Hegel (and to Marx) that there is no dialectical passage between the various forms of human living-together. The social is independent of the ethical (which is about the ego and a single other) and of the political (which is the domain of institutions). It consists of the absence of responsibility together with the absence of universal laws. Just institutions will *never* emerge from the social domain.

Just institutions will not emerge from the social domain, namely, from a life of indifference and safeguarded riches, because, for Levinas, justice must be infused with ethics. Politics—understood as institutions and leadership—is the sole way to concretely implement the ethical principle that, however, can never be realized in its pure form (because society by definition involves more than two people). Politics, as a *superimposition* of comparison and, accordingly, of shared responsibility—and not as a dialectical alteration of economic competition into general law—is the sole way, for Levinas, to give some materiality to ethics.

Thus for Levinas the social is and remains highly problematic. It is a form of living-together that neither realizes ethics nor leads to politics. It does not even stand between ethics and politics. Rather, it is neither of them—a third domain in which people strive to live without any kind of commitment. Levinas regarded the social as a component of modern life, but unlike Hegel he did not see its modernity as a manifestation of Spirit. On the contrary, he considered the social as a domain of indifferent care for the self, unaffected by ethical responsibility. Such a domain cannot be transformed or redeemed. For Levinas, the pursuit of a better life will come not from the social but from *political structures realizing ethical responsibility*.

CHAPTER 4

On the Necessity of Political Violence

In the Talmudic readings, Levinas shows great respect for political institutions and, indeed, regards them as the only solution to the other's hunger and the ego's social indifference. However, he does not deny that these institutions are also characterized by violence, whether in a weak form (blindness to individual needs) or a strong form (repression and war). Thus the famous critique of politics in the opening pages of *Totality and Infinity*, which holds that politics is "the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means" (TI 5; TI' 21), does not disappear in the readings. However, while in *Totality and Infinity* politics is denounced at the outset, in the readings the assessment of politics is more ambiguous and follows another order, which appears in "The State of Caesar and the State of David." In that essay, Levinas first says "Yes to the State" (ADV 209; BTV 177) and insists on its *necessity*, by which he does not mean a lesser evil. The State, in effect, represents no less than the choice of life (ADV 210; BTV 178). Levinas goes so far as to draw an equivalence between the rabbis of the Talmud and Hobbes, who both chose the security of the State against the war of all against all: "The Rabbis cannot forget the organizing principle of Rome and its law! They therefore anticipate, with remarkable independence of spirit, modern political philosophy. Whatever its order, the City already ensures the rights of human beings against their fellow men, taken to be still in a state of nature—men as wolves for other men, as Hobbes would have it" (ADV 216; BTV 183).

Later in "The State of Caesar and the State of David," however, Levinas characterizes the institutions of realpolitik as oppression (ADV 216; BTV 183–184). In this chapter, I discuss Levinas's understanding of violence as essential to the State, both in the form of police repression and in its "thematization."

Politics and the Police

When, in "The State of Caesar and the State of David," Levinas turns to his critique of the State, he mentions the Talmudic extract that he had analyzed a few years earlier in "Judaism and Revolution," from *Baba Metsi'a* 83b: "Talmudic wisdom is entirely aware of the internal contradiction of the State subordinating some men to others in order to liberate them. . . . A subtle page from the Talmud relates the way in which R. Eleazar took part in Rome's struggle against thieves" (ADV 217; BTV 184). To understand how the discussion on labor law that we saw in Chapter 2 leads to the story of Rabbi Eleazar, and, hence, to the question of the violent use of the political institutions, let us return to "Judaism and Revolution" and *Baba Metsi'a* 83b.

As we remember from Chapter 2, the mishnah in *Baba Metsi'a* 83a decrees that working hours and workers' meals should be regulated by local custom. In the Gemara that follows, which we did not discuss in Chapter 2, the third-century sage Resh Lakish raises the question of whether workers are to be paid for their travel time. The question itself doesn't concern us here; the point of interest is that Resh Lakish justifies his answer by quoting from the Bible (Psalm 104)—that is, from a source regarded in Jewish tradition as representing absolute and universal law. Citing biblical verses to validate a halakhic opinion is standard practice in the Talmud. However, in this case this operational strategy is problematic, because the mishnah has already ruled that workers' hours are fixed by local custom, and a working principle of the Talmud is that the Gemara cannot contradict the Mishnah. The very fact that Resh Lakish supports his opinion by citing a biblical verse—a commonplace and, usually, unremarkable exercise in the Talmud—means that in his view, labor contracts should be based not on custom but on universal law, in blatant contradiction of the mishnah. To remove this contradiction, the Gemara (in this case, an impersonal voice) says Resh Lakish's ruling must refer only to the special case of new cities, in which, explains Levinas, people coming from various origins have no common custom that would be accepted by all.

At this point in the discussion, the Gemara claims therefore that the law regarding workers' hours should be based on the Torah—that is, apodictic law—only when there is no common custom to follow. Then, however, in a "very short paragraph," as Levinas calls it (DSS 31; NTR 106), the Gemara hints at something completely different and, in Levinas's view, decisive: namely, that employers *always* have the option of basing their labor contracts on the Torah rather than on custom. Thus, thanks to Resh Lakish's ruling, the source of the law has been radically transferred from custom to universal values.

For Levinas, conventions are here put to trial by the universal right of persons: "An eternal law attached to the person as such. . . . It's not long historical tradition that counts. It is the personal nature of persons that counts" (DSS 31; NTR 105–106). Rights cannot be implemented as long as labor laws depend on custom. As he writes: "Resh Lakish wants the law of the Torah to be independent of places and times: an eternal law that applies to the person as such, even in his individualistic isolation. Modern society depends neither on history nor on its sedimentation. It discovers its order in human dignity, in the human personality. It is established in regard to the person" (DSS 30; NTR 105).

In quoting Psalm 104, Resh Lakish has drastically altered the debate. First, as just explained, he advocates universal law over law based on local custom. Second, his intervention and the discussion that follows introduce a realm that was absent at the beginning of the discussion on labor—namely, politics. As noted, it is not Resh Lakish himself who mentions politics but the impersonal voice that interprets his objection to the mishnah in suggesting the notion of "new cities." However, it is clear that Resh Lakish is a proponent of the universalism of the law—and the universalism of the law is precisely the object of politics.

We can say, therefore, that the Talmudic discussion followed in "Judaism and Revolution" refers successively to three levels of relationships. First is the level of ad hoc negotiations between employers and employees, in which workers can potentially formulate their individual needs. The second is contracts elaborated in an impersonal way, in which individual needs are not taken into account but local or traditional customs are respected. Finally, the last level is political communities in which general laws are formulated for everyone independently of both individual needs and collective traditions. These laws are "just" because they take everybody into account and distribute resources and responsibilities to all third parties, but they are not charitable: they do not always see "the face of the other." When not transcended by *hesed* (mercy), justice is blind to the uniqueness of each individual. It is striking that the mythological icon of blindfolded justice is reinterpreted here quite critically: for Levinas, the impartiality of justice goes together with its anethicality, its inability to see the other. As he writes at the end of *Totality and Infinity*: "Insofar as the face of the Other puts us in relation with the third party, the metaphysical relation of the I with the Other moves into the form of a We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of universality. But politics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself: it deforms the I and the Other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules, and thus as in absentia" (TI 334–335; TI' 300).

At this point, the Talmud, however, suddenly turns to a strange story—the very story that Levinas mentions again in the essay "The State of Caesar and the State of David" to strengthen his discussion of violent politics.[1] That story deals with Rabbi Eleazar. To recall the context: Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai was a first-century Tannaic sage who criticized the Romans. To escape arrest, he went into hiding with his son, Rabbi Eleazar, for thirteen years. They sheltered in a cave in which they studied the Torah and survived thanks to the fruit of a carob tree and a spring of water. They left the cave only when they heard Elijah's voice saying that the Roman emperor had died and his decrees were annulled.[2] Rabbi Eleazar is therefore the son of someone revered for standing up to the current political power. In *Baba Metsi'a* 83b, this son of a famous rebel meets a Roman official responsible for catching thieves. For a reason unexplained in the Talmud, Rabbi Eleazar feels the need to interfere in the official's work. He tells him:

> How can you detect [thieves]? Are they not equal to brutes? For it is said: "In it [in the night] all the beasts of the night stir" [Psalm 104:20]. According to others, it would have been another verse that he interpreted (Psalm 10:9): "He waits in a covert like a lion in his lair; waits to size the lowly." And what if you caught a just man and let an evildoer go? The police official answered: What can I do? It is the order of the king. Then Rabbi Eleazar replied: Come, I will show you how you should proceed. (DSS 13; NTR 95)

According to Levinas, both quoted verses from the book of Psalms lead to the same conclusion:

> Unquestionably, violent action against Evil is necessary. And we shall soon see that this violence takes on all the appearances of political action. But it is no less evident that this action must seek the nature and cause of Evil. It must understand the reason for the absence or silence of God or the meaning of this silence. . . . And apparently questioning the absolute claim of politics [Rabbi Eleazar] asks: "How can you act politically while ignorant of the nature of Evil, while ignorant of its metaphysical and spiritual reason?" (DSS 38; NTR 110)

The meeting between Rabbi Eleazar and the official and their discussion about policing technique open up "the entire problem of the relation between politics and Evil, the problem of the relationship of political struggle and Evil"

(DSS 35; NTR 108). Political action implies violence because it fights evil. To put it differently, the manifestation of the law brings with it repression of offenders against the law. In the Roman context described here, the official represents the king, or the State, and his function is to stop evil, namely, to catch and punish thieves.

To say that the law and repression go together may mean two different things. The first is that violence is an instrument of politics. It follows that politics and violence are not identical. Rather, violence is required to *maintain* the law. In this context, violence has what Benjamin, in his "Critique of Violence," famously called a "law-preserving" function.[3] Repression is the third part of a story that starts with the constitution of the law, continues with the offense, and only then—and in consequence—introduces repression. As Derrida claims in his reading of Benjamin's essay in "Force of Law," it is extremely difficult to reject or even criticize this function of violence:

> To discuss the law-preserving violence, Benjamin sticks to relatively modern problems. . . . Now it is a matter of compulsory military service, the modern police or the abolition of the death penalty. . . . Here military violence is legal and preserves the law. It is therefore more difficult to criticize than the pacifists and activists believe in their "declamations," for which Benjamin does not hide his low esteem. The ineffectiveness and inconsistency of antimilitary pacifists has to do with their failure to recognize the legal and unassailable character of this law-preserving violence.[4]

According to Derrida and Levinas, violence in its law-preserving function is both legitimate and necessary. For Levinas, this means that the evil character of law-breaking is never cast into doubt. Levinas does not seem to imagine the case of an offender who is right because the law is unfair. The Talmud too refuses (at least here) to criticize repression: at the end of the passage read by Levinas, Rabbi Eleazar, insulted by a laundryman for cooperating with the Romans, denounces him to the authorities, who put him to death. Regretting his actions, Rabbi Eleazar weeps in remorse, but his students reassure him that the condemned man was a terribly evil person—he had had "illicit relations with the betrothed of another man," and on Yom Kippur, no less! (DSS 51; NTR 117). Even in the case of an apparently unjust condemnation, the sentence turns out to be well deserved.

In the Talmudic story, however, or, more exactly, in Levinas's reading of it, violence appears not only as a law-preserving necessity but also as

constituting the law itself. The function of the State represented by the Roman police officer is not only to react to offenses to the law, as in a liberal state, but also to repress thieves in order to make the law manifest.[5] As Benjamin explains in "Critique of Violence," "in the exercise of violence over life and death more than in any other legal act, law reaffirms itself."[6] This is the second meaning of the statement that the law and repression go together: police violence is legitimate not only in reaction to an offense but in general, as an affirmation of the existence of the State and its order. In Benjamin's words, police violence has both a law-preserving function and a "lawmaking function," continually repeating the founding moment of the State.[7]

In "The State of Caesar and the State of David," Levinas writes, "By serving the State one serves repression; by serving repression, one becomes a member of the police force" (ADV 217; BTV 184). What he describes here is not a causal chain of events in which one first chooses to serve the State, then elects to do this by helping to deter crime and apprehend offenders, and for this purpose becomes a police officer. Rather, it is a tautology. Serving the State and being a member of the police force are one and the same thing, by which Levinas means that all State servants, like police officers, use or condone violence and repression. *In essence*, all political activities are similar to the operations of the police. Let us, however, be careful: by contrast with Camus, who, in *Just Assassins*, puts in the mouth of Skouratov (senior police officer) the sentence "You start by wanting justice and end up organizing the police,"[8] Levinas's intention here is not moralistic. The critique that undoubtedly underlies his description of the violence of the state never leads to a simple rejection of this violence, because violence is necessary to fight evil. As Levinas says in "The State of Caesar and the State of David," the State is characterized by an *internal contradiction* "against which the very person who refuses the political order is not protected, since in abstaining from all collaboration with the ruling power, he makes himself party to the obscure powers that the State represses" (ADV 217; BTV 184). It is therefore striking that even when Levinas describes what seems to be the iniquitous aspect of the State—namely, its violence—he does not reject the value of the State.

Levinas's identification of the political with the police calls to mind Jacques Rancière's distinction between *police*, *politics*, and *the political*. As Rancière conceptualizes it, the *police* refers to the social order; it involves the rules, norms, and relationships by which society members are governed. The notion of the police "entails community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and [a] hierarchy of places and functions."[9] It is "the art of community management," whose goal is the fair distribution of roles and

modes of involvement among the members of the social order or, as Rancière puts it, "the common world."[10] The word "police" is meant to express the fact that repression and management are part of the same concept. *Politics*, on the other hand, is the term used by Rancière to describe practices of emancipation, namely, demands of equality from those not taken into account by the police. *The political* is, for Rancière, the clash between the police and politics, namely, between the dominant order and those who oppose it.

Thematization

We do not find in Levinas any conceptualization of a gap or clash between heterogeneous collective demands and the existing collective order, because we do not find in him any reference to an unfair, in the sense of inegalitarian, law or any unfair violence. We do, however, find a conception similar to Rancière's understanding of the police as a relationship between repression and management. This similarity is revealed by Rabbi Eleazar's policing advice. For Rabbi Eleazar, Rome is perfectly within her rights to act with violence against all who reject the Roman order. However, he adds an unexpected condition: repression must be accompanied by calculation and categorization. Rabbi Eleazar claims that the Roman police officer is not successful in his task because he does not know how to "recognize" thieves. What Rabbi Eleazar proposes to teach him, therefore, is not how to use violence more successfully or efficiently but the policing or politicizing reasoning that is required to put people into categories.[11] First, a thief is "equal to brutes." Second, a thief is not necessarily immediately identifiable—but he can be exposed: "Then Rabbi Eleazar ben Rabbi Simeon replied: Come, I will show you how you should proceed. Around four o'clock go to the Tavern. If you see a wine drinker holding a glass in his hand and dozing, inform yourself. If he is a scholar, he must have risen early to study; if he is a day laborer, he must have gone to work early; if he works the night shift, he could have been making needles. . . . But if he is none of the above, he is a thief and you can arrest him" (DSS 39–40; NTR 110–111). Rabbi Eleazar teaches the policeman a practice ("I will show you how you should proceed") that consists of an *act of reason*. A policeman's or politician's work relies on being able to identify and classify the population he deals with. Identification and classification go together with, or even are synonymous with, the violence of the police and of politics.

Here, Rabbi Eleazar's attitude embodies Levinas's famous understanding of "finding what is the same"[12] as *thematization*: "Reason is sought in the

relationship between terms, between the one and the other showing themselves in a theme. Reason consists in ensuring the coexistence of these terms, the coherence of the one and the other despite their difference, in the unity of a theme" (AE 256–257; OB 165). While, as Derrida writes in "Violence and Metaphysics," "the face-to-face eludes every category" (ED 148; WD 100), the categories of being destroy the ethical face-to-face. Thematization annihilates differences. It is an-ethical and, even, anti-ethical (this is not so much a definition as another tautology: thematization is anti-ethics and anti-ethics is thematization). Reason, which works through recognizing, comparing, and categorizing, cannot refer to otherness as otherness.[13] As Rabbi Eleazar shows the police officer, however, thematization constitutes the very practice of the law. Therefore, the State and the law cannot but manifest themselves as violence against differences. Thematization is lawmaking violence, and as such, it is the condition of possibility of the State. For this reason, Levinas does not critique the State from the point of view of political institutions, which are necessarily violent, but always from the point of view of what is not politics: the difference of the other.

It is therefore thematization as lawmaking violence that Rabbi Eleazar teaches the police officer, who, when asked, "And what if you caught a just man and let an evil-doer go?" answers, "What can I do? It is the order of the king" (DSS 39; NTR 110). Here we easily imagine a Monty Python–like scene in which rather dimwitted Roman policemen dart around arresting people for spurious crimes until they are set right by the perspicacious sage, but the issue is serious: in teaching how to preserve the law, Rabbi Eleazar exposes the relationship between violence, lawmaking, and thematization.[14] "It is the order of the king" means not only that it is the directive emitted by the king, the thing that the king wants the officer to do. It also means that it is the *order represented by the king*, the order of things that the king *is*. The king—or the law of the state—is active violence because it is thematization. In a state, violence is unavoidable.

This understanding of the text is reinforced a bit later, when the king is so pleased with Rabbi Eleazar's advice that he gives him the job of arresting thieves himself. Reacting to Rabbi Eleazar's new function, Rabbi Joshua bar Karhah sends him a message: "Vinegar son of wine, how much longer will you deliver unto death the people of our God?" (DSS 43; NTR 113). "Vinegar son of wine" refers to the fact that Rabbi Eleazar's father, Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, was known for his piety and defiance of the Romans; he was the good wine whose son degenerated into vinegar, collaborating with the Romans and handing over Jews to their violence. Rabbi Eleazar calmly answers: "I

remove the thorns from the vineyard." However, Rabbi Joshua bar Karhah retorts: "Let the owner of the vineyard come and remove the thorns himself."

Levinas offers two interpretations of this sentence. The first is that responsibility for evildoers lies with God, and not with either Rabbi Eleazar or the king. What is put into opposition here are two authorities, God and the State, and two systems of law, the divine and the political. For bar Karhah, the only acceptable lawmaking violence is that of God. Israel should take care of the good, trust God to deal with wrongdoers, and leave the evil Romans alone to do things in their own evil way. He therefore accuses Rabbi Eleazar of playing a game that belongs to God. Levinas's second interpretation comes from Rabbi Eleazar's answer: "I remove the thorns from the vineyard." Levinas writes: "If the wine became vinegar, it is because the wine is not as excellent as we think it is. The brambles which harm it must be removed" (DSS 45; NTR 114). In this reading, the vineyard was corrupted from the beginning. Rabbi Eleazar is not the bad offspring of a saintly father. The existence of evil is built-in, and the only way to fight it is through the violence of lawmaking or thematization. In the next chapter, we will endeavor to understand the meaning of the evil fought by political violence.

CHAPTER 5

Evil as Injustice

The idea that political violence is necessary to combat evil is recurrent in the Talmudic readings—meaning that violence and evil are not the same thing. However, while Levinas offers examples and illustrations of evil, he never provides a systematic definition of it. In particular, it is unclear whether evil is an ethical or a political problem. If the good is embedded in the ethical love of the other, evil should logically be hatred for or, even, indifference toward the other. But how to characterize this hatred or this indifference? Are they a lack of the ethical impulse? In the readings, both the manifestations of evil and the struggle against it are described in political terms or within political frameworks. However, Levinas does not say that politics is the negation of ethics but that politics and ethics disturb and complement each other. Therefore, is evil a third category, neither ethics nor politics? Could it be a theological category? But Levinas strongly condemns arguments based on theodicy, whereby evil is explained as part of a divine plan—an opinion that, in Levinas's view, threatens the notion of free will.[1] How, then, are we to understand Levinas's conception of evil?

In this chapter, I argue that evil in the Talmudic readings is the impossibility of justice. Therefore, evil is the antithesis neither of ethics nor of politics but of the relationship between them. Evil is the situation of an unattainable relationship between ethics and politics, a situation in which ethics and politics cannot coexist. As a result, a (hypothetical) situation of either pure ethics or pure politics would be a situation of pure evil. In concrete life, evil, which is never "pure," manifests as *various levels of disjunction between ethics and politics*.

This conception of evil as the impossibility of justice seems to be part of the traditional philosophical view of evil as *privatio boni*: the negation or absence of some good. In Levinas, as in the entire tradition of *privatio boni*, "we cannot understand or experience something as evil without having some

sort of knowledge of the good of which it deprives us."[2] Of course, Levinas disagrees with the medieval understanding of *privatio boni* in that, for him, the good is not identified with being, since the ethical impulse transcends essence. Still, in the readings evil appears as a lack—not of being but, as I will show here, of merciful justice. I do not believe, therefore, that Levinas completely succeeded in avoiding the pitfalls of the tradition by which evil is unthinkable without an a priori understanding of the good that is lacking, or in this case, justice.[3]

Levinas's conception of evil as the impossibility of non-indifferent justice, however, does not imply that evil should be understood *only* in reference to a lack or absence of some good. Indeed, the impossibility of justice is the result of a certain order of things and, hence, the construction of a reality with features of its own. Evil is not merely a situation in which justice cannot happen. It is the replacement of justice with something that leaves room neither for justice nor, even, for the feeling of a lack or absence of justice. Therefore, if there is a deprivation in evil, there is also a strong deception aimed at annihilating this feeling of lack or absence.[4] Thus, in what follows, I will show that in the readings, the disjunction between ethics and politics must be understood in three contexts. First, evil is related to deprivation and privacy (in French, the word *privé* would appear in both cases)[5]—namely, to a certain conception of a home. Second, evil has to do with deception, namely, with ideology and idolatry. And third, evil is linked to animality, namely, to a certain understanding of being.

Evil as Deprivation and Privacy

In "Judaism and Revolution" evil is exemplified by laziness at the tavern. Rabbi Eleazar, whose goal, according to Levinas, is to identify the nature and cause of evil, volunteers to teach the Roman officials how to identify evildoers or thieves. In the Talmudic story, these are individuals found dozing in the tavern in midmorning (the Talmudic "fourth hour," around 10 A.M.) who are neither scholars, laborers, nor night-shift workers—that is, people who either rise quite early or work at night. Anyone other than a scholar, laborer, or night worker who is tired in midmorning must have been up to no good the night before! Levinas reads the story to suggest simply that anyone who is not a scholar or worker is an evildoer: "All non-workers are Evil" (DSS 41; NTR 111). Certainly, Levinas expresses some unease about this quick "police wisdom" and the violence used against the so-called thieves. However, as

we saw in the previous chapter, he accepts that the aim of political violence, namely, the fight against evil, is important and legitimates its means. Not all violence is undesirable.[6] In an earlier essay, the article on Simone Weil published in *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas had explained that "the extermination of evil by violence means that evil is taken seriously. . . . To acknowledge punishment is to acknowledge respect even for the guilty party's person" (DL 197; DF 139). Levinas therefore justifies Rabbi Eleazar's position that thieves can be identified by not being scholars or workers: "Man must build the universe: the universe is built through work and study. Everything else is distraction. Distraction is Evil" (DSS 41; NTR 111).

This version of Puritan ethics, or, alternatively, of Marxist materialism, is reformulated in "Model of the West."[7] In this commentary on an extract from *Menahot* 99b–100a, Levinas emphasizes the need for a "solidarity constituted around a communal work" (ADV 39; BTV 23), which is threatened at night, when "everyone goes home. It is private life. Disintegration and individualism" (ADV 39; BTV 23). Here, as in "Judaism and Revolution," where the tavern characterizes a "society without solidarity . . . without common interests" (DSS 41; NTR 111), the accent is put on shared work or interest as a form of solidarity. In this context, evil is the opposite of being together, where being together means both being responsible for one another and engaging together in some common endeavor. Evil is the lack of the dyad constituted by ethical responsibility and collective action. For Levinas, therefore, being together is remote from the Heideggerian *mitsein*, which is an ontological aspect of individual existence. What is valued in the Levinassian understanding of these Talmudic situations is not our a priori sociability but the link between a *chosen* responsibility and a *chosen* community life.[8] The situation in which solidarity and common work are replaced by an intimate, personal use of time is evil. Or put differently: evil is theft because it is the private appropriation of time that should be dedicated to responsibility and the general good.

In the two aforementioned texts, evil is related to a specific time of day—morning in "Judaism and Revolution," night in "Model of the West"—during which responsibility and solidarity are endangered. In "Damages Due to Fire," it is night, again, which is "the very danger of a suspended justice among human beings" (DSS 168; NTR 189). In "The Pact," Levinas attacks the "society of Sundays and leisure activities" (ADV 88; BTV 69). Evil, as "suspended justice" or injustice, seems to be a risk associated with time, or, more exactly, a risk pertaining to the social organization of time. Social time—which allows for a "private life" at night and for solitary moments in the early

morning or on Sundays—implies the possibility of evil. Therefore, evil is not seen as part of human nature—for example, as an inclination or flaw stemming from human passions—but as a result of the temporal organization of society, which allows for private moments detached from responsibility and collective action.

However, in an earlier part of "Judaism and Revolution," evil is represented by the night, which "would be a mode of human existence. Evil is within the human" (DSS 32; NTR 106). Levinas seems here to open up the possibility that evil is deterministically part of the human, independent of free will and social agency. Yet as he continues, the "day"—or the good that will follow evil—is the situation in which everyone will have a home and will be at home (DSS 33; NTR 107). Only then, says Levinas, will the ego be able to see the face of the other. Or again: redemption is "the possibility of a society in which everyone has a home," by contrast with the proletarian condition, which constitutes "the alienation of man, primarily the fact of having no home" (DSS 33; NTR 107). Since an ability to return home—or having a home to which one can return—is a consequence of political and social structures, it appears that, here too, good and evil are not embedded in human nature independently of collective choices but are the products of contingent social possibilities.

For Levinas, then, there are two ways of having a home or returning home. The first consists of a return to oneself—to one's house or favorite café—which puts an end to responsibility and solidarity. When one is home in such a way, one eschews both ethics (one does not see the face of the other) and politics (one is not part of collective action). This return is evil, which is not a moral category but an ethical-political one: this return is *unjust*. However, there is another kind of returning home, which is the opposite of alienation because it makes communication with the other possible.[9] This second return is illustrated, in "Damages Due to Fire," by the metaphor of the biblical Ruth: "The beauty of Ruth's conversion—conversion or return, return of the one who never had to leave or come back—the reversal of things or possibility of the Messiah" (DSS 172; NTR 191).

In the biblical narrative, Ruth the Moabite chooses to follow her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Bethlehem in Judah after the death of her husband (Naomi's son). She returns to a home that was not her native land, or even her religious or national home. She therefore chooses her home not for the rest and security it gives her but for the possibilities of responsibility and solidarity that it enables. This second kind of "return," to a "home" that has been chosen, provides the self with a future, in the form of progeny (a child

who is the ancestor of King David and, through David, of the Messiah). This return is an opening to the other: Ruth offers herself to Boaz, an older man with whom she will perpetuate the name of Naomi's family.

Note that the case of Ruth is one of free choice, and of a politico-religious community. Ruth the Moabite could remain in Moab, in her parents' home. She freely follows Naomi back to Bethlehem, which becomes her home, and there marries Boaz, a local man. Her weakness as a stranger is compensated for by her choice of Bethlehem as a home. As a result, her weakness is transfigured into strength and the ability to see the face of the other. Ruth's journey epitomizes the good, and it does so as the choice of a human community defined by religious, political, territorial, ethnic, or national constituents. As it seems, in order to see the other, one must *first* choose his or her home.

Does this mean that, for Levinas, the choice of a cultural, religious, or national home is the key to seeing the other? Does this mean, therefore, that political parochialism is necessary to universal ethics? This idea would logically follow Levinas's assertion that a home is necessary to see the other. In "Damages Due to Fire," he accentuates this position: "One must go back home. Assuming that one has a home. . . . There is no salvation except in the reentry into oneself. One must have an interiority where one can seek refuge, in which one is able to stop participating in the world" (DSS 169; NTR 190). These sentences reinstate the need for a home that was expressed in "Judaism and Revolution," but they boldly contradict Levinas's assertion in that same text that non-participation in the world is evil. They also contradict Levinas's general critique of interiority formulated at length in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. In particular, they contradict the thesis, so radically emphasized in *Otherwise than Being*, that the ego is open to the other before being in itself: "Responsibility for another is not an accident that happens to a subject, but precedes essence in it, has not awaited freedom, in which a commitment to another would have been made" (AE 180; OB 114). To understand these contradictions and Levinas's position on the necessity of a cultural, religious, or national home, it is helpful to compare Levinas's position to a body of literature apparently far from his interests and from phenomenology in general: the liberal and republican discussion on patriotism.

In his 1995 book *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism*, Viroli conceptualizes the difference between patriotism and nationalism. In his view, patriotism and nationalism refer to different things. Patriotism, or more accurately, what Viroli calls "republican patriotism," consists of "love of the political institutions and the way of life that sustain the common liberty of a people." The language of nationalism, on the other hand, has been

forged "to defend or reinforce the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic oneness and homogeneity of a people."[10] For Viroli, both patriotism and nationalism are passions, and both involve an elevation of the in-group, but in the former case this elevation is based on institutions, norms, and values, while in the latter it is based on the status of group members. As such, nationalism creates aggression and exclusion and, on the whole, is bad, while patriotism promotes liberty, solidarity, fellowship, and realization of the common good. Or as Viroli puts it, "Whereas the enemies of republican patriotism are tyranny, despotism, oppression, and corruption, the enemies of nationalism are cultural contamination, heterogeneity, racial impurity, and social, political, and intellectual disunion."[11]

Viroli's ideas sparked a number of responses. In an essay published in 1994 (and reprinted in 1996 in a book called *For Love of Country?*, an allusion to Viroli's title), Nussbaum presents a defense of cosmopolitanism, as opposed to a patriotism undistinguished from nationalism. In Nussbaum's view, patriotism and nationalism both refer to what Rorty called in 1994 a "politics of difference," something very close to what we would also call "identity politics." Against such a patriotism, Nussbaum advocates a "cosmopolitan education," one that would emphasize allegiance to the moral community to which all human beings belong. Students, she argues, may "regard themselves as defined partly by their particular loves—their families, their religious, ethnic, or racial communities, or even their country. But they must also, and centrally, learn to recognize humanity whenever they encounter it. . . . They must learn enough about the different to recognize common aims, aspirations and values."[12] For Nussbaum, a cosmopolitan education would have an important impact on political life. Indeed, "one of the greatest barriers to rational deliberation in politics is the unexamined feeling that one's own preferences and ways are neutral and natural. . . . By looking at ourselves though the lens of the other, we come to see what in our practices is local and nonessential, what is more broadly or deeply shared."[13]

While for Viroli patriotism refers to a passion that is activated in political practices and institutions, for Nussbaum cosmopolitanism is a cultural position. For both, however, what is at stake is a moral principle, or even the very nature of morality. In Viroli's eyes, the moral principle is liberty. Looking through a Hegelian lens, this principle, universal in essence, can nonetheless be realized only through defined particularities, namely, specific political experiences. From a more liberal perspective, for Nussbaum, the moral principle is universality itself. That is, if morality consists of universal values, it is universality that has to be sought and praised wherever possible.

Particularities cannot be avoided, but our duty is to look beyond our preferences and search for what is deeply shared with all human beings.

Levinas's position dialogues with Viroli's and Nussbaum's. Much like the former, Levinas distinguishes between two positions: one that strengthens oneness and homogeneity—the ontological position—and one that opens to otherness, namely, the position of ethical responsibility. It is true that Viroli's patriotism reinforces liberty and solidarity *within* the group and not toward the different others. Thus at first view his liberty and solidarity are not ethical but ontological. However, quoting the anti-fascist author Carlo Rosselli, Viroli identifies patriotism with "claims for liberty based on respect for the rights of other peoples," while he sees nationalism as the "politics of aggrandizement pursued by reactionary regimes."[14] Here, therefore, Viroli's distinction between patriotism and nationalism echoes in some way Levinas's distinction between responsibility and pure ontology.

However, Levinas is not as eager to strengthen political particularisms as is Viroli. The distance between their positions appears through the difference in their appreciation of Simone Weil's philosophy. For Viroli, Weil "proposed a powerful reinterpretation of the patriotism of liberty and compassion which addresses the need for cultural and spiritual rootedness without turning love of country into blind identification or pride for the uniqueness of our own nation. Our obligation to our country, she writes, is grounded in the vital need of human beings for rootedness."[15] In "Simone Weil Against the Bible," however, Levinas rejects Weil's idea that "the Divine is absolutely universal, and this is why it can be served in purity only through the particularity of each people, a particularity named rootedness" (DL 193–194; DF 136). For Levinas, "every reasonable institution is an uprooting. The constitution of a real society is an uprooting—the end of an existence in which 'being-at-home' is absolute and everything comes from within" (DL 194; DF 137). What Levinas rejects, therefore, is not the importance or even the necessity of particularism. Like Viroli and Weil—and Hegel—he posits that universal values can be made manifest through particular expressions. However, he objects to the identification of particularity with vital needs and rootedness because, for him, vital needs and rootedness imply some form of prerogative—some attempt to "grasp" as much as possible: "The tree grows and keeps for itself all the earth's sap" (DL 195; DF 137). The particularism that Levinas advocates means a surplus of responsibility for the other, the out-group, not anything given to or taken by the in-group.

In this sense, Levinas's position is as universalist as Nussbaum's. Local practices must be acknowledged, but they are not the highest aim of moral

life—and they carry the danger of assigning value to roots instead of responsibility. Here, we can enlarge the meaning of the morning whiled away in the tavern or the "private life" of the home at night described in the Talmud. These situations are parables not only for social disintegration but also for chauvinism and insularity. They represent the closure of local practices, not in the sense that some people enjoy going to the pub and others do not but in the sense that these private moments symbolize the return to oneself and the refusal to look beyond our preferences. They represent *structural features* of human society: nationalism, xenophobia, racism.

This being said, Levinas's universalism is formulated in opposite terms to that of Nussbaum. It is not what is shared with others—with the entirety of humanity—that constitutes the grounds for the good life. On the contrary, recognition of a common humanity is, for Levinas, the basis of ontological behavior. It is the attempt to see oneself in others that leads to the reduction of the other's otherness and, ultimately, to the possibility of murder. Levinas's universalism is based not on looking for resemblances but on accepting otherness, which transcends common aims and values. For Levinas, therefore, evil—an injustice that is both ethical and political—is the holding on to definitions and practices closed to otherness, where otherness is what transcends a common humanity. It is the withdrawal into a fantasized "refuge which can hold my entire thought" (DSS 132; NTR 167), the attempt to build a fortified self—be it an individual or national home—erected against the rest of the world. But the individual or national home is not evil when it is open to that world—that is, as Bernasconi puts it, when "dwelling takes place in a land of exile."[16] Relaxing in the tavern is acceptable and even necessary for workers and scholars, namely, for people who do things with others.[17] A home—be it individual or national—embodies a form of justice when it manifests a relationship between ontological structures and ethical responsibility. It is unjust when this relationship is put in jeopardy.

Evil as Deception

In "As Old as the World?" a reading of an extract from *Sanhedrin* 36b–37a, Levinas discusses the following sentence (a Talmudic commentary on a verse from the Song of Songs): "Even if the separation is only a hedge of roses, they will make no breach in it" (QLT 170; NTR 79). He explains that the "separation"—or in a better translation, barrier—is what stands between the judges discussed in the Talmudic text (i.e., the members of the Sanhedrin)

and sin, or more generally, between us as human beings and evil. This separation is so thin that it barely exists: it is made of roses. This metaphor has two immediate meanings: First, good people do not need big fences and stone walls to keep them from vice. A hedge of roses, thin and unsubstantial, will suffice. Second, evil is always very close, even when we seek to avoid it. It is just the other side of that unsubstantial barrier. Levinas then adds a third dimension to his explanation. The hedge of roses is not only a separation or barrier but also a temptation. It is a protection against evil but also an invitation to sin: "In what separates us from evil resides an equivocal seduction" (QLT 171; NTR 80).

My argument here is that in the readings, the seduction of evil comes from its being a mirror image or inversion of justice. Evil seduces because from a certain point of view, or thanks to certain manipulations, it looks like justice, although it is its very opposite and impossibility. It is therefore no accident that "As Old as the World?" deals with the seduction of *judges*, an idea that appears also in "Damages Due to Fire," where Levinas writes: "The righteous are responsible for evil before anyone else is. They are responsible because they have not been righteous enough to make their justice spread and abolish injustice" (DSS 162; NTR 186). Evil is surrounded by a hedge of roses so delicate and tempting that even the judges, the righteous, do not always see that what stands beyond the roses, or *in the roses themselves*, is the very opposite of what they intend. The hedge of roses is both what prevents us from doing evil—and, hence, opens the gates of paradise (QLT 176; NTR 82)—and what makes us fall into the fire of hell (QLT 185; NTR 87).

But how does evil look like justice? How does it seduce? How do the "roses" appear in the real world? The answer to this question is given in the reading "Model of the West," where the fire of hell is again evoked in association with seduction. There, Levinas asserts that humanism, "in its powers to abuse and betray," leads to hell on earth (ADV 49; BTV 32). This humanism "concern[s] a certain language, that which is spoken at the court of kings; it concerns courtesy and diplomacy; everything that Greek civilization bespeaks of flattery and charm—everything that charms us in the Western model" (ADV 43; BTV 27)—namely, rhetoric. In "The Nations and the Presence of Israel," Levinas likewise underlines the "courtesy of evil, hypocrisy of evil" (AHN 121; ITN 105). In "Who Plays Last?" he goes further and speaks about the "possibility of rhetoric and pure courtesy, a 'courtly language' which veils cruelties and malevolence, the extreme fragility of all this refinement capable of ending up in Auschwitz" (ADV 80; BTV 61). Humanism and Greek civilization or rhetoric are synonyms for "the possibility of speaking

through signs which are not universally understood and which, as signs of complicity, thus have the power to betray. Greek wisdom, inasmuch as it is enveloped by ambiguity in a certain language, is thus a weapon of ruse and domination. In philosophy, it is the fact that it is open to sophistry; in science, that it places itself in the service of strength and politics. There would exist in purely human wisdom the power to invert itself into lie and ideology" (ADV 44; BTV 28).

In a manner reminiscent of Yeshayahu Leibowitz's harsh critique of humanism, Levinas understands humanism and its rhetoric as the rejection of transcendence.[18] In focusing solely on human beings, humanism forgets that they are part of, or submitted to, something bigger, which limits their power. On the face of it, humanism represents the liberation of human beings from superstition and the ethical empowerment of humankind. However, in effect it reinforces closure and the will to sameness and leads to the cruelty of ontological impulses. Humanism has no room for and no interest in otherness, and, for that reason, it leads to suffocation: "You are smoked out in this infernal existence in which pure humanism, humanism without Torah, has led us. This is hell on earth" (ADV 49; BTV 32). Humanism is, *in itself*, and before even advocating the use of rhetoric, a rhetorical device, a lie, and a seduction. It pretends to liberate humankind from the oppression of irrational rules, while it legitimates the brutality and ruthlessness of human hubris.

No doubt, Levinas's positions in these texts may seem extreme. We are repelled by the idea that it was humanism, viewed as "rhetoric and pure courtesy," that led to Auschwitz. Moreover, we saw in Chapters 2 and 3 that Levinas strongly praised the humanism that allows for workers' welfare and for humanitarian urban planning. What Levinas's apparent anti-humanism means here, therefore, is not that the entire project of modernity and of the Enlightenment should be discarded. What he terms "humanism," but which could be regarded as only one aspect of the humanistic endeavor, is the conception of the centrality of the human being, which leads to a relativism manifested in ideology. If the human will is the only measure of all things, this will can find the ideological means to justify Auschwitz.

In many theories, and in common usage, the term "ideology" has become neutrally descriptive. It designates a set of beliefs and principles held by an individual or a collective. For Levinas, however, ideology is a negative term. It does not mean merely a set of doctrines but a collection of unfounded ideas disguised as truth in order to control and oppress. As he writes in his essay "Ideology and Idealism" (which, oddly, was not published in a collection of Talmudic readings despite its Talmudic references), "Ideology usurps the

appearances of science, but the statement of its concept ruins the credit of morality. . . . That the appearance of rationality might be more insinuating and more resistant than a paralogism, and that its powers of mystification might be dissimulated to the point where the art of logic was insufficient for its demystification . . . here lay the novelty of this notion of ideology" (II 17–18; II' 3–4). Here again, Levinas emphasizes the influence of rhetoric, which "eats away the very substance of speech, precisely insofar as it 'functions in the absence of all truth'" (II 24; II' 8). Ideology is the ultimate form of lie: it does not consist simply in the uttering of untruth but in the fact that ambiguity and ruse aimed at domination appear as universal and provable reason.

Levinas is here close to Hannah Arendt, who in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* defined ideology as "the logic of an idea."[19] She wrote,

> Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction. The danger in exchanging the necessary insecurity of philosophical thought for the total explanation of an ideology . . . is not even so much the risk of falling for some usually vulgar, always uncritical assumption as of exchanging the freedom inherent in man's capacity to think for the strait jacket of logic with which man can force himself almost as violently as he is forced by some outside power. . . . Hence ideological thinking becomes emancipated from the reality that we perceive with our five senses, and insists on a "truer" reality concealed behind all perceptible things.[20]

For Arendt as for Levinas, ideologies proclaim a "truth" disconnected from empirical reality, which, for that reason, replaces philosophy and science. This is not the replacement of one set of opinions by another. It is the replacement of truth by a mystification that, according to both Arendt and Levinas, contains "totalitarian elements."[21] Ideology is the development of a lie meant to dominate and oppress, but disguised as moral reason, and expressed through rhetorical devices. Therefore, asserts Levinas, the fight against ideology is the fight against injustice—an injustice that is a simulacrum of justice spread by the ruling power (II 26–27; II' 9). Or put differently, ideology is the language of injustice. It is a form of language that looks like the formulation of truth and justice, convinces even better than truth and justice, and leads to absolute control.

Although ideology is a modern reality, Levinas discovers its components of simulacrum and oppression in a more ancient situation and another "id" word, *idolatry*. More precisely, he affirms that ideology appears as the "source of the idolatries," namely, as "some secret closing up of the soul, which is satisfied with I know not what fetish, symbol or representation taken for a concept. Here demystification still has concrete usefulness and is an act of courage" (AHN 70; ITN 57–58). Idolatry, like ideology, is a mystification—a faith in false gods, in a fallacious justice, in a misleading good. Therefore, the fight against evil consists of demystifying both ideology and idolatry.

As we saw in Chapter 1, in "Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry," Levinas explains that idolatry means the adoration of sameness, and establishes the resemblance between idolatry and ontology. In an earlier text published in *Difficult Freedom*, "A Religion for Adults," Levinas describes idolatry as the enthusiasm generated by the "sacred." The "sacred," which is distinguished from the "holy" in the collection of Talmudic readings *From the Sacred to the Holy* (translated in NTR), is a transcendent power that destroys human freedom. It is, if you will, the divine power conceived in Greek tragedies. As Levinas writes, it "annuls the relationships between people by making beings participate, albeit ecstatically, in a drama not brought about willingly by them, in an order in which they disappear" (DL 29; DF 14). However, human freedom is a necessary condition for responsibility, which constitutes the basis of the relationship with the other. Hence, the annulment of freedom means the impossibility of ethics. As a result, "the sacred that envelops and transports me is violence" (DL 29; DF 14).

These last words allow us to understand that, for Levinas, idolatry is not only a spiritual situation or a problem of faith. Idolatry, a certain way of viewing both the divine and the text, also means a certain way of being together. More exactly, it is the thing that manifests itself equally in a belief in the sacred, in the refusal of interpretation, and in cruelty. In "The State of Caesar and the State of David," Levinas equates it with an expression of politics that he famously labels "the State of Caesar," namely, "the pagan State, jealous of its sovereignty, the State in search of hegemony, the conquering, imperialist, totalitarian, oppressive State, attached to realist egoism. Incapable of being without self-adoration, it is idolatry itself" (ADV 216; BTV 184). Levinas here describes a certain form of politics, not all politics. He does not say that the state, in general, is idolatry. He says that the state, viewed as a metonymy of political power and institutions, is idolatry when it does not aim *beyond itself*, namely, when it adores itself. Politics is idolatry when its necessary violence is not intended to fight evil and strengthen ethics but is manifested in

conquest and oppression. Whenever the violence of the state fails to fight evil, or even does not limit itself to fighting evil, it becomes evil.

In sum, idolatry is not a mere religious position, which would be obsolete in modern times. Idolatry infuses all forms of collective organization closed in on themselves—their people, their culture, their religion, their history (AHN 77; ITN 65). This closure is always expressed in aggression, which is why Levinas can speak in the same breath of "idols and tyrannies" (AHN 10; ITN 3). Idolatry reflects a disentanglement of ethics and politics and the impossibility of their mutual influence.

Evil as Animality

Idolatry is not excluded from intelligibility and reason, namely, from logos (AHN 83; ITN 70). It is not connected to the surreal, the irrational, the illusory, or the incomprehensible. On the contrary: it infuses everything that has a well-defined meaning, everything that is, for that reason, sure of itself with no opening unto otherness. It is thanks to its tight conjunction with logos that idolatry seduces and silences all possible opposition to its brutality. For Levinas, however, this connection to logos paradoxically reveals the nonhuman or, more exactly, the *animal* at work in evil. Indeed, he says in "Contempt for the Torah as Idolatry," the properly human language is not simply a meaningful language, a "pure logos," be it an expression of science, literature, or entertainment. To be "human," language must be a *saying*, namely, a relation to the other (AHN 83; ITN 71). It is when language loses its ability to be a *saying* while staying logically meaningful that idolatry appears, as false human language. Those who use that language are like speaking animals, who would emit "wandering words" (AHN 83; ITN 71)—that is, words intended for no one. The animal metaphor underlines that the link between vital power and logos is no guarantee of humanity. In "Who Plays Last?" Levinas stresses that young animals' vital forces "in their play without regard for others, would be susceptible to turning into delicacy and refinement, without any ethical intention; they may become 'victory of the mind', and thus go further than crude acts of violence" (ADV 79; BTV 60). In other words, animal vitality can be manifested in spiritual or logical ways, but it has no connection to ethics whatsoever.

Animal vitality appears in almost all of Levinas's descriptions of evil. As a result, the good is always a "constraint imposed on the spontaneity of life . . . on life lived in its living vitality . . . life lived as 'a force on

the go'" (NLT 22–23; NewTR 60). It is a fight against life's "somnambulant spontaneity . . . [and] centripetal movement" (NLT 23; NewTR 60). Vital forces are evil and must be contained when they become apparent in the "appetite for desire, for domination, and for enjoyment, to which nothing is an obstacle, not even the other" (NLT 23; NewTR 60–61).

The most accurate description of this evil appetite forms the main argument of "And God Created Woman," an oft-commented-upon reading written in the early 1970s, which focuses on an extract from tractate *Berakhot* 61a.[22] The story told in the Talmudic text deals with the creation of the first man, followed by the creation of the first woman from Adam's rib in Genesis 2:22. Levinas explains that the creation of two human creatures—one male and one female—is parallel to the creation of two inclinations, the good and the bad. This duality represents the division within the human between two modes of being: reason and animality. But this tension can be interpreted in another way: as the choice not only between reason and animality (because "reason can put itself at the service of bestiality and the instincts" [DSS 128; NTR 165]) but between obedience to the divine law and surrender to eros. This division, in turn, reflects the tension between openness (obedience to the divine law means responsibility for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan [AHN 74; ITN 61]) and interiority (the satisfaction of instincts). Openness means, therefore, the human ability or willingness to be "looked through" by God; and interiority means the attempt to hide from God (DSS 132; NTR 167). The search for interiority as an attempt to hide from God must be understood here as another way to express the inclination toward closure that we saw earlier in the retreat into a closed home or in the temptation of idolatry. Therefore, evil does not lie in sexuality but in the *seduction* of sexuality, namely, in the conviction that human culture (or the human psyche) should or can be determined by the libido rather than by responsibility (DSS 140; NTR 172). As with the home, the problem of sexuality lies in the closure it introduces, not in the thing (sexuality) itself.

It becomes easier now to understand what Levinas means by "animality." Animality lies neither in our natural impulses nor in our need for intimacy. Rather, it consists of giving them *preponderance*. The question is one of subordination: for Levinas the relation based on sexual differences must be subordinated to the interhuman relation (DSS 148; NTR 177), as the need for privacy and a home must be subordinated to hospitality. Evil is the refusal to accept this hierarchy, this "order of things" (AHN 74; ITN 61).[23] This point is important and allows us to resolve some apparent contradictions in Levinas—where he seems to say that the same thing (e.g., a home) is

both a good thing and a bad thing—and to moderate his claims against the "animal." Evil is not anchored in biological or psychological inclinations but in choosing to give these dispositions precedence over responsibility, while justice reflects the opposite. This is the reason why Levinas rejects theodicy. As Katz observes, "Evil is not something to be blamed on God, nor is it something that one ought to try to justify in the 'grand scheme of things.'"[24] Evil is a human, chosen "confusion" of the order of things. "Animality" and "vital forces" are terms for the refusal to control and put our various impulses in the right order.

It is animality that is at work in the political enterprises that Levinas regards as evil. And therefore, it is in this sense that we should read the following lines of "Who Plays Last?" whose biological and determinist accents would be unsettling if we forgot that, by "vitality," Levinas means an order of preference and not a natural given:

> War would be a confrontation of purely biological forces, the brutality of animals; its outcome would be predetermined by the imbalance between the vitality of the initial energies of beings; politics would already be inscribed in chromosomes . . . I think, then . . . that pure politics, in which the people of the earth are held together, is only the display, with a view to mutual repression, of the animal energies of the attachment to being. . . . Animal energy would control the secret of the social, the political, the struggle, defeat and victory, an energy from which the rigor of logic itself would stem, the strength of reasoning and all "ideas the right way up." The life of the States predetermined animalistically without moral questions! The persistence of the animal in being, the *conatus*, remains indeed indifferent to all justification and all accusation. (ADV 76; BTV 57–58)

Two things must be noted here. First, these lines speak of "pure politics," therefore an injustice, an evil, that, as we have already seen, is hypothetical in its purity. This does not mean that reality does not have its share of unjust politics, but evil is hardly ever as absolute as in the description above. One could venture here that, for Levinas, Nazism was the materialization of the purity of evil. However, Levinas also recognized that even under Nazi rule, some people did not comply; some people were able to discern the "howling of wolves in the seduction of discourse" (NP 127; PN 108). In other words, there was some resistance. Evil, as extreme as it was, was never total in that it never completely recovered everything and everyone.

Second, animality is the subordination of ethics to being. As Levinas writes in "Freedom of Speech," "political totalitarianism rests on an ontological totalitarianism. Being is all, a Being in which nothing finishes and nothing begins" (DL 289; DF 206–207). Therefore, the extreme claim of Levinas's 1948 book *Time and the Other*, that "Being is evil" (TA 29; TO 51), is, in the readings, moderated into a more complex view: Being is evil, but only when it is not subordinated to ethics. In the 1990 Prefatory Note to the "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism," the extreme evil of Nazism is called "*elemental evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself" (QRPH 25; RPH 63). We can be led to such evil by logic because it is the *choice* of an order of things: a chosen subordination of ethics to being.

As the formulations of the Talmudic readings show, it would be naïve to stay with Levinas's position in his early texts. Not only is being not evil, but it is *necessary* to the good.[25] As early as 1954, in another text dedicated to the Nazi phenomenon, Levinas writes, "To make laws and create institutions based on reason, thanks to which he will avoid the ordeal of abdication, is man's unique opportunity" (DL 212; DF 150). To fight against the order of things in which being comes first, we must choose the order of things in which being is subordinated to ethics—in laws, institutions, reason. This is the argument developed in most of the Talmudic readings, in which Levinas describes the need for "human institutions through which the *good* would succeed in *being*" (AHN 103; ITN 89). From this last sentence, we understand that the problem resides not in being but in the choice of what will happen to being—the good or the evil. There are laws, institutions, and expressions of reason that express a good order of things. Therefore, the readings make it clear that the good comes to exist only in ontological forms. Politics is needed against evil. On the one hand, "the bestiality, the savagery of the wild beast are immediately evident in Rome's crimes" (AHN 116; ITN 100). On the other hand, "the extension of Rome into the world would be necessary to justice and to Messianic peace itself" (ADV 85; BTV 66).

CHAPTER 6

On Nature

The danger in the subordination of ethics to being—what we called animality in the previous chapter—raises the question of the place of nature in Levinas's thinking. At first glance, this place is a negative one because for Levinas, nature is the manifestation of the processes of presence famously described in many ontologies—those of Hegel and Heidegger but also of Spinoza. According to Levinas, therefore, the natural world stands in for something that must be criticized, not celebrated. In his thought, nature is synonymous with being and perseverance in being—that is, conatus. Ethics, on the other hand, is a relationship with an infinite transcendence that is not found in nature and that interrupts or challenges perseverance in being. If nature consists of everything that is and wants to be, ethics is about the meeting with something else, which "is not," and which disturbs nature.

Since, as already discussed, Levinas's philosophy aims to reverse the order of things that gives preponderance to presence or being, it seems difficult to find in his work any admiration, appreciation, or even positive awareness of nature. For this reason, and despite the efforts of some environmental ethicists to find support in Levinas's ethics, environmentalism does not coexist easily with his philosophy. Both have at their heart ethical, social, and political concerns, but these concerns look incompatible. Levinas's "unapologetic anthropocentrism"[1] leads him to be utterly silent even concerning human-centered care for the world. His ethics responds to social needs, but he never integrates these needs into the larger picture of holistic interdependency that is at the core of the environmentalist narrative. At a time when other thinkers of his generation were paving the way for the large body of philosophical, sociological, and political reflections that have accompanied the scientific discourse on climate change and the condemnation of neo-liberalism, Levinas's philosophy, which, as we have seen, disagrees with central aspects of liberalism, seems to relate solely to human beings and to be only for the sake of human beings.

Levinas's philosophy challenges two conceptions of nature. First, it resists the view, inspired by romanticism and developed in many different forms, both academic and popular, that regards all things natural as more "authentic" and morally superior to anything made by man. This mode of thought holds that there is an underlying harmony between human and non-human nature—a harmony perpetually threatened and even broken by technology but constituting the only meaningful guide by which to live.[2] Second, as emphasized above, it responds to Spinoza. Levinas rejects Spinoza's monism, namely, his concept of immanent God or Nature—"Deus sive Natura"—and his understanding of the world as a unity reflected as such in human knowledge. Moreover, the focus of Levinas's ethics is Spinoza's conatus, that is, the fact that "everything, insofar as it is in itself, endeavors to persevere in its own being" (*Ethics*, III, Prop. 6). Perseverance in being leads to "affections" and conflicts between the various beings or "modes" of the one substance, God/Nature.[3] Interestingly, Levinas does not hold Spinoza's conatus to be an inadequate description of nature. On the contrary, he insists that beings do persevere in being, and in so doing kill each other. His argument against Spinoza is that the latter is right: nature is driven by conatus. However, he argues that immanence and perseverance are not the only manifestation and experience of reality. There exists another "level" of existence: the meeting with alterity and transcendence, *beyond nature*: "Thought and freedom come to us from separation and from the consideration of the other—this thesis is at the antipodes of Spinozism" (TI 108; TI' 105).

For Levinas, transcendence has a primary meaning, signifying "the fact that the *event of being*, the *esse*, the *essence*, passes over to what is other than being" (AE 13; OB 3). Therefore transcendence, or God (DD 95; OG 56), is *not nature*, and is *other than nature*. God is on the side of ethics, but God and ethics are not on the side of nature. Levinas is arguably the thinker who, in the name of concern for humankind, most vehemently rejected all *interest* in nature. (*Inter-est* is a recurrent Levinassian play on words, indicating the activity of essence.)

In such a context, it is surprising that in the Talmudic readings, the natural world is sometimes connected to the uncanny infinity of transcendence, showing the limits of human power, cruelty, or hubris. In other words, while in Levinas's phenomenological work the natural designates primarily the ontological character of Creation, in the readings it sometimes refers to the otherness beyond ontology. The readings include descriptions of nature as both ontological and inspiring the ethical.[4]

In this chapter, I analyze how these two characteristics of nature meet and disturb each other, and I interpret their meeting and disturbance. First,

I focus on "A Religion for Adults" (DL 24–42; DF 11–23) and "Damages Due to Fire" (DSS 149–180; NTR 178–197) to emphasize Levinas's criticism of what will be called a "rooted" nature. I then examine Levinas's appreciation of what will be called a "wandering" nature, reinterpreting the oft-read text "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights" (DL 213–216; DF 151–153). Finally, we will see how the readings "Beyond the State in the State" (NLT 45–76; NewTR 79–108) and "Judaism and Kenosis" (AHN 133–151; ITN 114–132) demonstrate the ambivalent or amphibological role of nature.[5] I will show that for Levinas nature is associated with war, conquest, and destruction but at the same time is sometimes presented as the cure for the will of power. In other words, in the readings nature strikingly mirrors politics. It embodies an ontological necessity that must be moderated by an ethics that, in a way, comes from nature itself.

A Rooted Nature

The most explicit of Levinas's statements against nature can arguably be found in "A Religion for Adults." In the last and most political part of the essay, called "Citizens of Modern States," Levinas writes:

> The Jewish man discovers man before discovering landscapes and towns. . . . He understands the world on the basis of the Other rather than the whole of being according to the earth. He is in a sense exiled on this earth, as the psalmist says, and he finds a meaning to the earth on the basis of a human society. This is not an analysis of the contemporary Jewish soul; it is the literal teaching of the Bible. . . . Freedom with regard to the sedentary forms of existence is, perhaps, the human way to be in the world. For Judaism, the world becomes intelligible before a human face and not, as for a great contemporary philosopher who sums up an important aspect of the West, through houses, temples and bridges. . . . [This freedom] reduces the importance of all values related to roots, and institutes other forms of fidelity and responsibility. Man, after all, is not a tree, and humanity is not a forest. (DL 40–41; DF 22–23)[6]

Levinas here contrasts himself with Heidegger, and Heidegger's dwelling in his forest hut, to make the central claim of his philosophy: human beings have no roots.[7] To express this more fully, human beings are human

precisely because they can escape their being rooted into being: "What I want to emphasize is that the human breaks with pure being, which is always persistence in being. This is my principal thesis" (PM 172). Nature-ineluctably-connected-to-itself appears to be the non-human part of the world. On the other hand, humanity is that which is able to cut its connection to nature—namely, to relinquish the satisfaction of being *there*, of being part of the *there is*, of ontological immanence. We are, and by this very fact, we are connected to what is, to the world. But we are not trees, rooted in the soil; rather, our humanity can be found precisely in that we feel the need or obligation to break the chains of immanence. As early as in *On Escape* (1935), Levinas reflects on the situation of "being held fast [être rivé]" (DE 95; OE 52) and on the need to exit from being: "Escape is the need to get out of oneself, that is, to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, *the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même]*" (DE 98; OE 55). Much later, in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, Levinas expresses the same idea in different words: "Everything is absorbed, sucked down and walled up in the Same" (DD 31; OG 12). Being consists of identification with oneself—of being "stuck to oneself." This is the way of the world, the way of natural beings. The world is in and for itself. But humanity—humankindness, or human kindness, as it were—consists of cutting all roots and turning over to *otherwise than being*, to the *other person*.

The metaphysical or, as Levinas calls it, the ethical claim against rootedness is also a normative social and political claim. Individuals are not trees and humanity is not a forest. People should not stand rooted in themselves and in their soil, like a nationalist army or a self-satisfied mob sure of its rights and of its possession of the land. If being stuck to oneself and being rooted are one and the same thing, then "boundedness" (*enchaînement*) to the body and to the "biological" goes hand in hand with the connection to the earth. From that point, it is a very short step to fascism and Nazism, explains Levinas in his early text, "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" (QRPH 19; RPH 69). Does this mean that all commitments to the natural and to nature lead to fascism or, perhaps, *are* fascism? This sounds preposterous and certainly raises a difficulty. Levinas contends that the "ego structure" always means "harm caused to the other" (DL 32; DF 16). His ethics is intended to describe the opening that challenges the identifying and totalizing activity of being. However, in putting breathing and imperialism on the same spectrum of perseverance in being, is Levinas not generalizing being in a totalizing way? Does the fact that war is an expression of being (TI 6; TI' 21) imply that being manifests itself always and only as war?

Does the fact that fascism includes a "boundedness" to nature imply that all relations to nature are fascist?

It seems to me that distinctions must be made. As Asher Horowitz and Gad Horowitz note, "Levinas fervently rejects the fascists' association of the body's 'adherence to the Self' with the identification of the bodies of singular individuals as mere monads of a Generalized Body of the People."[8] Levinas, however, also rejects the identification of the bodies of the people as monads of nature. From this it is clear that fascism presupposes a biological connection to nature, *but only* through a nationalist (and racist) phase that is not inherent to all connections to nature. We must therefore emphasize that the fascist way of being connected to nature is only one particular way of doing so.

Levinas, however, does not make distinctions. He insists on warning us against the holistic continuum of human beings and nature that can be found in *all* connections to nature. So long as nature represents a rooted Same, a principle of renewed identification, a conatus, it cannot be redeemed, even if not all relations to nature concretely lead to fascism. By definition, nature is that which is blind to otherness. It cannot be awakened by transcendence. It is a Darwinian struggle that endlessly destroys for the sake of its own survival. Levinas's position echoes that of the Russian writer Vasily Grossman, whom he greatly admired: "This is the life of the forest—a constant struggle of everything against everything. Only the blind conceive of the kingdom of trees and grass as the world of good. . . . Is it that life itself is evil?"[9] For Levinas, what prevents humanity from collapsing into war, imperialism, and fascism is the rupture of the connection to nature. The openness to transcendence is lived and experienced in the solidarity between human beings beyond biological ties and natural roots.

For Levinas, then, trees and forests are unethical because of their rootedness. Likewise, all human endeavors motivated by or celebrating rootedness are unethical. However, trees are also unethical for another reason—namely, because they burn irrationally, without control. In "Damages Due to Fire," the Talmudic extract studied by Levinas is a piece of tort law dealing with liability in the case of a spreading fire (*Baba Kama* 60a–b). What is important here is that the liability at issue is related to an event that is out of human control. Reflecting on the destructive potential of fire, with its sometimes unexpected consequences, Levinas notes the "appearance here of a responsibility concerning that which escapes perception and consequently the precautions and powers of the one who has caused the harm" (DSS 159; NTR 184).

Fire personifies loss of control on the part of not only whoever has lit the fire but all humankind. A raging fire respects neither human property nor

human morality, nor any other component of the human order. It embodies the law of a nature that is totally indifferent to human misery, welfare, or reason. In Levinas's words, "Fire is an elementary force to which other elementary forces will add themselves, thereby multiplying damages beyond any rational conjecture! The wind adds its whims and violence to it" (DSS 161; NTR 185). An elementary force, a *natural* force, is characterized by unreasonable brutality and destructive capacity. Levinas continues: "But perhaps the elemental force of fire is already the intervention of the uncontrollable, of war" (DSS 161; NTR 185).

According to Levinas, elementary forces have something in common with human war. Like Camus, who, in *The Plague*, used the metaphor of the bubonic plague to personify Nazism, Levinas associates a natural process with human calamity. Camus created the story of the epidemic to make a statement about evil and death. He implied that no matter the origin of suffering, it always provokes the same "absurd" questions. Suffering—of either natural or human origin—challenges our understanding of the meaning of life. Levinas's thesis here is based on a similar approach. Levinas believes that we are responsible for uncontrollable, unreasonable evil—whether of natural or human origin. However, unlike Camus, who said nothing about the essence of evil, and only pointed to similarities in the consequences of its manifestations, Levinas uses his generalizing logic to underline its essence: "This page 60 of the tractate *Baba Kama* speaks of the damages caused by fire and of the liability they imply. It does not refer to war but to destructive fire and, later, to epidemics, to famine—all of this causing damages and death. These are also the effects of war. Is it possible to deduce the *essence* of war from this starting point? Or to deduce what is more war than war?" (DSS 154; NTR 181–182).

Here is a text that describes not war but destruction that resembles the destruction of war. From this similarity of *effects*, Levinas deduces a similarity of *causes*. He alleges that the same effects must have the same causes or, more precisely, that the same effects result from the same *essential cause*. As a result, fire and war are regarded as having the same *essence*. Later in the reading, it becomes clear that fire, epidemic, hunger, war, and Auschwitz are expressions of the same principle, the absence of reason. "We are entering the realm of total disorder, of sheer Element, no longer in the service of any thought" (DSS 164; NTR 187).[10] The similarity between human evil and uncontrolled fire is the problem of the "elemental," or, in other words, of unreasonable nature.

This is surprising, because Levinas does not regard reason as the foundation of ethics. On the contrary, he argues that the ethical commandment

revealed in the face of the other is prior to reason and beyond reason. By reason he understands that which is "sought in the relationship between terms, between the one and the other showing themselves in a theme." It is that which ensures "the coexistence of these terms, the coherence of the one and the other despite their difference" (AE, 256; OB 165). That reason which explains one thing by means of another, which establishes similarities and relations between things in order to comprehend them, misses the infinite uniqueness expressed in the face of another human being. The reason of "representation, of knowledge through deduction, served by logic and synchronizing the successive" (AE 260; OB 167) annihilates difference and otherness. It is part of the ontological, not of the ethical. Therefore, it is striking that in "Damages Due to Fire" Levinas laments the disappearance of reason, which is characteristic, he says, of "sheer element" (*l'Elément pur*)—namely, of nature reduced to cruelty.

Nature is ontological. Reason, seen as "knowledge through deduction," is ontological. But the brutality of nature emanates precisely from the absence of reason. As we shall see in the next section, this stems from the fact that there exists a non-wholly ontological reason, a reason opened to otherness, which alone can moderate the irrational hostility of nature.

A Wandering Nature

"Damages Due to Fire" describes situations in which the worst is always to come. In such situations, however, some creatures *sense* the ethical meaning of the events. Pursuing his exegesis of his chosen text from *Baba Kama* 60a–b, Levinas writes:

> If dogs howl, says the last quoted text, that is because the angel of death has entered the city; if mean dogs are happy, that points to Elijah, the precursor of the Messiah! But only if there are no bitches among them! The first statement is affirmed unconditionally: The dogs howl. Instinctive, irrational forebodings, dogs are the first to sense that the angel of death is here. But . . . let us not confuse eroticism and messianism! Those dogs, pleased by the presence of a bitch, point to one of the deceptive aspects of salvation through youth. For youth, animated by pure vital impulse, which is not always the equivalent of a pure impulse, messianic times are always near. Beware of the quality of joy! (DSS 175–176; NTR 193–194)

Dogs are as irrational as fire, war, or extermination, and they do not think, says Levinas, but they perceive the ethical reality. Their howls or happiness reflects situations of misery or redemption; they reflect a desire for *hesed*, mercy. However, it is different when they are in a situation of pure perseverance in being—when they are "animated by pure vital impulse." When, due to the presence of females, they forget everything but themselves, their expressions of joy are no longer reliable. When they are animated by pure conatus, dogs cannot be trusted. As Levinas once said, "The being of animals is a struggle for life; a struggle for life without ethics. It is a question of might" (PM 172).

Levinas's remarks on the dogs of *Baba Kama* 60b echo his short essay in *Difficult Freedom*, "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights." Both texts focus on dogs' reactions to war and suffering. In "The Name of a Dog," Levinas comments on Exodus 22:31: "You shall be men consecrated to me; therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beast in the field; you shall cast it to the dogs." He says:

> This flesh torn by beasts in the field, and the remains of bloody struggles between wild animals that half-devour one another, from the strong species to the weak, will be sublimated by intelligence into hunting games. This spectacle suggesting the horrors of war, this devouring between species, will provide men with the artistic emotions of the *Kriegspiel*. . . . It is the dog mentioned at the end of the verse that I am especially interested in. . . . So who is this dog at the end of the verse? (DL 213–214; DF 151)

In a few humorous lines, Levinas recalls the metaphoric uses of the word "dog" in French and their significations of misery, servility, and fidelity but also cruelty. However, he says that the question raised in the verse from Exodus deals not with allegories but with the real dog, an animal representing nothing but itself. In emphasizing this point, he raises the topic of a "pure nature leading to rights" (DL 214; DF 152). Nevertheless, contrary to what is implied by this phrase and the title of the essay, the text never becomes a discussion of natural rights and their application to animals. Instead, as in "Damages Due to Fire," it focuses on the absence of reason in animals—and on their potential for nonetheless showing mercy. What interests Levinas is not whether dogs can be regarded as the other but whether dogs have the capacity to recognize the other.

This is an important point for an understanding of Levinas's philosophy in general. As we saw earlier, Levinas rarely asks, "Who is my neighbor?"[11] He

does not deal with the *definition* of the other, because the other is precisely that which is exterior to all definitions. Hence, he does not consider the possibility that nature can be regarded as the other.[12] His focus is on subjectivity, on that which faces the other. Put differently, the question raised by nature is not whether nature can be the object or recipient of human ethical behavior. It is not "Can a non-human other be 'the other'?"[13] It is about nature and natural creatures as possible *subjects*, leaving the other undefined.[14]

In addition to the dogs already mentioned, dogs appear twice more in *Difficult Freedom*. The first is the dogs of Exodus 11:7, which will not even snarl at the Israelites as God smites the firstborn of Egypt. These dogs, who by their silence respect the institution of freedom, have "neither ethics nor *logos*," writes Levinas, yet "attest to the dignity of the individual. This is what the friend of man means: transcendence in the animal!" (DL 215; DF 152). The second is the most famous of all Levinassian dogs, Bobby, who briefly comforted Levinas and his fellow prisoners in the Nazi work camp where he was held during the war. While the human beings they encountered

> stripped us of our human skin . . . for a few short weeks, before the sentinels chased him away, a wandering dog entered our lives. . . . He survived [*vivotait*] in some wild patch in the region of the camp. But we called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. For him there was no doubt that we were men. . . . This dog was the last Kantian in Nazi Germany, without the brain needed to universalize maxims and drives. He was a descendant of the dogs of Egypt. (DL 215–216; DF 153)

Like the dogs of *Baba Kama* reacting to the coming of Elijah, Bobby and the dogs of Egypt lack intelligence, yet behave ethically. They are pure conatus, but in certain cases they sense or express "transcendence." "Transcendence in the animal" means a disruption of the pure vital impulse—the rooted nature that endlessly struggles for growth and survival. Dogs, and perhaps other animals as well, can experience an interruption of their conatus, which allows them to perceive the other. If, as Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*, "the happiness of enjoyment is stronger than every disquietude, but disquietude can trouble it; here lies the gap between the animal and the human" (TI 159; TI' 149), there was no gap between Bobby and the prisoners in the camp, who for Bobby were still human beings. Or, perhaps, Bobby was

more human than the Nazis and their acolytes, who regarded the prisoners as "a gang of apes" (DL 215; DF 153).

What made the interruption of conatus in Bobby possible was his "wandering" nature, which broke the steadiness of being. As noted earlier, ethics means "freedom with regard to the sedentary forms of existence" (DL 40; DF 23). For Levinas, homeless wandering is the figure of the opening of subjectivity toward infinity. When the ego functions ontologically, it aims at "staying home" and comes back to itself. When it functions in the ethical mode, it breaks away from itself for the sake of the other. Levinas has illustrated these two levels of existence, the ontological and the ethical, through the myths of Ulysses and Abraham: "To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant even to bring back his son to the point of departure" (TA 267; TO 348). For Levinas, Ithaca represents ontology—the return to one's identity, one's property, one's kingdom. The ego "is a dog that recognizes as its own Ulysses coming to take possession of his goods" (AE 127; OB 79–80). Ethics, however, occurs in a non-return and a nowhere. In the Nazi camp Bobby was on the side of Abraham, not Ulysses: "Perhaps the dog that recognized Ulysses beneath his disguise on his return from the Odyssey was a forebear of our own? But no, no! There, they were in Ithaca and the Fatherland. Here we were nowhere" (DL 216; DF 153).[15] Bobby, homeless like the prisoners, reacted with mercy in spite of his conatus. Like Abraham of Genesis 18 welcoming the three desert wayfarers, the dog greeted the prisoners each day when they returned from work, recognizing them as fellow-homeless and as human beings. And, says Levinas, "his friendly growling . . . was born from the silence of his forefathers on the banks of the Nile" (DL 216; DF 153). Bobby, like the dogs of Exodus 11:7, was able to recognize the other.

Bobby is a specimen of a very unnatural nature, if by natural we mean perseverance in being. The homeless, wandering dog, which did not live but merely "survived" (*vivotait*, not *vivait*) until he was driven off, was nevertheless able to interrupt his survival impulse to greet the prisoners each day.[16] Without logos and ethics, he manifested ethical behavior.[17] He was a Kantian without the intelligence to universalize maxims and drives. But why does Levinas here mention Kant? Since when does universalizing reason play any role in Levinassian ethics? Is ethics not that which precisely transcends universalized maxims and drives?[18]

Here we meet again the difficulty described above. On the one hand, we know that ethics does not involve ontological reason. On the other hand,

Levinas claims that nature's absence of mercy arises from the absence of reason. Moreover, animals, which have no reason, sometimes (but not always) interrupt their blind vital impulse to behave ethically. Therefore, it appears that Levinas uses the word "reason" to mean *two different things*. The first is ontological reason—the cognitive faculty that establishes relationships of sameness. The second is what Levinas calls "pre-original" reason, which is open to otherness. Pre-original reason has two central and related expressions. The first consists of thinking beyond being, as emphasized in the "idea of infinity," which

> is exceptional in that its ideatum surpasses its idea . . . the alterity of the infinite is not cancelled, is not extinguished in the thought that thinks it. . . . The idea of infinity is then the only one that teaches what we are ignorant of. . . . It is experience in the sole radical sense of the term: a relationship with the exterior, with the other, without this exteriority being able to be integrated into the same. . . . Experience, the idea of infinity, occurs in the relationship with the other. The idea of infinity is the social relationship. (EDEHH 238–239; CP 54)

The second consists of thinking beyond historical time. It is a "reason before the thematization of signification by a thinking subject, before the assembling of terms in a present, a pre-original reason that does not proceed from any initiative of the subject, an anarchic reason. . . . Reason that would be one-for-the-other!" (AE 259; OB 166–167). It should be noted that by "before" Levinas does not mean an event that historically precedes ontological reason but an "immemorial past" or other dimension of the past, the dimension of eternity (TA 277, TO 358; AE 23, 141, OB 9, 88; TI 136, TI' 130).[19]

We now understand that rooted nature's lack of ethics does not stem from a deficiency in ontological reason but from the absence of the pre-original reason that would moderate its savagery. On the other hand, with the prisoners Bobby had an experience beyond thematization and logical deduction: "If experience precisely means a relation with the absolutely other, that is, with what always overflows thought, the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word" (TI 10; TI' 25). Without forming a hypothesis about the "idea of infinity" in dogs and their relation to eternity, we can assume, as Levinas seems to assume, that Bobby and his biblical and Talmudic forefathers lacked ontological reason but not pre-original reason. In some cases, therefore, nature can be ethical. More, in circumstances like the work camp, nature is ethics' last refuge.

It would be tempting at this stage to understand Levinas's position as a preference for animal over vegetal life. This would reflect his anthropocentrism—human beings are, after all, animals—as well as a simple and intuitive hierarchy of the natural world: human beings are superior to animals; animals are superior to plants. Yet forests, dogs, and people belong equally to being. Therefore, if ethics disturbs the human conatus, and sometimes the canine version, one may wonder why it would not disturb the conatus of trees or stones. In what follows, I will show that Levinas uncovers the complicated relationship between the ontological and the ethical in all parts of nature. His criticism of natural perseverance in being is accompanied by an acknowledgment, only seldom expressed, of a *beyond nature in nature*.

The Amphibology of Nature

In "Beyond the State in the State," Levinas reads a passage from tractate *Tamid* 31b–32b in which Alexander of Macedon tests the Elders of the Negev with ten questions.[20] The first deals with a surprising geography: "He asked them if the distance is greater from heaven to earth than from east to west" (NLT 45; NewTR 79). Interpreting these words, Levinas distinguishes between the two "measures of the world . . . length and height" (NLT 52; NewTR 85), or horizontal and vertical, which express two different aspects of the world.

The vertical, or distance from heaven to earth, may be understood as contemplation, "imagination, poetry or dream. Impotent and uncertain movement" (NLT 51; NewTR 84). As could be expected, however, Levinas proposes a second interpretation of the "elevation to the heavens." This comprises the ethical dimension, pointing to an infinite exteriority, outside of nature. When understood this way, the "elevation" challenges the laws of nature and of geometry: "All this must be redressed, redeemed, pardoned, and returned to its just rectitude. Hence height is needed. The true height is that elevation in the goodness which reestablishes the disrupted peace in human relationships. The metaphor of this height has other meanings than that of geometry. It is here that one thinks about God [*C'est là que Dieu se pense*]" (NLT 52; NewTR 85).

Note that "c'est là que Dieu se pense" literally means "it is there that God thinks himself." Levinas plays with the two possible senses of the sentence, indicating that height induces or manifests another kind of reason.[21] It is the reason of God himself, reflected in the pre-original reason mentioned earlier. Height, therefore, has nothing to do with the spatial relationship between

earth and sky. "Height is not a geometrical measure. The astronomical sky is empty of gods. And our airplanes and rockets will come tomorrow to traverse and conquer it" (NLT 53; NewTR 86). Rather, the physical vertical dimension of nature is part of what he calls "the horizontal."

The horizontal is made of "lengths" and "lines" that connect one point to another. It reveals distances within a *presence*. Lengths and lines reflect the synchrony of distinct positions. They manifest things that are *there*: "Priority of horizontal lines, those of efficiency, and, despite distances and obstacles, the whole marvel of paths, tracks, road-ways, and hence spirit" (NLT 50–51; NewTR 84). The horizontal is "thematization." Its lines are the geographic equivalent of politics and reason. Aristotle's disciple, who knows how to ask the question of being (NLT 54; NewTR 86–87), is a statesman, a general, and a philosopher: "Wisdom was defined to Alexander only as deductive thought, as science which masters the future. Wisdom—reasonable thought, to be sure, the ideal of the West which does not like the unforeseen, admires strong characters and is capable of despising riches; but it also remains sensitive to the nobility of the conquering sword and will never have peace" (NLT 60; NewTR 92).

Politics and reason take place in the same horizontal synchronic dimension. And so does everyday life:

> Does one not hear [in Alexander's question] the preoccupations of power as also the politics of the statesman, of the conqueror crossing or hollowing out the paths of the universe? Of a politics driven to imperialism, to couriers bearing far away the decisions of the commander in chief and the central administration? But, already [there is] all the importance of the horizontal in the daily march [*démarches*] of the human multitudes toward their place of work. Next to or behind the march [*marche*] of military columns. (NLT 50; NewTR 83–84)

The natural world is not simply the home, the context, of ontological occupations. It is their substance. Nature is made of lines, and linear are army columns, subway lines, and logical deduction, all of which are expressions of an expanding universe. Thus *politics is natural* and functions according to natural expansion: "Political power wants to expand; it wants to be an empire. Everything that limits it is already against it and provokes it" (NLT 71; NewTR 102).

However, the forward march of the conqueror will meet a barrier. In the Talmudic discussion, Alexander tells the Elders that he wants to go to

Africa, to which they reply, "You cannot, for the mountains of darkness will stop you." Thus, Levinas notes: "The world is not a Euclidian space open to conquest, to the forward movement of a horizontal march. Places inhabited by men concealed under their dissimilarities, whose human look cannot manage to penetrate the night, multiplicity without synthesis, space without transition, without return, exotic worlds requiring, on their paths without destination, the irrational perspicacity of instinct and the guiding threads of the blind" (NLT 71; NewTR 102).

The "irrational perspicacity of instinct" is here linked with the non-return, as if Levinas were acknowledging Bobby's pre-original reason. However, the meaning of his lyrical sentences is clear. Something *in this world*—like mountains—at some point stops the conquest of the land, the spreading out of imperialist armies. The world is a horizontal expanding space, yet at the same time, it is not a Euclidian space open to conquest.[22] Levinas is referring to the same world. Verticality beyond being is not detached from the natural world, but it is a modality of nature itself. Being and otherwise than being meet in this world, without synthesizing. The "elevation"—which is not part of the everyday being of people, trees, animals, sky, land, and fire—nevertheless intervenes in their being, to limit their expanding conatus. In the lines from *Tamid* 31b–32b read by Levinas, Alexander's imperialism is interrupted first by the mountains referred to above, then by encountering a spring whose scent reveals that it flows from the Garden of Eden—a garden that transforms a nature of conquest and the harsh struggle for survival into a haven of peace (NLT 74; NewTR 104). Eden is a natural garden that challenges nature—a vertical garden, as it were.

The irruption of mountains and of Eden into horizontal nature echoes the ambiguity or amphibology of politics. Politics is at the same time the origin of all wrongs and, thanks to the ethical disruption, the cure of most. The amphibology of nature and politics is expressed in slightly different language in "Judaism and Kenosis." Levinas there reformulates in his own words a parable from tractate *Hulin* (60a). At the creation of the world, when the sun and moon are still the same size, the moon wonders if she or the former will be king. As a result, God makes her smaller. Following this is a dialogue in which the moon complains about her size and function. For the moon, according to Levinas, the sun represents universal history, scientific reason, and political triumph. The moon is hurt to be smaller and refuses all the "second-best jobs" proposed by God. Her answers manifest a struggle inherent to nature, the struggle for supremacy. Conscious of this essential aspect of the world that he has just created, and of the ineluctable despair it generates,

God does not answer but takes responsibility for the offense to the moon, whose dissatisfaction is

> the residue of the stubborn contention of a nature persevering in its being, imperturbably affirming itself. To this there is no response, but for this, precisely, Holiness takes on the responsibility. Here is the humility of God assuming responsibility for this ambiguity. The greatness of humility is also in the humiliation of greatness. It is the sublime kenosis of a God who accepts the questioning of his holiness in a world incapable of restricting itself to the light of his Revelation. (AHN 137; ITN 118)

Hence, God plays a double function. On the one hand, he creates the world as an ontological nature struggling for perseverance, a world where kings as implacable as fire conquer lands and where the small, humble, and poor inevitably lose the game. On the other hand, he acknowledges and takes responsibility for wrongs in the world. He "accepts the questioning of his holiness." Kenosis or humility—doubt as to the absolute justification of being—is a breach in the very creation of being.

If so, Levinas's philosophy entails what we could call a prudent environmentalism. Obviously, his work pours cold water on all forms of uncritical enthusiasm for nature. The relationship between human beings and nature is an expression of being in which both sides necessarily seek predominance. Nature kills more than we do, and we kill and destroy because we are part of nature. Nature left to itself, like "politics left to itself" (TI 334–335; TI' 300), produces piles of dead. Why be enthusiastic for a conatus in a perpetual war of expansion? However, the ethical interruption of being *is natural.* As the story of Bobby shows in a paradigmatic way, the awakening to the cries of the victims and the frailty of the other is an *otherwise than nature in nature*. Being/nature can be interrupted anywhere by acts of mercy or charity.

Nature is conatus. It is struggle and expansion indifferent to charity or kindness. But the ethical disquietude appears in nature—in the form of Bobby's barking or of the spring that brings forth Eden. In this sudden and unexpected meeting between kenosis and essence, the world becomes livable, and the only place to live. It is in learning to see the suspension of nature in nature as described in Levinas's ethical phenomenology that we can start to conceive of a behavior that will not destroy that suspension.

CHAPTER 7

Levinas and the Modern State of Israel

The topic of Zionism constitutes an open question in Levinas studies. Does Zionism have a place within Levinas's distinction between ethics and politics, or is it a third category, which requires a separate discussion and, as such, indicates that in empirical situations Levinas failed to use his own categories? Any answer to this question has the potential to be highly problematic. For some Levinas scholars, Levinas's apologetics for the State of Israel are rooted in his ethics and, hence, reveal the flawed foundations of his philosophy. For others, Levinas was unable or unwilling to apply his generous ethics to the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and made a shameful exception to his own rules. In the first case, we have a problem with Levinas's philosophy.[1] In the second, Levinas's philosophy is innocent but Levinas was not.[2]

While I subscribe to some of the arguments made by both groups of scholars, I disagree with the general framework of their discussions. On the one hand, I am uncomfortable with what Eisenstadt and Katz recently described as an increasing tendency to approach Levinas's writings with the expectation of finding them anti-Palestinian, Eurocentrist, and racist—namely, to read him with the a priori goal of denouncing his political positions.[3] However, I feel similar uneasiness when faced with commentaries of the opposite kind, which defend Levinas's positions at all costs. While one cannot pretend to be utterly objective or impartial, I believe we can attempt to make sense of what Levinas said in the context of his philosophy before turning either to defense or to criticism. In this respect, it is important to recall that Levinas was a French citizen, not an Israeli one. His political allegiance was to the French Republic with its universalist policies, its *laïcité* (to which we will return in the conclusion of this book), and its patriotic ethos; he was not politically accountable for anything that took place or is currently taking place in the Middle East. For this reason and many others, it is extraordinarily misleading to compare him to Heidegger, who was a German national and a member

of the Nazi party.[4] That said, there is no doubt that Levinas's own identity and experiences as a Jew—including the murder of much of his family in the Holocaust, and then the birth of the State of Israel a few years later—influenced his opinions on Zionism.[5]

Levinas expressed his thoughts about Israel and Zionism on several occasions in the Talmudic readings. Zionism is there addressed as an occurrence of the *intrigue* of ethics and politics.[6] In saying that Levinas's take on Zionism is a specific instance of his broader conception of the relationship between ethics and politics, I wish to underline that not all of Levinas's philosophy is at stake in his views on Zionism. To put it differently: Levinas's views on Zionism are a particular development of his philosophy; his philosophy is not a development of his views on Zionism. As such, the position that I will take in this chapter is that Levinas's understanding of Zionism is consistent with his philosophy rather than a sign of his failure to apply his own thinking to the Israeli case. At the same time, any problems that we might find in Levinas's application of his philosophy to Zionism do not disqualify the entirety of his work.

In the first part of this chapter, I will discuss Levinas's conception of the relationship between ethics and politics and explain his defense of the State of Israel. In the second part, I will show that, in line with his philosophy, Levinas voiced strong criticism of that state—criticism often overlooked or underanalyzed in the scholarship. In the last part of the chapter, I will examine the main weakness of Levinas's Zionism, namely, the patent Hegelianism that clashes with a philosophy that claims to refute Hegel.

A Defense of the State of Israel

Levinas's defense of Zionism should be understood in the context of his general conception of non-indifferent justice, or the relationship between ethics and politics. For Levinas, this notion is illustrated in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, and in particular in 1 Samuel 8, Deuteronomy 17:14–20, and their Talmudic commentaries, which deal with kingship. In 1 Samuel 8, the Israelites ask the judge and prophet Samuel to appoint a king. Samuel, who has tried to establish a hereditary dynasty of judges, is displeased and turns to God, who explains that the Israelites are not rejecting Samuel's authority but God's, as has been the case since the day God took them out of Egypt. God commands Samuel to let the Israelites have their way, but first to warn them about the misdeeds and exactions they can expect from a king should they

stubbornly persist in demanding an earthly ruler. Deuteronomy 17:14–20 provides a set of rules and strictures to be observed by any future king, so as to prevent the offenses described by Samuel.[7] The biblical texts express, therefore, "the idea of a power that does not abuse its powers" (ADV 210; BTV 178)—that is, the notion that a dangerous and perhaps undesirable political power should be strictly limited by ethical concerns. The Talmud, however, interprets these same texts in a Hobbesian way (ADV 216; BTV 183), defining political power as necessarily violent and legitimately stripped of ethical concerns. Levinas raises the question of whether this shrinking of the ethical sphere is ever justifiable: "Would the excesses of power be justified when it is a question of assuming the task of the survival of a people among the nations, or of a person among his fellow men?" (ADV 210; BTV 178). In other words, the biblical and Talmudic conception of kingship embodies the problem of justice seen as a restriction of both politics and ethics left to themselves.

Levinas's discussion in "The State of Caesar and the State of David" outlines two directive ideas. The first is that merciful justice, seen as a limitation of both ethics and politics, is in its very concreteness the best for which one can hope, not in the sense of the minimum evil but in the sense of the very materialization of ethics. As Levinas writes, "The Law entering the world requires an education, protection, and consequently a history and a State; . . . politics is the path of this long patience and these great precautions" (ADV 211; BTV 179). Therefore, justice as it is described in the biblical and Talmudic texts has a messianic function: "The purpose of the State of David remains [Messianic] Deliverance. . . . This political world must, therefore, remain related to the ideal world. . . . The political action of each passing day begins in an eternal midnight and derives from a nocturnal contact with the Absolute" (ADV 213; BTV 181). Put differently, the utopia of ethics does not disappear in justice, understood as some ratio of ethics to politics. On the contrary, justice is the only way that this utopia can be realized. The second directive idea of the text is that the aim of justice is the survival of a people or of a person. Ethics aims not at survival but at sacrificial responsibility. Justice is about survival.

It is in the framework of these two ideas, which together encapsulate most of his political thinking, that Levinas expresses his views on Zionism. For him, the modern State of Israel has the same goal as the "State of David," viewed not as a historical kingdom but as a conception of justice elaborated in the Bible and its commentaries (DL 131; DF 91). *Pace* Derrida and Caygill, this does not exactly mean that Israel "*commits itself* to being *not only* what it also is, in fact and by law—that is a State like any other" (A 140; A' 77), or

that it is "more than any nation-state, and its revealed ethical mission exceeds the limits of their violent histories."[8] For Levinas, the modern State of Israel is as national and violent as any other state, but it is meant to reenact the *specific* form of justice conceptualized in the Bible and later in the Talmud as a path to redemption or as redemption itself. As he writes in 1951, this form of justice embodies specific social laws concerned with "sordid questions of food, work and shelter" (DL 305; DF 218). Therefore, the modern State of Israel is not more just than other states—France, for instance, also realizes justice through its motto of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"[9]—but it manifests Israel's "particularism" by means of its respect for the social laws formulated in the Bible and the Talmud (ADV 210; BTV 178): "The State of Israel is the first opportunity [for the Jews] to move into history by bringing about a just world. . . . The sacrifices and works which the realization of justice invites men to make give body once more to the spirit that animated the prophets and the Talmud" (DL 230; DF 164). One can smile at Levinas's emphatic naivete when he writes, "An Israeli experiences the famous touch of God in his social dealings" (DL 305; DF 218). However, he seems honestly convinced that the State of Israel "embraces the teaching of the prophets" (DL 366; DF 263), namely, cares for the poor, the widow, and the orphan.

In Levinas's telling, the State of Israel realizes justice like all states, but at the same time it manifests a *particular* version of justice, namely, the prophetic vision of social solidarity, a "society in which man is not exploited, a society in which men are equal, a society such as the first founders of kibbutzim wanted it" (QLT 141; NTR 66).[10] For Levinas, this means that the State of Israel is *inventing* something "unheard of" (ADV 220; BTV 187), a special blend of old ideas and new realities. The modern State of Israel is the patient elaboration of a "monotheistic politics" (ADV 219; BTV 186)—a politics that perceives the trace of God in the face of the other. This monotheistic or "messianic" (NLT 63; NewTR 95) politics is both that defined in the Torah and that realized in the modern State of Israel.[11]

This particularistic component of the State of Israel comes together with its second and universal component: justice makes survival possible. As mentioned earlier, Levinas suggests that the enlargement of political power and, hence, the restriction of ethics are legitimized by the "task of survival." Survival is a universal need fulfilled through political stability and peace (PP 339–340; PP' 162–163). Levinas does not mention a right of self-preservation, but neither in "The State of Caesar and the State of David" nor in many other texts does he avoid the reference to Hobbes: "Although Israel would see itself as descended from an irreducible fraternity, it is aware of the

temptation, within itself and around it, of the war which pits everyone against everyone" (ADV 216; BTV 183). The state is the cause of but also the answer to wars and destruction. As a result, one of the main concerns of the modern State of Israel is to "ensure a refuge for those who are persecuted" (ADV 220; BTV 187). This notion is emphasized in the 1979 essay "Politics After!" written after the visit of President Sadat to Israel in which Levinas recalls the nineteenth-century Jewish populations of eastern Europe, "exposed to persecutions and pogroms" (ADV 225; BTV 192), and twentieth-century antisemitism and Nazism. As Levinas writes in the 1981 introduction to *Beyond the Verse*, the "millennial history of outrages and tears, of permanent insecurity and of the shedding of real, warm blood . . . is where the concrete cause and real *raison d'être* of Zionism lies" (ADV 13; BTV xvi).

It follows, according to Levinas, that if the modern State of Israel is strong—and it is necessarily so because it is a political power—it is also weak because it was born from the suffering of European Jewry, and, "its back to the wall, or the sea" (ADV 224; BTV 191), it is still menaced by "its neighbors, undisputed nations, rich in natural allies, and surrounded by their lands" (ADV 226; BTV 193). The State of Israel gets its legitimacy not from any so-called need for an "espace vital," which Levinas never recognized as a right (DL 32; DF 17), but from its being born for self-defense.[12] As he says in the oft-mentioned interview that followed the 1982 massacres at Sabra and Shatila, "there is a place for a defense . . . I'd call such a defense a politics, but a politics that's ethically necessary" (IEP 3; EP 292).[13] The limitation of ethics, which ensures survival, has an ethical meaning because it is only through survival that ethics can be manifested. The modern State of Israel allows a survival that is necessary for the implementation of its specific justice.

A Criticism of the State of Israel

It would be easy to argue at this point that Levinas's defense of the State of Israel is founded on a fantasized version of that country, only remotely connected to its empirical reality. An anecdote related in Malka's biography of Levinas underlines the distance between Levinas's conception of the State of Israel and its phenomenal counterpart—and highlights Levinas's surprise and disapproval when confronted with the latter: "There had also been another trip to Israel, to Be'er-Sheva in 1978, for a conference on Martin Buber. . . . Afterwards, the group went to visit a Bedouin settlement in the suburbs of Be'er-Sheva, and when the guide, before letting the participants disembark,

explained that the Bedouins were required to burn their tents if they wanted to be eligible to receive stone houses from the government, Levinas remained on the bus. 'It's colonialism!' he cursed."[14]

However, Levinas had very early voiced reservations about the dangers inherent in the limitation of ethics, which was a necessary part of the Israeli political project, and, in particular, the risk of developing an *idolatry of the land*. In his letter to Blanchot of May 21, 1948, he notes ironically, "Isn't it magnificent, Jewish soldiers and Jewish peasants? And thus a culture that would be young, rerooted in the soil, 'healthy' as they say, concrete, patriotic."[15] By contrast, as already emphasized in the previous chapter, "The Jewish man discovers man before discovering landscapes and towns. . . . He understands the world on the basis of the Other rather than the whole of being according to the earth. He is in a sense exiled on this earth, as the psalmist says, and he finds a meaning to the earth on the basis of a human society. This is not an analysis of the contemporary Jewish soul; it is the literal teaching of the Bible" (DL 40–41; DF 22–23).

As we saw in the context of Levinas's criticism of nature's rootedness (Chapter 6) and in his rejection of Weil's conception of particularism fixed in the soil (Chapter 5)—both possibly leading to fascism—for Levinas, the ethics expressed in Judaism consists of cutting all roots and turning to the other person. As he said in 1992, in an interview with Ephraim Meir and Jacob Golomb about the meaning of Zionism, "My view is not similar to those who think that man grew out of the soil. I don't see in the soil the highest value. There is a distance from the soil and, even more, the origin of space is in speech" (IEL 89). If so, there is a danger that the new Israelis, building their State on a particular piece of land, will ascribe too much importance to that land. In the second half of the 1982 interview about Sabra and Shatila, which is very seldom quoted, the point is made starkly: "I'd like to mention another Talmudic text, for the benefit of those who confuse Zionism—or the relationship to the world and to human beings that its message entails—with some sort of commonplace mystique of the earth as native soil. . . . The argument . . . is remarkable. A person is more holy than a land, even a holy land, since, faced with an affront made to a person, this holy land appears in its nakedness to be but stone and wood" (IEP 7–8; EP 296–297).

This idea was already developed in the 1965 Talmudic reading "Promised Land or Permitted Land?" (QLT 113–148; NTR 51–69), in which Levinas analyzes a Talmudic extract dealing with the reactions of the spies sent by Moses to scout the land of Canaan in Numbers 13–14. In the biblical story, ten of the twelve spies return with a message of dismay: the land is rich and

fertile, but the Canaanites are too strong, too powerful, too well equipped—the land cannot be taken. Only two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, try to convince the people that with God's help they can indeed conquer the land. The unexpected idea that emerges from Levinas's reading of this story and its commentaries is that the ten "bad" spies who, on the face of it, let their fear overwhelm their faith are in fact righteous people. While their hesitancy is eventually proved wrong, they are not evil. Indeed, their warnings are meant to prevent the Israelites from turning the land into an object of adoration. They are motivated by a desire to "shame the worshippers of Land"—namely, "the Zionists of that time" (QLT 121; NTR 56). Levinas repeats the word "Zionists" in a rare combination of hesitation and assertion: "[The explorers] have decided, in the name of truth, to confound the Zionists. Please excuse these anachronisms, these excesses of language. . . . Let us be fearless then. . . . There is, then, a worship of the earth and a shame attached to this worship, and I am sorry that Domenach is not here, for he would have seen that there are Jews who, exactly like Christians, want land, but sense some shame in this desire, in this covetousness" (QLT 121; NTR 56).

Therefore, there is a risk, in modern Zionism, to worship the land, to grow roots, to "be held fast" as Levinas wrote in *On Escape*—and thereby to forget the word of God, namely, the social laws and the responsibility for the other which are the purpose of the Jewish Bible (DL 36; DF 19) and of the State of Israel.

Levinas notes that the ten spies are concerned by an "excess of justice" (QLT 127; NTR 59). To explain what this means, he offers three ways of understanding what the spies felt when they saw the richness of the land and the power and might of its inhabitants.[16] According to the first, the ten spies saw the big, strong native Canaanites and were scared. These recently freed slaves, newly liberated from the "Egyptian ghettos" (QLT 130; NTR 60), made a quick comparison between the obvious might of the Canaanites and their own obvious weakness and drew a reasonable conclusion.

It is the second and third suggestions that are of interest here. In the second, Levinas suggests that when they saw the Canaanites, the spies saw the future of Israel. They saw what would become of their children and grandchildren in the land of Canaan. They saw powerful people who—according to the Talmudic interpretation—built awesome cities and dug deep holes wherever they put their feet. They saw Zionists, modern Israelis. And they refused that future, fearing that these builders, these Zionists, would be "the end of the Jewish people" (QLT 131; NTR 61). And in the third, the spies saw the land so beautifully built and cultivated by the Canaanites and concluded

that they had no right to conquer what had been made by others. Even the ancestry of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, buried here in this land—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who spoke with God and received His promise—did not give them the right to expropriate other people, no matter who or what these people were, or what they did or might do (QLT 131–135; NTR 60–63).[17]

Through this discussion, Levinas draws attention to the risks implied by the existence of the state. That is, despite the fact that the State of Israel serves an ethical purpose and is, indeed, necessary for the survival of the Jewish people, it nonetheless puts Jewish existence in physical and spiritual danger because it entails an embrace of ontology—idolatry of the land, rootedness, conquest, and destruction. In an essay written a few years before "Promised Land or Permitted Land?" titled "The Light and the Dark," Levinas already underlined the risk of becoming accustomed to violence. Emphasizing that Israel was weak and surrounded by enemies, he wrote, "For the weak, throwing himself into the violence of combat, risks being accustomed to this violence which he had to accept momentarily. Will he abandon one day the political and warlike paths that he has chosen for a time? He finds himself caught up in a world he wanted to destroy. To engage unequivocally one's absolute principles in a war or a political struggle is to betray these principles in some way" (DL 320; DF 228–229).

The State of Israel is in danger of "betraying" itself in forgetting to realize its own principles—its specific version of justice. Therefore, when Levinas writes, "Justice as the *raison d'être* of the State: that is religion. . . . The State of Israel will be religious because of the intelligence of its great books which it is not free to forget. It will be religious through the very action that establishes it as a State. It will be religious or it will not be at all" (DL 306; DF 219), he is not calling for Israel to become a theocratic state. Rather, he is saying that the essence of the State of Israel is a particular form of justice and that, should it fail to realize that justice, it will not be the *State of Israel* but something else. The greatest risk taken by the State is that it will miss the opportunity to be itself. In the "Messianic Texts," written in the early 1960s and published in *Difficult Freedom*, Levinas writes something that can be read either as wishful thinking or as a warning: "This is also why the necessary commitment [*engagement*] is so difficult for the Jew; this is why the Jew cannot commit himself [*s'engager*] without also disengaging himself [*se désengager*], even when he commits himself to a just cause; the Jew can never march off to war with banner unfurled, to the triumphal strains of military music and with the blessing of a church" (DL 117; DF 80).

Some will say that this emphasis on the possible failings of the State of Israel falls short of condemning Israel's actual policies toward the Palestinians.

It must be noted, however, that most of Levinas's writings and remarks on Zionism were composed at a time when Israel's main concern was the ongoing state of hostility with the Arab *states*—namely, before the 1979 peace treaty with Egypt and, hence, before the Palestinians were left alone in their struggle against Israel. By this I do not mean to suggest that there was no violence between Israelis and Palestinians before 1979, but we should recall that it was not unusual in Europe at that time to consider Israeli-Palestinian violence as occurring within the context of the larger conflict between the many Arab states ("undisputed nations" [ADV 226; BTV 193]) and Israel. This is the background of Levinas's writings on Zionism, not the occupation of Palestinian villages (though we begin to see a shift in this direction in the beginning of the 1980s, when he first mentions "Palestinian nationalism, and . . . its just complaints").[18] It is therefore against that background of conventional war that Levinas feared Israel would "betray" its own principles of "prophetic moral codes and the idea of its peace" (ADV 228; BTV 195), in worshipping the land and becoming accustomed to war.

The First Lebanon War and the Sabra and Shatila massacres of September 1982 (perpetrated by Christian Phalangists allowed by the Israeli army to enter the camps) apparently induced a change in Levinas's views toward violence vis-à-vis the State of Israel.[19] This change is perceptible in a 1986 interview with Francois Poirié. When asked about Israel, Levinas answers cautiously, "I would only say that now, under the circumstances, a State is the only form in which Israel—the people and the culture—can survive." When pressed to say more, he refuses: "I will say to you that there are many things about which I cannot speak because I am not in Israel."[20] Caygill critically wonders about "the meaning of this silence that is professed but not maintained,"[21] but this silence *was* maintained: almost everything that Levinas ever said about the State of Israel was said well before the period of this interview,[22] except perhaps for the 1992 interview in Hebrew with Ephraim Meir and Yaakov Golomb, in which Levinas said, "It is not within my ability to provide a new point of view. Zionism is the survival of Judaism, not a nationalism whatsoever" (IEL 89). We must note that in neither the 1986 nor the 1992 interview does Levinas mention the "messianic" or "monotheistic" essence of the State of Israel, stressing instead the realist necessity of a state for Jewish survival.

Universalism and Hegelianism

We can sum up Levinas's positions on Zionism as he expressed them between the 1950s and the late 1970s in a few words. The modern State of Israel has a

double meaning: it is the phenomenal realization of the social laws expressed in the prophetic narrative of the Bible; and it ensures the survival of the Jewish people, after fully a third of the Jews alive before World War II were murdered by Nazi Germany. These two meanings, or purposes, are the two sides of the same coin and cannot be separated. Indeed, the Jewish people must survive if they are to realize the teaching of the prophets. The complementarity of justice and survival, misunderstood or overlooked by the "bad" spies of Numbers 13, sounds on the one hand trivial—survival is undoubtedly a necessary condition for anything—and on the other hand paradoxical: survival entails an ontological concern (a care for the self), whereas non-indifferent justice is infused by altruistic ethics. As a result, the survival of the State of Israel is the condition for its "messianic" achievement, but it puts this achievement at risk. Yet this paradox does not imply that Israel is "suspended . . . between ideality and reality," between "an ideal where ethical responsibility would be incarnated in social justice, and . . . a really existing state where justice is endlessly compromised by violence."[23] For Levinas, the modern State of Israel is not an ideal but a reality through and through, undoubtedly violent (because its political function is to ensure survival) and at the same time meant to realize social justice. To put it differently, ethical concerns cannot be realized without the support of political violence, which endangers these same ethical concerns. Therefore, there are not two "Israels," an ideal one and a phenomenological one, as there could be from some kind of Platonic perspective. There is only one State of Israel, which is real and self-contradictory, or, more exactly, which exists thanks to being a contradiction between justice and survival. Moreover, that contradiction is double because, as we recall, justice itself is a ratio of ethics and politics, namely, an "internal contradiction" (ADV 217; BTV 184).

The contradiction between justice and survival is a form of the contradiction between the universal and the particular, where both justice and survival play both roles. As already emphasized, Levinas sees in the State of Israel the realization of a particularism—the just society demanded by the prophets for the people of Israel—and in survival, or "perseverance in being," a universal necessity. However, he also consistently stressed the "obvious equation between Israel and the universal" (DL 313; DF 223) and repeated that his philosophical aim consisted of extricating "the universal intentions from the apparent particularism within which facts tied to the national history of Israel, improperly so-called, enclose us" (QLT 15; NTR 5).[24] In other words, prophetic justice constitutes a universal value and a universal goal, not at all restricted to a specific national history. In that context, it is the survival of the

Jewish people that can be seen as a particular enterprise of perseverance in being: "The fundamental idea of political Zionism . . . is the necessity for the Jewish people, in peace with its neighbors, not to continue being a minority in its political structure. . . . [T]his is necessary—a necessity that I call, precisely, historical—in order for the attack and murder of Jews in the world to lose their character of an incontrollable and unpunished phenomenon" (ADV 14; BTV xvii).

Levinas's relentless concern with the opposition between the universal and the particular shows how difficult it was for him to escape Hegel, whom he called "probably the greatest thinker of all time" (DL 332; DF 238). Levinas's entire project, similar to that of Rosenzweig, can be thought of as a refutation of Hegel's conception of totality and the assimilation of alterity. As Levinas told Salomon Malka, "It is the critique of the idea of totality in the *Star of Redemption* that I purely and simply took up again. It is the rupture with Hegel."[25] However, he also stressed that "a philosopher settling his view on Hegel is like a weaver installing a loom—a preliminary task to all subsequent work."[26] Therefore, from the very first pages of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas makes clear that his description of the openness of subjectivity toward (and for) the other is an objection and response to Hegel (TI 25–26; TI' 36–37). He explains that contrary to Hegel's understanding of the development of Spirit, the ethical dimension of human existence transcends totality, is "otherwise" than the movement of identification—meaning that history "cannot claim to totalize the same and the other" (TI 30; TI' 40).[27]

It happens, however, that if ethics transcends totality and, hence, refutes Hegel's development of history, non-indifferent justice, as the paradoxical relationship between ethics and politics, never really escapes the Hegelian dialectic. As Derrida famously argued, "Levinas is very close to Hegel, much closer than he admits, and at the very moment when he is apparently opposed to Hegel in the most radical fashion" (ED 147; WD 99).[28] As the case of the State of Israel shows, for Levinas historical reality consists of the contradiction between the universal and particular. In formulations that do not hide their Hegelian influences, he posits that "Zionism is finally revealing itself, on the scale of substantial Judaism, as a great ambition of Spirit" (ADV 224; BTV 191). It is striking to see how he fights with his own Hegelianism when he argues that "Zionism, supposedly a purely political doctrine, thus carries in the depths of its being the inverted image of a certain universality, while also correcting that image" (ADV 226; BTV 193). Similarly, he cannot escape Hegel when he writes that

> the messianic sensibility inseparable from the knowledge of being chosen . . . would be irremediably lost . . . if the solution of the State of Israel did not represent an attempt to reunite the irreversible acceptance of universal history with the necessarily particularist messianism. This universalist particularism (which is not Hegel's concrete universal) can be found in the aspirations of Zionism, and associated with a recognition of History and in collaboration with it. . . . It is in the preservation of this universalist particularism, at the heart of History in which it is henceforth to be found, that I see the importance of the Israeli solution for the History of Israel. (DL 138; DF 96)

However much Levinas asserts—without demonstrating—that his "universalist particularism" is not Hegel's concrete universal, his use of the notions of "reunion," "universal history," "necessity," "universal," and "particular" are Hegelian. His justification of the violence of the state and his understanding of the necessary contradiction between this violence and ethical meanings are also very close to Hegel. Of course, violence in Levinas is never as triumphalist as in Hegel; the other is not forgotten, and King David, who made war during the day, spends his nights studying the ethical principles of the Torah (ADV 213; BTV 181). However, during the day, he made war! Even more: "What is most important is the idea that not only does the essence of the state not contradict the absolute order, but it is called by it" (ADV 212–213; BTV 180). However painful and unwanted war can be, however distraught and anguished the ethical warrior, however good and desired the elusive peace, violence is an unavoidable step in the "search for the absolute and for purity" (DL 230; DF 164).

The danger of seduction by the Hegelian dialectic is that it can be used to legitimize anything, since anything can find its place in the logic of contradiction. Levinas does not always avoid this pitfall, as when he mentions the "painful necessities of the occupation" (ADV 220; BTV 187). However, this is the same dialectic that allows him to say: "To shelter the other in one's own land or home, to tolerate the presence of the landless and homeless on the 'ancestral soil,' so jealously, so meanly loved—is that the criterion of humanness? Unquestionably so" (AHN 114; ITN 98). As with Hegel, who was claimed by both conservatives and radicals, all of whom selected from his work the "authentic" Hegel and rejected those portions where, in their view, Hegel failed to be sufficiently Hegelian, Levinas's writings can be read as a defense or as a critique of Zionism—and each reader may decide where Levinas is not sufficiently Levinassian. However, like Hegel's

philosophy, Levinas's understanding of Zionism was *both* conservative and critical, because Levinas believed that the political reality was contradictory in essence—showing that after two hundred years of refutations, the Hegelian dialectic was indeed still very much alive, as will become even clearer in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 8

Hegelian Dialectics and the Question of Messianism

The "Messianic Texts" of *Difficult Freedom*, presented as lectures at the third and fourth Colloques des intellectuels juifs in 1960 and 1961, were Levinas's first published Talmudic readings. Levinas's talk on Franz Rosenzweig, "Between Two Worlds," presented at the second Colloque in 1959, was also subsequently published in *Difficult Freedom*. These texts, which reflect Levinas's interests at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s—that is, around the time that *Totality and Infinity* appeared in print—set the tone for the entire series of Talmudic readings. By this I do not mean that Levinas's thinking in the readings is monolithic from *Difficult Freedom* through the *New Talmudic Readings*. I mean that from 1959 to 1989, Levinas develops, in the readings, a succession of answers to the questions raised in these texts. These questions deal with two main political concepts, the law and history, examined in the "Messianic Texts" and "Between Two Worlds" through an inquiry into Jewish eschatology. They reflect Levinas's dialogue with Hegel, a dialogue that is explicitly acknowledged in these texts but that is conducted there chiefly through Levinas's replies to Rosenzweig and Scholem—both major Hegelian thinkers. Therefore, Levinas's arguments for and against Hegel are perceptible in his treatment of Rosenzweig's and Scholem's own disputes with the master of dialectics.

In this chapter, I will first analyze Levinas's conceptions of the law and of history. I will then show that in his understanding of messianism, Levinas did not completely succeed in rejecting all dialectics.

Messianism and the Law

It has only seldom been noticed that the "Messianic Texts" of *Difficult Freedom* constitute a reply to Scholem's famous essay, "Toward an Understanding

of the Messianic Era," which had recently been published in *Eranos*[1]—even though Levinas indicates as much in a note on the first page of his commentary (I will discuss this note in more detail later in the chapter).[2] Like Scholem's, Levinas's text deals with the meanings of messianism in Judaism and ends by connecting messianism and Zionism. However, the two texts differ in both style and intention. Scholem's work is historical and aimed at showing the importance of the messianic imagination in the social and religious development of Judaism. Levinas's essay was his first philosophical exegesis of Talmudic material. As he said in the introduction to his oral lecture at the third Colloque, such an "explication de texte" had not often been attempted.[3] It was meant to display "the positive meaning of the messianism of the rabbis" (DL 90; DF 297), namely, the radical implications of Jewish law. The arguments of both authors are sometimes extreme and hyperbolic, but they are utterly distinct.

In his essay, Scholem posits the essential difference between the Christian and Jewish perspectives on messianism as this: the former "conceives of redemption as an event in the spiritual and unseen realm, an event which is reflected in the soul, in the private world of each individual," while for the latter, redemption is "an event which takes place publicly, on the stage of history and within the community."[4] That is, Jewish messianism is "a public event realized in the community," never the "salvation of each individual soul."[5]

Yet for Scholem, the Jewish approach to messianism is not itself homogeneous. Scholem distinguishes between three interrelated forces in rabbinic Judaism—the conservative, restorative, and utopian. The conservative element is directed toward the present; it is particularly active in relation to halakhah or religious law, which deals with all areas of moral, social, and political life. The restorative element is directed toward a return to an ideal and imagined past, and the utopian element "aim(s) at a state of things that has never yet existed." In this context, claims Scholem, messianism is the product of a dialectic between the restorative and utopian impulses—a tension that finds its most extreme form in the opposition between apocalyptic eschatology, with its miracles, cataclysms, and even, in some cases, redemption through sin, and a more "rational" restorative tendency, famously embraced by Maimonides.[6] What is at stake in this opposition is partly the status of the law (halakhah) in messianic times. Under the apocalyptic, utopian perspective the messianic age means the end of the world, and therefore halakhah as we know it will be replaced by something else. Under the restorative approach the messianic age is defined precisely by the (re)establishment of a Torah-observing polity. As Scholem puts it, for the rationalist Maimonides, in

messianic times "the binding force of the law does not cease and the lawful order of nature does not give way to any miracles."[7] In contrast, "there is an anarchic element in the very nature of Messianic utopianism. . . . The total novelty for which utopianism hopes enters thus into a momentous tension with the world of bonds and laws which is the world of *Halakhah*."[8]

In the footnote mentioned above, which appears at the end of the second paragraph of the "Messianic Texts," Levinas writes (I quote the entire footnote):

> In a recent article published in *Eranos*, Mr. Scholem, evincing an admirable historical science and a remarkable intuition in the systematic meaning uncovered in the texts studied (an intuition that sometimes fails other historians), distinguishes between apocalyptic messianism, which is above all popular in form, and the rationalist messianism of the rabbis, which culminates in the famous page on the messianic eras which Maimonides gives in his Mishneh Torah at the end of the chapter relating to the laws of political power. Not everything has been said, however, as Scholem sometimes seems to think, on the subject of the rationalist signature of this messianism—as if rationalization meant only the negation of the miraculous and as if, in the realm of the spirit, we could abandon one set of values without setting other values in motion. It is this positive meaning of the messianism of the rabbis that I want to show in my commentary. (DL 89–90; DF 296–297)

It is therefore by way of criticizing Scholem's project that Levinas defines his own endeavor.[9] Contrary to Scholem, who, according to Levinas, was content with saying that the rational rabbinic trend opposed the popular belief in apocalyptic catastrophes and miracles, he, Levinas, will explain the positive values of the messianism of the rabbis. More, it will soon become clear that these values, which are manifest in the interrelation between ethics and politics described in the readings, constitute Levinas's own philosophy.

Here we must pause and emphasize that for Scholem, the tension was not in fact between a rabbinic rationalism and a popular belief in supernatural anarchy but between two trends in rabbinic Judaism—the apocalyptic, utopian messianism on the one hand and the more "rational" restorative messianism on the other. Scholem explicitly criticizes the "great Jewish scholars of the nineteenth and early twentieth century" who, because of "their concept of a purified and rational Judaism . . . left the claim of apocalyptic continuity

to a Christianity which, to their minds, gained nothing on that account."[10] Scholem calls "popular" some medieval beliefs in apocalyptic miracles, but he does not assert that rabbinic Judaism ever was or has become free from such beliefs. To the contrary: in Scholem's view, "many of the great men of *Halakhah* are completely entwined in the realm of popular apocalypticism when they come to speak of the redemption."[11] Moreover, he insists that even on the rational side of the divide between the different trends of rabbinic messianism, "the utopian content does not disappear entirely, but it is now only the intensive realization of a state which fundamentally and in its real essence can be already reached under the conditions of our time."[12]

Could Levinas have so misunderstood or misinterpreted Scholem as to believe that great scholar distinguished between two distinct kinds of messianism—the popular and the rabbinic, the latter being associated with the position of Maimonides? Rather, I argue that Levinas's reading of Scholem actually reveals his objective in the "Messianic Texts," and, in effect, in his entire work. First, Levinas follows Maimonides in assigning the highest authority to the Law, understood as both the order of nature and religious law. Nothing, not even the advent of the Messiah, can induce a reduction or a transformation of the Law: to borrow from Scholem, "the binding force of the law [will] not cease and the lawful order of nature [will] not give way."[13] In this, Levinas absolutely rejects the antinomianism of the so-called "popular" apocalyptic messianism. Then, by a unique twist that colors his entire philosophy, Levinas finds *in the Law itself*—now understood as the call to responsibility for the other, namely, *ethics*—redemptive, catastrophic, and even anarchic elements. It is the absolute subjection to heteronomy that contains, in itself, the ferment of anarchic disruption.[14] Contrary to the cataclysmic imaginings depicted by Scholem, Levinas affirms both that messianism never goes beyond the Law *and* that messianism consists in the fact that the Law goes beyond itself—*beyond being*. As Agata Bielik-Robson puts it,

> As a redemptive force, the Law wants something *more*: it wants to transgress the cycle of coming in and out of being. . . . The war on Being waged by the Law of the Torah does not play according to the ontological rules, where destruction means simply annihilation, but imposes its own rules—thanks to which our existence can be wrenched from the snares of ontological totality . . . Levinas's *differentia specifica* consists precisely in his use of the antinomian technics in the defense of the Law: all his effort goes in protecting the Law against

> "mythic" corruption, i.e. against its fall into a closed, mechanical system, imitating the laws of Being-Nature.[15]

In the "Messianic Texts," Levinas displays his "antinomian technics in the defense of the Law" by emphasizing the difference between messianic times and the "world to come." The former will be the realization of the People of Israel's political hopes (the end of dispersion, the return of an anointed king), while the latter will "exist on another level. . . . [It] concerns a personal and intimate order, lying outside the achievements of history that wait for humanity to be united in a collective destiny. . . . The personal salvation of men, the discreet and intimate relationship between man and God, escapes the indiscretion of the prophets" (DL 92; DF 60–61).

The distinction between these two events or levels—messianism and the world to come—is discussed by the Talmudic sages and corresponds to the tension underlined by Scholem between restorative and utopian forces in Judaism (hope in the return of the king versus hope for an ideal state that has never previously existed). However, Levinas's commentary emphasizes the idea of a rupture or dissociation *within utopian hope*, and as essential to this hope. Messianic hope goes beyond its own imagination, as it were: "What is interesting is the very category of an event which has come from *outside*. It matters little whether this outside is the action of God or a political revolution that is distinct from morality" (DL 97; DF 65). As he also explains in the opening of his lecture at the third Colloque, "Is announcing the Messiah not, in a way, resorting to a morality external to human beings? Is my salvation, then, not stronger than me?"[16] In other words, for Levinas, the Talmudic discussions are significant not because they can help us identify the "major trends"[17] in Judaism but because they show us that the notion of "outside" is intrinsic to Judaism's spirit. Levinas hardly hides here his critique of Scholem: "It is also important to be on one's guard against the simplistic use of antitheses indulged in by thinkers anxious to sum up the apparent options within Jewish thought" (DL 96; DF 64). What counts is not that phenomenologically, or historically, or sociologically Judaism embraces different points of view. What is important is what is revealed by interpreting these points of view together: Judaism, seen as a whole, aims at *exteriority*.[18]

Levinas expresses the overflowing of the Law *against itself* (against being) through his understanding of the position of the Talmudic sage Samuel, for whom "spiritual life, as such, cannot be separated from economic solidarity with the other—the *giving* is in some way the original movement of spiritual life. It will not be suppressed by the messianic outcome, which constitutes

its complete blossoming, its greatest purity and its highest joys" (DL 93–94; DF 62). The Law—that is, the ethical requirement to take responsibility for the widow, the poor, and the orphan—will not disappear in the messianic era; indeed, it may even reach its full expression only then. Levinas, of course, recognizes the problems raised by this claim: if those living in the messianic age still include the widow, the poor, and the orphan, then the Messiah is a meaningless concept—or worse, "the poor should survive so that the rich will have the messianic joy of nourishing them" (DL 93–94; DF 62). His response is that "we must think more radically: the other is always the poor, poverty defines the poor as other, and the relation with the other will always be an offering and a gift" (DL 94; DF 62). Even if messianic times bring about the end of poverty, there will still be others, who are poor *by definition*. The full realization of the Law in messianism reveals only that the Law can never be fully realized, because there is always an other. Or put differently: the actualization of the Law shows the Law's inherent inadequacy, and by this, the Law's *anarchic character*. This is what Levinas sums up a few pages later when he writes, "We must pass through interpretation to surpass interpretation" (DL 100; DF 67). Interpretation is here a metonymy of the Law, which exists only though its interpretations.[19]

This understanding of the Law is influenced, in large part, by Rosenzweig. In "Between Two Worlds," Levinas explains that we owe to Rosenzweig "a notion of religion that is totally different from the one that secularism combats" (DL 261–262; DF 187), namely, a notion of religion in which Law is love. In other words, "the eminent role of the *Mitzvah* [or commandment] in Judaism signifies not a moral formalism, but the living presence of divine love that is eternally renewed. And consequently, through the commandment, it signifies the experience of an eternal present" (DL 267; DF 191). In such a context, for Rosenzweig as read by Levinas the human response to God's love is not a symmetrical love of God but a love of the other person: Revelation, namely, God's love for us, leads to the Redemption manifested in ethical love. Levinas underlines that for Rosenzweig, redemption signifies "the fact that the *I* learns to say *you* to a *him*" (DL 267; DF 192). His conclusion is clear: "Redemption is the work of Man" (DL 268; DF 192).

Returning to the "Messianic Texts" and to Levinas's idiosyncratic vocabulary, this means that

> The Messiah is Me; to be Me is to be the Messiah. . . . All persons are Messiah . . . Messianism is no more than this apogee in being, a centralizing, concentration or twisting back on itself of the Self. And

> concretely this means that each person ought to act as if he or she were the Messiah. Messianism is therefore not the certainty of the coming of a man who stops History. It is my power to bear the suffering of all. It is the moment when I recognize this power and my universal responsibility. (DL 129–130; DF 89–90)

Note that the notion of sacrifice of the ego, who bears the suffering of all and has infinite responsibility, will be developed later on and become the central motif of *Otherwise than Being*. However, it is already there, in embryonic form, in this description of the Messiah.

It must be emphasized that Rosenzweig's conception of the Law as love and redemption is less anarchic than Levinas's. More exactly, for Rosenzweig, the Law does not imply substitution or sacrifice—or any part of the Levinassian notion of "bearing the suffering of all." It does not entail a suspension of being; on the contrary, it makes redemptive life possible within being, while being at the same time transcendent and awaited. For Rosenzweig, the Law allows for the eternal survival of the Jewish people. In obeying the Law, the people has "cancelled the conflict between Creation and Revelation in itself. It lives in its own redemption. It anticipated eternity for itself. In the cycle of its year the future is the motive power . . . the present elapses, not because the past shoves it forward, but because the future drags it along. . . . But the people still remains the eternal people. . . . For eternity is precisely this, that between the present moment and the completion time may no longer claim a place, but as early as in the today every future is graspable."[20] As Bielik-Robson emphasizes, in *The Star of Redemption* the Law "is thus conceived of as a device that simultaneously *uses* apocalyptic energy and infinitely *delays* the ultimate fulfilment of apocalypsis as the total destruction of the world. . . . [The Law is] a *suspended destruction of the creaturely world* in clear reference to Hegel's famous definition of work as an activity dialectically mediating between the preservation and annihilation of its object. The *works* of Law . . . have nothing grandiose, sublime or lordly about them: they are non-spectacular acts of reparation."[21]

Bielik-Robson is undoubtedly right in pointing out that in Rosenzweig the Law constitutes a delay and is "designed to interrupt, arrest and attenuate the apocalyptic fire, to prevent both the subject and the world from annihilation."[22] The Law in Rosenzweig is a necessary instrument of communal existence in a present stretched toward the future. Redemption consists of the overcoming of time through a "we" that expresses itself in worship—that is, in praise and song: "The We is eternal: before this triumphant cry of eternity,

death is hurled down into the nothing. Life becomes immortal in the eternal song of praise of Redemption."[23]

It seems to me, however, that Bielik-Robson understates a parallel development in Levinas when she argues that in Levinas's philosophy "the destructive force of revelation gets the upper hand, and instead of an intensified life happily breaking out of the ontological cycle marked by the rule of death, it leads the subject to the very gates of death, demanding from him a radical sacrifice of substitution."[24] Of course, Levinas's Law, understood as the ethical interruption of being, is radical and apocalyptic. It entails an absolute sacrifice and destroys being (or points to beyond-being). However, the entire purpose of the Talmudic readings is to show that the Law can never be actualized in its pure anarchic form. The Law cannot appear in the world without interpretation—namely, without processes of mediation, transformation, and delay. It has no phenomenal existence outside of justice, understood as a ratio of ethics and politics. Therefore, while Levinas's Law is at first sight far more destructive than Rosenzweig's, this is tempered by the Talmudic system, namely, by the *différance* (to use Derrida's famous term) at work in the commentaries, which transforms the Law into *livable laws*. For instance, as we saw, Levinas asserts that the ego is the Messiah because it bears the suffering of all. However, he immediately moderates this "universal responsibility" by pointing out that, in the next verses of the Talmudic discussion (found in *Sanhedrin* 98b–99a), the Messiah is understood as double, as both king and rabbi: "A Messiah and a Vice-Messiah" (DL 130; DF 90). To put it simply, the universal responsibility of the ego is phenomenologically impossible. The apocalypse brought about by the anarchic Law—that is, by the sacrifice or substitution of the ego—is regulated and subdued through the balance between political power and rabbinic jurisdiction, which allows the Law to enter the world without destroying it.[25]

It is indisputable that Levinas's descriptions of the messianic ego have a Christian flavor, which has been widely noticed in the literature. In an illuminating article, David Brezis emphasizes that "passion, persecution, substitution, expiation, sacrifice of a subject meant to carry the Others' fault like the world's weight: all motifs that manifestly lead to the Christlike figure."[26] Moreover, if we accept Scholem's description of Jewish messianism as a public event realized in the community, such an internal and spiritual conception of the Messiah would not be essentially "Jewish."[27] For Brezis, however, Levinas tried to "rejudaize" Christianity, namely, to grasp, "behind the image of Christ, the fundamentally Jewish message of the ethical demand." Furthermore, continues Brezis, "inside the Talmud itself two trends of thought fight each other:

the first, which asserts the unconditional precedence of the assignation by the Other; and the second, which keeps this assignation at bay, limits it, and pragmatically reinserts it into the domain of reciprocity and common measure."[28] One can find in the Talmud itself a tension between the ethical and the political. The Talmud is concerned with non-indifferent justice.

Levinas's commentaries reflect the Talmudic ambivalence between ethical radicalism and pragmatic calculation and distribution. We should not, therefore, look at Levinas's descriptions of the messianic ego without considering the other side of the coin: the necessity of political messianism. As he writes, "The phenomenon of Haman (or Hitler) is placed in the perspective of messianism. Only repentance can cause salvation, but objective events of a political character produce this repentance which is both a manifestation of human freedom and a product of an external cause" (DL 107; DF 72). Levinas enlarges this point at length in *Beyond the Verse*, where, under the influence of Maimonides, he shows that the ethical Law needs the support of political laws: "The Messiah is king. The divine invests History and State rather than doing away with them. The end of History retains a political form" (ADV 213; BTV 180).

Let us emphasize that political messianism is not depicted here as a necessary evil that neutralizes the radicalism of the anarchic Law in order to establish peace but as the only possible way for the anarchic Law to be expressed in the world. In order to be effective in the world, the Law must at least partly abrogate its anarchism and submit to laws: "The divinity of the Law consists in entering the world other than as 'a great and strong wind (rending) the mountains and (breaking) in pieces the rocks,' other than as an 'earthquake,' other than as a 'fire' . . . the Law entering the world requires an education, protection, and consequently a history and a State" (ADV 210–211; BTV 178–179). In "Who Plays Last?" Levinas is no less explicit: "Roman legalism is the positive effect of its negativity" (ADV 85; BTV 66).

Messianism and History

The necessity of political transformations—which moderate the ethical messianism of the ego and give it a phenomenal foundation—must therefore be examined together with the place of history in Levinas's thought. Michel Vanni argues that "the notions of *eschatology, messianism* and *prophetism* are not used by Levinas in their usual theological sense . . . *eschatology* does not mean waiting for, or discoursing on the end of time, but the constant rupture

of historical time by the ethical dimension, which has a deeper meaning. *Messianism* does not mean waiting for the Messiah, but the salvation brought about by the Other facing the definitive involvement of the ego [*sujet*] in his or her existence. Finally, *prophetism* does not mean the vision or prediction of a future, but the inspiration of the ego [*sujet*] by the Other."[29] Messianism and prophetism here correspond to the individual and ethical conceptions of messianism in Levinas.[30] However, both in the "Messianic Texts" and in his later writings, and, in particular, in *Beyond the Verse*, Levinas insists on the messianic role of historical processes: "But the coming of the son of David demands, perhaps, that the union is made beforehand, the Western union—not straight away according to the law inspired by the love of the other man, but already on a preparatory basis according to the law where evil will give itself the appearance of good. A world organized entirely around the Law, which politically will have a hold over it. The necessity of a planetary West for the coming of the Messiah" (ADV 86; BTV 66–67).

These words suggest that there is a historical dimension to messianism, not only as a rupture of historical time but, quite the opposite, as a development of historical time, which is conceived by Levinas as entirely political: "The epoch of the Messiah can and must result from the political order that is allegedly indifferent to eschatology and preoccupied solely with the problems of the hour" (ADV 213; BTV 181). In other words, the moment of the Messiah's coming "is not politically indifferent, nor politically indeterminate" (ADV 73; BTV 55). More, this historical and political moment will occur in the "West." The Messiah will come when and where occidental values have prevailed.

I will leave the discussion of this last point for the end of this chapter and focus first on the different layers of Levinas's understanding of history. The nature and meaning of history was the trigger of the heated debate that followed Levinas's lecture on Rosenzweig at the second Colloque. In his comments following the lecture, Jean Wahl critiqued the last part of the talk, in which Levinas emphasized the non-historical essence of the Jewish people.[31] Wahl argued that Levinas "implicitly kept history" in the form of a Jewish "holy history."[32] Wahl then argued that the use of history to justify everything that happens in the world ought to be completely condemned, even in the form of holy history; and it should be condemned by everyone, not only by the Jews.

In his lecture, Levinas attacks the Hegelian "exaltation of the judgement of history, as the ultimate jurisdiction of every being, and the affirmation that history is the measure of all things" (DL 277–278; DF 199). According

to the Hegelian conception, "there is no eternal people liable to live free in the face of history . . . what would be eternal is the universal history itself, which inherits the heritage of dead peoples" (DL 278; DF 199). Within Hegelian logic, particularism is justified only in relation to a whole, and the particular cannot last forever; that which is finite by definition must come to an end (*tout ce qui est fini doit finir*) (DL 278; DF 199). However, Levinas follows Rosenzweig in arguing that Jewish existence does not receive its meaning from the march of History. Judaism, as a set of works and thoughts generated by real subjective intentions, is true independently of universal history. It gets its meaning from the intentions of its authors and not from "the totality into which it is inserted" (DL 279; DF 200).

Levinas's critique of Hegel reaffirms Rosenzweig's rejection of the Hegelian totality—a critique that also permeates *Totality and Infinity*. Rosenzweig argues that while the Christian world functions historically *as Hegel described it*, the Jewish experience reflects an eternal reality that "dominat[es] history."[33] Therefore, the world has two dimensions, the Christian and the Jewish. Levinas adopts this position in his presentation of Rosenzweig's thought at the second Colloque, and also expresses it elsewhere in his work. For instance, here is Levinas in an interview given after Sartre's death in 1980: "Then Sartre discovered another dimension of history, as if there were what I would call 'holy history,' that goes in another direction, coexists with history, and is carried by a people. . . . [I]f Jewish history exists, Hegel was wrong. Well, Jewish history does exist."[34] Likewise, here he is in "Model of the West": "Faced with the 'historical meaning' which dominates modernity . . . faced with all this historicism, does not Israel attach itself to an 'always'—in other words, to a permanence in time, to a time held by moments of holiness" (ADV 33; BTV 17).

Yet this notion of two parallel dimensions, equally important and inseparable,[35] comes together with another way of answering Hegel. Levinas argues that, far from being simply equal to the Christian, the Jewish dimension of history is, in fact, universal: "The chief goal of our exegesis is to extricate the universal intentions from the apparent particularism within which facts tied to the national history of Israel, improperly so-called, enclose us" (QLT 15; NTR 5). As he insisted again and again, "when thinking of Judaism, one must always catch sight of humanity as a whole in it" (AHN 94–95; ITN 81).

What these words imply is that Hegel was wrong not because he forgot or underestimated the specific destiny of the Jews but because the Jewish destiny reflects the whole of humanity *in its ethical dimension*. Israel is "the humanity of the Human" (AHN 97; ITN 84). Accordingly, in the readings

Levinas accepted Wahl's point against Rosenzweig and prescribed a rejection of political history that would be the sign not of the particular Jewish religion but of a mature humanity in its entirety.

To sum up Levinas's answer to Hegel, we can identify two distinct but connected arguments. First, as Rosenzweig taught, Jewish holy history does not fit into Hegel's perception of history. Jewish holy history exists, and, hence, Hegel was wrong. Second, this "holy history" is the story not of one determined people in a distinct sphere (as Rosenzweig would have it) but of the ethical consciousness of the whole of humanity. The famous election of the Jews constitutes in effect the dimension of human existence that takes responsibility for the other. Therefore, Levinas's position is a kind of inverted Hegelianism: humanity is fulfilled in Judaism. Messianic redemption comes through the a-historical holy history of the Jews, which is not a particularism but a "human message" (AHN 112; ITN 97).

This rejection of worldly or political history for the Jews would explain why, *methodologically*, Levinas had no trust in Scholem's understanding of Judaism. As we saw, historicism was obvious in Scholem's treatment of messianism but, even more famously, in his conception of religion as a historical development divided into three stages: the mythical, in which the world is understood as "being full of gods whom man encounters at every step"; the classical, in which religion is conceived as "a vast abyss" between God and man; and the mystical, which is a synthesis of the first two.[36] Of course, Scholem's position is not orthodoxly Hegelian, in that his final stage is the mystical, which Hegel could never have considered as part of the modern expression of Reason.[37] However, Scholem's history in three stages, which was probably also influenced by August Comte's "law of the three stages,"[38] remains Hegelian in its form. For Levinas, however, this view of history as a progression toward an end is abhorrent because it can be used to condone anything: everything is legitimate from the perspective of the end. To put it differently, Levinas never forgets that Hegelianism requires a perfect equivalence of method and content: to look at anything from a historical point of view effectively means to recognize and approve it, because it plays a role in the grand scheme of things. However, the ethical consciousness orders us to break with this approval and to judge history—not to be judged by it.[39]

Therefore, like Rosenzweig and against Hegel, Levinas emphasized an "eternal" dimension of Jewish existence, which he qualified as "holy history." Against Rosenzweig, however, this holy history does not reflect the particularism of the Jews but the ethical dimension of the entirety of humanity. Moreover, in an inverted Hegelianism, this ethical dimension constitutes

Redemption, a messianic order in which "one has been able to admit others among one's own" (AHN 113; ITN 98). However, as mentioned earlier, this ethical and a-historical messianism is accompanied by a more traditional conception of political transformations, deemed necessary in "the economy of human salvation" (ADV 83; BTV 64). For Levinas, there is no contradiction between recognizing the importance of political history and holding to an ethical messianism, because political history is the instrument that allows redemption to enter the phenomenal world. It is this instrumentality that keeps history from being the judge of all experiences and that allows it (history) to be judged from the point of view of ethics. History is necessary, but this necessity is not identical to the fulfillment of humanity. Or as Levinas said in the debate that followed his oral presentation of "Who Plays Last?" politics is necessary even if its aim is never achieved.[40] In an astonishing anti-Hegelian move, Levinas asserts, therefore, that there is something that exists beyond the realm of necessity: the ethical order, which is the measure of all human things. However, this does not mean that necessity loses any of its necessary character.

If, as has often been emphasized, the notion of a fractured time is a critique of the (Hegelian) linear development of historical events, the readings make it clear that this critique never means a rejection of political history—as if we were not part of a chain of political events, as if human existence could be summed up by the ethical rupture of the totality. For Levinas, "politics, such as Rome represents it, is a preliminary gestation for Messianic generosity itself. It will give being to the law which, issued from animality, keeps in check the animality of human hordes" (ADV 85; BTV 66). Levinas formulates therefore two conceptions of time, both of which include a version of messianism: messianism as sacrifice of the ego for the other; messianism as political support for the manifestation of the good. We must conclude that Levinas does not wholly reject the notion of a historical telos. He rejects it *only* from the ethical perspective, not from the perspective of messianism in general, which also contains a historical and political dimension.

The notion of historical necessity where history progresses toward the future and the ethical rupture of history are not the only dimensions of history to be found in Levinas. Or, more exactly, in *Otherwise than Being* and other texts, including "The Trace of the Other" and other essays written in the early 1960s, the ethical rupture of history is understood as a turning toward the past. As a result, in these texts the opening of the ego to the suffering other loses its value of the present instant, which in the "Messianic Texts" was perceptible in formulations such as "each person ought to act as if he or

she were the Messiah." It becomes oriented to an immemorial past, through the concept of *trace*: "A face is in the trace of the utterly bygone, utterly passed absent. . . . The signifyingness of a trace places us in a lateral relationship, unconvertible into rightness . . . answering to an irreversible past" (TA 276–277; TO 355). In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas describes the ethical relation as "pre-original, anarchic, older than every beginning. It is not self-consciousness attaining itself in the present, but the extreme exposure to the assignation by the other, already realized behind consciousness and freedom" (AE 227; OB 145). For Michel Vanni, this Levinassian evolution toward an emphasis on the past constitutes a "return to fatality" that reduces the utopian potential of Levinas's philosophy: "In the dialectic between criticism (or suspicion) and utopia, Levinassian eschatology resolutely slides toward the former . . . [and] the possibility of any involvement in praxis narrows. . . . In this sense, we can say that Levinassian ethics becomes really 'impracticable.'"[41] If the ethical moment does not happen now but has always already occurred, as Levinas explains in "The Trace of the Other," nothing new, nothing *else* can ever be done. The rupture of the totality becomes something that has always already passed, like the God of Exodus 33 (TA 282; TO 359), and the prospect of action and transformation are greatly reduced. To Vanni's concern we could add that the impracticability of ethics might even give way to a "politics left to itself" (TI 335; TI' 300)—namely, tyranny.

While I agree with Vanni that in *Otherwise than Being* the notion of the past takes a central place, and that, accordingly, "the eschatological no longer positively fertilizes history,"[42] it seems to me that this is due less to an evolution in Levinas's thought than to a tension that can be detected throughout his work, from its beginning to its end. It is striking, indeed, that the turn toward the past, and, hence, the emphasis on the ego's extreme *patience* or passivity—a notable theme of *Otherwise than Being*—appears in the readings, but always as a question or surrounded by "active" elements that moderate it. Take, for instance, the 1985 reading "Beyond Memory"—a text written well after *Otherwise than Being*. This reading deals with the role played in Judaism by the memory of hardship and suffering, and the universal message transmitted to the world through this memory or beyond it. The dimension of the past is central to the text, as well as the extreme passivity that infuses eschatology: "What a paradox Holy History is—in which the announcement to Abraham implies the certainty of the cruelty of the Pharaohs. An eschatology through the Passion of Israel among the nations. Passion of Humanity bleeding through the wounds of Israel" (AHN 101; ITN 88). However, in the same text, Levinas argues that "Judaism and humanity as a whole in it . . . open

themselves to a future more—or otherwise—significant than slavery and emancipation from slavery" (AHN 95; ITN 82–83). He then exclaims: "Hear, through the relative present, bold anticipations of an absolute future! . . . Do not constitute the future from traces of memory, mistrusting new things and even the miracle required for universal peace" (AHN 99; ITN 85–86). There is thus a tension, *within ethics*, between extreme passivity and an activity anchored in the present and directed toward a future filled with "new things."

Messianism and Dialectics

The question that remains, therefore, is about the nature of the relationship between the anarchic Law and political laws, or between the ethical rupture of history (either as present or as trace of the past) and the development of political history toward the future. Should we think of these contradictory elements as opposing each other, as correlated, as helping each other, as leading to each other, or as synthesizing into some kind of telos? Is there any trace of dialectics in Levinas's messianism? For Martin Kavka, there is a "periodic oscillation" between ethical anarchy, which he calls "anarchic skepticism," and continuous history.[43] Skepticism, he argues, "breaks the line of progressive accounts of history that claim to have some putative knowledge of what it takes to engender peace and social or political stability."[44] Since the historical lines are "broken, re-seamed, and re-broken, history neither moves toward a telos nor foresees redemption. All there is is a continual reinterpretation of the past 'ad infinitum.'… Nevertheless, in this act of reinterpreting how a norm is to be applied or what norm properly governs a situation or issue, catastrophe happens . . . Levinasian skepticism bears the marks of the genre of apocalyptic, though here no past is restored and no utopia arrives . . . it leaves the end of history unpredictable."[45] As a result, Levinas successfully rejects Hegel, an idea that Kavka develops in detail in his fascinating study of meontology (the study of the nonbeing or the not-yet) in his *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*.[46] There he argues that "for Levinas, there can be no such thing as a dialectical meontology. The type of nonbeing that Levinasian meontology invokes refers not to another being, but to an inability to be, the privation of being. This privation in turn discloses transcendence, a realm 'other than being' that is a nonbeing beyond (and hence more fundamental than) the dialectical notion of 'not-being' mentioned in the opening pages of *Otherwise than Being* . . . ontology shows itself to be inadequate, in need of a messianic faith as its supplement."[47]

We can undoubtedly accept Kavka's account of the non-dialectical "oscillations" of messianism in Levinas, and of Levinas's apocalyptic ethics, if, as Kavka did, we focus on the analyses proposed in Levinas's phenomenological books. Kavka does not forget the political element in Levinas, but he localizes it *within* the ethical substitution, since "the Levinasian prophet ensures political sovereignty for the Other"—a conclusion derived from a close reading of *Otherwise than Being*.[48] For Kavka, therefore, Levinassian eschatology happens in the gap between two non-commensurable entities, not at the end of history but at every instant of "messianic consciousness."[49] This understanding of Levinas's eschatology bears explicit resemblance to Derrida's famous formulation of "a thinking of the other and of the event to come" in *Specters of Marx*.[50] For Derrida, messianism is a spectral "emancipatory promise," a performative "idea of justice" leading the quest for what he describes in *Politics of Friendship* as the "democracy to come"—*always* "to come" and never there, albeit, as he insists, never "not-there."[51]

The lines that, in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, immediately precede the formulation of the "event to come" are dedicated to Jerusalem and the Middle East conflicts. The theme of Jerusalem also opens Derrida's 1996 lecture "A Word of Welcome," presented for the first anniversary of Levinas's death and published in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. But "A Word of Welcome" is a desperate attempt to deal with one of the biggest difficulties of Levinas's work (and my topic in this book): the fact that the Talmudic readings say something slightly different from the phenomenological books, offering a more intricate and sometimes contradictory picture—which Kavka in his book dismisses as showing Levinas's "inability to treat issues of redaction."[52] In his 1996 lecture, commenting on Levinas's understanding of Zionism and Jerusalem, Derrida makes a heroic effort to minimize the meaning of the Levinassian contradictions: "The 'Talmudic Readings and Lectures' gathered together in 1982 at the end of *Beyond the Verse* . . . multiply propositions that have a form, and I emphasize *form*, that is deliberately contradictory, aporetic, indeed dialectical (in the sense of a transcendental dialectics)—propositions at once intra-political and transpolitical, at once *for and against* the 'state principle'" (A 135; A' 73).[53] Note that it is only the "form" that is contradictory, that the contradictions were made "deliberately," and that Levinas's dialectics is immediately qualified as "transcendental," diverting it from Hegel to Kant. Hence, Derrida sees well but refuses to see the fact that *the readings reveal some kind of Hegelian dialectics.*

The possibility of Hegelian dialectics in Levinas is rejected by Kavka, who has little patience with the readings' blindness on issues of redaction and

hence focuses on the phenomenological books. Moreover, as we saw in the quotation from Kavka given above, Kavka sees in Levinassian messianism a "faith" needed to supplement ontology. Here I object both to Derrida's denial of Levinas's dialectics and to Kavka's dismissal of the readings. The readings show contradictions and twists in form and in content. It is with their help that Levinas draws a picture more complex than that proposed in *Otherwise than Being* (and the other phenomenological books) but also more *dialectical*. Remember that in the introduction to *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, Levinas resolutely emphasizes the "dialectics of the Talmud" (QLT 21; NTR 8). Moreover, this picture has little to do with "a turn to faith,"[54] because by messianism Levinas refers not only to the ethical rupture of the ego but also to the political and historical becoming of the community within the nations. As shown above, this point appears on various occasions in the readings—but, and here Kavka and Derrida are right, much less in the phenomenological books.

The most common argument *against* the idea of Hegelian dialectics in Levinas is that there is no telos in his work. Indeed, the rejection of the judgment of history and the endeavor to dismantle the totality that characterize Levinas's ethics are of course the expression and proof of his rejection of Hegelian totality, a rejection that Levinas formulated often and unambiguously. Nevertheless, the Talmudic readings accommodate, at times, a telos. When Levinas "sincerely wonders" whether we can still "believe that History has no meaning, that no reason makes itself manifest therein" (DL 137; DF 95), he has in mind the ideals of the Enlightenment and the history of the liberal West: "Since the eighteenth century, reason has penetrated History. . . . Emancipation has been for Judaism itself an opening . . . on the political forms of humanity. It has enabled it to take history seriously" (DL 137; DF 95–96). He concludes that "messianism in the strong sense of the term"—namely, the ethical messianism of the ego, the a-historical sacrifice of the self for the other—"has been compromised in the Jewish consciousness since Emancipation, ever since Jews participated in world history" (DL 137–138; DF 96), but has been reactivated in Zionism, together with the political aspect of universal history. As shown in the previous chapter, for Levinas Zionism represents an "attempt to reunite the irreversible acceptance of universal history with the necessarily particularist messianism" (DL 138; DF 96)—namely, to unify the political and ethical dimensions of existence.

Zionism, however, is just one form of synthesis—and, as we have seen, an ambivalent one. What is important to notice is that the historical and political sides of the development of Reason are expressed in the "West"—that is, in the ideals of the French Revolution that led to the Emancipation not only

of the Jews but also, and above all, of all citizens. Zionism itself creates a "Westerner Jew" (QLT 24; NTR 10). Admiration for the West as the realization of Reason suffuses Levinas's work despite, or alongside, his critiques of humanism and liberalism.[55] The unequivocal defense of Western values elaborated in the 1951 paper "Being a Westerner" ("Etre occidental"), in which Levinas exclaims, "Defense of the West, defense of civilization, defense of spirit [*esprit*]!" (DL 73; DF 46), finds its echo in the late 1970s reading quoted earlier, "Who Plays Last?" In this reading Levinas first recalls that politics is destruction, war, evil. It is "capable of ending up in Auschwitz" (ADV 80; BTV 61). It is best symbolized by Rome, which was responsible for the dispersion of the Jews and then for endless persecutions under both its pagan and its Christian rulers. There is therefore "no illusion" about this West (ADV 86; BTV 66). Despite all this, "the extension of Rome into the world [is] necessary to justice and to Messianic peace itself. In its wickedness, it begins the Order of the West" (ADV 85; BTV 66).

Levinas's admiration for the West is bound up with hope for a better West—a West imbued with ethics as with politics, a West that moderates its imperialism with "love of the other man," a West that synthesizes holy history and universal history, divine Law and human law. What is absolutely not Hegelian in this vision of the West is the anxiety that pervades it. The West, for Levinas, has never consisted and will never consist of "the unity of a Whole wherein everyone finds their repose, their place, their seat" (PP 339; PP' 162–163), because for Levinas the other must not be assimilated to the identical. The West should therefore be the realization of the "awakened consciousness" (AHN 93; ITN 80) that makes conceivable "particularity beyond universality" (ADV 232; BTV 199). Levinas describes an "eschatological drama" (AHN 180; ITN 154) rather than the self-confident march of History. However, Hegel is "a source, and not just the system to be destroyed" (AHN 180; ITN 155). If Hegel's integration of otherness is refused, his European ethos and telos are conserved, as is the relationship between opposed elements, which leads to a *surplus* that Levinas, against himself, reintegrates into messianic history.

CONCLUSION

Levinas's Concept of *Laïcité*

Levinas's Story of Politics in the Talmudic Readings

The Talmudic readings tell us an original story of politics. Politics, say the readings, originates in hunger and destitution. Resources are scarce or unevenly distributed, life conditions are difficult, and people need help, attention, and support. People—"others"—are poor by definition, not in the sense that everyone around us is literally destitute but in the sense that the "others" include people in need and that even the wealthiest and strongest may need comfort and care. People do things for and with other people—work for them, teach them, help them, and fight them. Hence, they have and will always have power over others. Power to hurt, and power to heal. This is what Levinas meant when he said that the other is and will always be poor, even in messianic times.

The others are numerous, and we have our own families to feed. For this reason, and from the very beginning of human society, we establish contracts that stipulate the extent of our duties and limit our responsibility. There is need around us, but we cannot satisfy all of it, and so we organize ourselves to satisfy *some* of it. We cannot treat everyone like King Solomon, but we can ensure everyone gets at least a small plate from Solomon's table. As such, the political contract is designed neither for the purposes of mutual security (Hobbes), nor to establish the conditions for people to pursue their individual goals (Locke), nor even to ensure an equal distribution of power (Rousseau). Rather, it constitutes the general effort to satisfy at least some part of everyone's needs.

Thus, political institutions protect us against two dangers. The first is the risk of becoming so focused on the needs of some people that we forget the others. The contract limits our responsibility to any one individual, in order to allow for the care of a larger number. The second is the risk that, confronted

by so much destitution, we will become blind to it. This can happen when so many people surround us that we become insensitive to others' needs. We retire into ourselves and begin to fear others, instead of seeing them.

To reiterate: politics exists neither to limit our power, nor to give us the means to enjoy it, nor to ensure we allocate it equally. Rather, its purpose is to moderate both our responsibility and our indifference. This vision of politics reflects the interconnection of pure ethics and pure politics, which never exist in pure form but as a relationship between infinite responsibility and egoist self-management of the community. Using Levinas's vocabulary in the readings, I called this relationship non-indifferent or merciful justice. It permeates the institutions that regulate our life with others, which must become, therefore, aware of the indifference or generality that they themselves give rise to.

Note that this is both a descriptive and prescriptive statement: for Levinas, political institutions are non-indifferent and should become even more so. Good political institutions are those that make room for *hesed*—mercy or kindness—namely, those that resist bureaucracy and are able, at least to some degree, to see the individual behind the anonymous citizen. This is what Levinas underlines in his recurring references to Vasily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* in the readings (AHN 101–105, 57; ITN 88–91, 135), and also in "Peace and Proximity," where he describes how the "face" appears in the expressive backs and necks of relatives waiting their turn to get news of their loved ones in the notorious Lubyanka prison, headquarters of the KGB (PP 344; PP' 167). The "face" is the quality in each person that makes him or her an individual, with individual claims on the mercy and kindness of others. Politics involves judgments and rules that make people wait in lines, sometimes even in front of the Lubyanka, but good politics makes room for a mercy thanks to which people standing in line do not become, or do not remain, transparent to others.

Such politics is not nonviolent. On the contrary, says Levinas, it is necessarily violent, for two reasons, one good and one less visibly so. The less visibly good reason is that politics, even when non-indifferent, is based on laws and rules, which, by definition, neglect or compromise individual needs to satisfy general ones. As we have seen, this is the only way of ensuring that we satisfy at least *some* needs. Yet people get hurt in this thematizing process: they are unseen and unheard. To use Levinas's Talmudic metaphor, they sometimes must be satisfied with simple meals. They must respect police officers because these officers, in their very violence, represent the law. In other words, says Levinas, and here he comes close to Hobbes, the violence of thematization creates pain—but there would be much more pain without it.

There is also a good reason for the use of violence: the fight against evil. Repression is needed to fight evil, which takes forms that can be summed up under the term "idolatry." Idolatry means closure, namely, the refusal to see beyond oneself (what we think, want, and understand), and hence, the denial of responsibility. It is expressed in closing one's door—the gates of one's property, the classes of one's society, or the frontiers of one's country—and in believing in ideologies through which reality is distorted. Evil consists of the voluntary act of giving preponderance to one's perseverance in being, the conatus also at work in the natural world. In nature, however, there is no free will. Trees do not choose to be what they are. Levinas therefore looks at nature with suspicion, as the possible ground for an evil that would be purer and more primordial than the human, chosen evil, although care for the other sometimes unexpectedly appears in natural situations. As for human evil: it is mostly generated by political institutions themselves, but these institutions remain the only way to fight it. Hence, solutions to the problems of politics must be found in politics, while the principle behind these solutions, namely, responsibility for the concrete needs of the people around us, transcends politics.

This point emerges clearly in Levinas's discussion of messianism. Everything, including eschatological time, transpires through history in political form. However, these historical and political events are transcended by the ethical law, which needs the phenomenal background of history to appear (and to surpass history). The fact that everything is historical and political *and* transcended makes us conjecture that Levinas remained Hegelian and that his interrelation between ethics and politics is not very far from the Hegelian *Aufhebung*—in which what goes beyond itself is recaptured by the historical totality. Ultimately, however, awareness of the other's needs and anxiety for the other's welfare are a rejection of Hegelianism: in Levinas, the final and decisive judgment is not made by history but by kindness or mercy. The telos, which undoubtedly exists, does not consist of the victory of the universal but of care for particular needs. From the perspective of non-indifferent justice, God is in small things.

Levinas hoped that the modern State of Israel would prove to be the realization of non-indifferent justice. However, he never lived in Israel. As Perrine Simon-Nahum notes, he was the only founder of the Colloques des intellectuels juifs who stayed in France. Neher, Askenazi, Amado Levy-Valensi, and others left for Israel after the Six-Day War, but Levinas, who had chosen France in his youth, continued to choose it in his mature years.[1] Therefore, his positions on the State of Israel were conceived from afar and remained hopes or maybe fantasies of messianic achievement.

Levinas was and stayed European, and recurrently vindicated the West and Western values. In an infelicitous declaration, he stressed that "humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. . . . All the rest—all the exotic—is dance."[2] Another such remark appears in a 1960 article, "Dialectics and the Sino-Soviet Quarrel," in which Levinas states: "The yellow peril! It is not racial but spiritual. Not about inferior values but about a radical strangeness, strange to all the density of its past, where no voice with a familiar inflection comes through: a lunar, a Martian past."[3] In the readings' more restrained stances, Europe, despite its many flaws, remains for Levinas the only spiritual referent. I have no intention of trying to exonerate Levinas from such inept formulations, or even to explain them. However, putting aside the discomfort caused by these "opinions," as Derrida calls Levinas's positions when they seem to be in opposition to his philosophical discourse (A 201–202; A' 117), one is led to wonder whether Levinas's admiration of the West also reflects acceptance of either of its main modern political trends, liberalism and socialism.

Liberalism and *Laïcité*

The question of socialism in Levinas is a relatively easy one. Levinas admired the Marxist commitment to the betterment of the poor and their economic situation. He agreed with the socialist denunciation of capitalist egoism and social indifference. He emphasized the prophetic and messianic aspiration of socialism and the utopian hope that it created (AT 121; AT' 112). However, he had doubts about the realization of a socialist society. As he wrote in an essay on Buber, "There is one lone, unique example of a socialist society that was successfully realized: collective farms—*kibbutzim*—on the soil of the land of Israel" (AT 123; AT' 115). Yet, as we saw in Chapter 7, he had reservations about kibbutz members' attachment to the soil (QLT 121; NTR 56). Even this relative success of the socialist model was darkened by its rootedness. "Judaism and Revolution," presented at the Colloque several months after the civil unrest of May 1968, is an answer to the Marxist revolutionaries of the time and proposes a non-Marxist answer to the problems that Marxism raised. As shown in this book, the Levinassian answer was based on the idea of the "rights of the other person."

If so, was Levinas a liberal? That question is not an easy one. As just mentioned, and as we saw in Chapter 3, Levinas unambivalently condemns the hedonism of liberal culture, and he wondered, until the end of his life, whether "liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the

human subject" (QRPH 26; RPH 63). On the other hand, he seemed to admit that the liberal state allows for the materialization of non-indifferent justice: "Within justice we seek a better justice. That is the liberal state" (PM 175). Moreover, he adopted the rhetoric of human rights, which he, however, transformed into the "rights of the other person": "*The right of man, absolutely and originally*, takes on meaning only in the other, as the right of the other man" (AT 135; AT' 127). Is this emphasis on rights—as rights of the other—enough to call Levinas a "liberal"?[4]

In his important book *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, Michael Morgan emphasizes Levinas's rhetoric of rights to propose a liberal defense of Levinas's politics. Morgan argues that "if 'Europe is the Bible and the Greeks,' democracy [= 'the liberal democratic state'] is the form of Europe."[5] Put differently, Morgan sees in liberalism the logical consequence of Levinas's European preferences. He emphasizes that Levinas's liberalism is a "welfare" or "prophetic" liberalism and not a "classical" one, because the latter "was insufficiently engaged with the concrete world in which we live."[6] Drawing on Bernasconi's significant discussion of the transformations of Levinas's positions on liberalism, Morgan explains that "the normative foundation of the liberal state lies in a 'territory' outside its own actual domain. It is outside of the political altogether, in the ethical. This extra-territoriality of the state, of politics, is not the 'outside' that classical liberalism endorses, that is, the private realm. Nor is it the 'outside' of the social contract tradition, the state of nature. Rather it is the religious, or in Levinas's vocabulary, it is ethics."[7]

It is true that liberalism and Levinas's politics have in common the idea of an external normative foundation, which allows for judgment and criticism of the political system thanks to its very "extra-territoriality." In Levinas's words,

> The defense of the rights of man corresponds to a vocation *outside* the state, disposing, in a political society, of a kind of extra-territoriality, like that of prophecy in the face of the political powers of the Old Testament, a vigilance totally different from political intelligence, a lucidity not limited to yielding before the formalism of universality, but upholding justice itself in its limitations. The capacity to guarantee that extra-territoriality and that independence defines the liberal state and describes the modality according to which the conjunction of politics and ethics is intrinsically possible. (HS 185; OS 123)

However, Levinas's strong, explicit, and repeated refusal to accept the private realm as the normative outside of politics is, as we saw in Chapter 3,

the essential reason for his critique of liberalism seen as the reign of closure (or idolatry) and economic self-preservation. In other words, the similarities that undoubtedly exist between liberalism and Levinas's politics in the readings do not necessarily imply that Levinas was a liberal, even in a non-classical sense, and even if Levinas himself praised the "liberal state." The problem comes from Levinas's double use of the word "liberal," which, in his criticism of it, means a political worldview based on economic individualism and hedonist self-realization, and in his approval of it means the fair rule of law, respect for basic liberties, and, most importantly, the capacity for self-criticism and self-improvement.

The main source of Levinas's ambivalence about liberalism is that apart from his explicit disagreement with Hobbes, Levinas was not much influenced by the authors of the Anglo-American canon and did not dialogue with them. His influences were French and German. If, as Morgan stresses, Levinas's liberalism is the liberalism of Hegel,[8] it is hardly liberalism in the Anglo-American sense and perhaps hardly liberalism at all.[9] Clearly, Levinas's position has nothing to do with any liberal development of utilitarianism. But even within the discourse of rights, he stands outside mainstream Anglo-American positions. According to his interpretation of the Kantian version of rights, "*practical reason*'s intention, attributed to the will, of ensuring the right of man or the freedom of the neighbor—does it not cost free will its own right to freedom?" (AT 154; AT' 148–149). This is hardly reminiscent of any Lockean, or Locke-influenced, conception of rights. In fact, when Levinas mentions human rights or liberalism in a positive way, he always means the spirit of the 1789 French Revolution (AT 153, AT' 147; DL 359, DF 259; AHN 159, ITN 136). Therefore, when we speak of Levinas's liberalism, it is to this French tradition and its developments in the *Aufklärung* that we must refer.

Paradoxically, it is Levinas's French context that induced scholars to consider him an unambiguous liberal. Indeed, Levinas wrote at a time when Marxism and structuralism had so permeated the French intellectual milieu that mentions of the rights of man were rare and suspect.[10] When Miguel Abensour recalls that Levinas used to be considered "a great liberal thinker, attached to the rule of law and to democracy in the most classical sense," he refers to this left-leaning mood in French philosophical circles: in a Marxist and structuralist atmosphere, Levinas looked like a "great liberal."[11] However, we live at a time when liberalism in its *neo-liberal* version has everywhere supplanted the very possibility of such a leftist mood. By neo-liberalism I mean not only deregulation, privatization, and free trade but also, as we have seen in in this book, indifference toward the underprivileged classes and

their marginalization, and, more generally, the inflated individualistic and consumerist mentality by which every political problem (related to unemployment, global health, environmental issues, education, and more) can be solved by a special diet, a better fitness program, and intransigent recycling discipline. In an age where *that* is the meaning of liberalism, we must wonder whether Levinas should be counted as a liberal.

According to Bernasconi, Levinas's position on liberalism evolved from early criticism to a later celebration based, as in the above quote, on the notions of "vocation outside the state" or "extra-territoriality" that give legitimacy to the rights of the other. Bernasconi identifies the turning point in Levinas's thinking in his reading of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* and the publication of his 1982 essay on Mendelssohn in *A l'heure des nations*.[12] However, as early as 1964, in one of the first Talmudic readings ("Temptation of Temptation"), Levinas, without using the word "liberalism," sums up the entirety of his criticism of it under the idiosyncratic formulation "temptation of temptation," which describes "the condition of Western man. . . . He is for an open life, eager to try everything, to experience everything. . . . One must be rich and a spendthrift and multiple" (QLT 71–72; NTR 32). He then mentions "all that moral extra-territoriality opened up by the temptation of temptation" (QLT 95; NTR 43). Here, as Bernasconi recalls, the term "extra-territoriality" does not have its other Levinassian meaning, namely, the interiority of the house, which it has in *Totality and Infinity* (TI 161; TI' 150). Here extraterritoriality means, as in the texts of the 1980s, the external normative foundation of the prevalent Western culture. Yet Levinas criticizes it. Hence, it is not the conceptualization of extraterritoriality as external justification of the rights of the other that led Levinas to a positive reevaluation of liberalism. Moreover, in 1990—that is, very late in his life—Levinas still wondered whether "liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject" (QRPH 26; RPH 63).

I do not think, therefore, that Levinas's positions on liberalism evolved from criticism to praise. Like Bernasconi, however, I think that the Mendelssohn essay helps us understand Levinas's position. What is remarkable in this essay is that the problematic of human rights and of liberalism seen as a doctrine of freedom is discussed in the context of the Emancipation of the Jews. This is, of course, not surprising since the Emancipation is the topic of Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*. It is, however, important to underline that freedom and rights are considered the "spiritual basis upon which the Jews are to enter the City—without their religion having to suffer or to stand in the way of that emancipation" (AHN 161; ITN 138). What Levinas admires in Mendelssohn's

views is "his claim to the dignity of citizenship" for the Jews (AHN 162; ITN 139). In the 1959 essay "How Is Judaism Possible?" which, without mentioning Mendelssohn, expresses the same ideas about political emancipation and the specificity of Jewish life, Levinas had already asserted that "a citizen's life was the great event in our modern history" (DL 341; DF 245).

The entry of the Jews into political life is not important only as a Jewish event: it signifies a human experience made possible by the spirit of 1789. The French nation, says Levinas in his 1968 article "Space Is Not One-Dimensional," was distinguished in allowing outsiders to become full citizens: "It is on the basis of France's exceptional essence, in which political and moral life came together, on the basis of the ideals of the 1789 Revolution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, through the literature and the institutions that gave it expression, that an attachment was formed with the history and the country that had generated these ideas" (DL 362; DF 261). Both in "Space Is Not One-Dimensional" and in the later Mendelssohn essay Levinas emphasizes that World War II was the end of this political process, the collapse of the "symbiotic relationship [between the Jewish and] non-Jewish human world" (AHN 167; ITN 144). Despite this, however, "the assimilation that did not occur in accordance with [Mendelssohn]'s provisions was the product of an elevated mode of thought not yet exhausted" (AHN 167; ITN 144).

What Mendelssohn understood, and what has not yet been exhausted, is the extraterritoriality of freedom, which constitutes the "spiritual basis" making possible "the entry of the Jews in the City—without their religion having to suffer" (AHN 161; ITN 138). In other words, it is this external "state's vocation" (AHN 160; ITN 138) that, in modernity, allows for the relationship between universalism and singularity—a relationship in which both universalism and singularity are preserved. In a 1960 essay, "Secularism [*Laïcité*] and the Thought of Israel," this relationship is labeled "*laïcité*" (LPI 170; STI 123).

It must be emphasized that the French word *laïcité* is not adequately translated by "secularism." I am not speaking here of the formulation of the law but the cultural interpretation of it. Secularism, in the American tradition, is the principle of separation between the state and religious institutions. It means that the state will not interfere in matters of belief, religious education, and so on. As a result, society becomes a kind of free religious market, in which creeds and practices are displayed and coexist nonviolently. The French *laïcité* also refers to a principle of separation between the state and religious institutions, but instead of freeing religion from interference by the state, it frees the state from religious influence. It holds that society should be totally devoid of religious symbols and practices in the public sphere. The French *laïcité* is the

basis of the French Republic, and hence, in France, religion is wholly relegated to the private realm.[13] It is this concept of *laïcité* Levinas considers to be "characteristic of the Western genius" (LPI 155; STI 113).

"Secularism [*Laïcité*] and the Thought of Israel" is an exposition of the meaning of Judaism through a historical description of the Talmud and an explication of its political conception. It is therefore surprising that in this essay, Levinas wonders whether Judaism, as a religious group and doctrine, could "have known or even hinted at such a concept as *laïcité*" (LPI 155; STI 113). Beyond the irony of asking whether a religion could have an anti-religious politics, it is striking that Levinas builds a coherent account of Judaism and its sources through a specifically French political concept, which he acknowledges as such. One might think that this choice was purely tactical: fifteen years after the end of World War II, trying to inject new spiritual life into a mostly assimilated Jewish community, and to introduce Judaism into a public discourse still resistant to it, Levinas uses the most fundamental French political concept, the symbol of the Republic, to show that Judaism could fit in. While I do not discard this interpretation, I think that later texts—for example, the Mendelssohn essay—prove that Levinas really believed in *laïcité*.

Levinas understands the Talmudic conception of politics as resulting from a "state of mind . . . manifest in the preponderance of the moral over the sacerdotal and the relative autonomy of the political" (LPI 158; STI 115). As for *laïcité*, it means a political system devoid of religious symbols and rituals but nonetheless normatively founded on a transcendent ethical law. *Laïcité* in the Talmudic context means therefore that the historical and political law, "which includes the possibility of crimes and war" (LPI 170; STI 123), has its normative justification in the absolute law of the Torah, understood as ethical prophecy rather than as sacerdotal order (LPI 171; STI 123). As a result, *laïcité* is the essence of a society that puts religion (namely, ethics) between parentheses "in the name of religion itself" (LPI 163; STI 119): "It is in the name of the Absolute that Absolute law is given leave of absence" (LPI 170; STI 123). As we have seen throughout this book, this principle is the foundation of Levinas's understanding of the interconnection of ethics and politics in the Talmudic readings.

"Secularism [*Laïcité*] and the Thought of Israel," however, adds two concrete components to what we have called non-indifferent justice. First, in a political entity defined by *laïcité* "people of different beliefs can come together" (LPI 167; STI 121). Second, "the law will be the same for foreigner and native; this is justified by both human fraternity and the community of human misery" (LPI 163; STI 119). The use of the word *laïcité* to describe the

framework of non-indifferent justice open to people of different beliefs and to foreigners means not merely that Judaism is fit to find its place in French political culture but also, and no less importantly, that the French political culture is good—a notion reinforced by Levinas's adoption of the word "fraternity" (from the 1789 triad "Liberté, égalité, fraternité") in describing the virtues of *laïcité* in the sentence just quoted. "Secularism [*Laïcité*] and the Thought of Israel" is no less a way of praising the French version of freedom than a description of Judaism.[14] Does this mean that Levinas simply added some Jewish spice to the French *laïcité*?

Levinas's conception of *laïcité* is not a mere reformulation and "Judaization" of the French notion but a deep reconceptualization of it. Indeed, Levinas replaces the clerical power rejected by the French *laïcité* with his ethics. As a result, his *laïcité* is not a refusal of religion's influence but a withdrawal of ethics for the sake of its phenomenality. This Levinassian version of *laïcité* is certainly not the only conception of a society open to people of different beliefs and origins. However, by contrast with liberal pluralism, it is not simply "open" to the others; it cares for them. It leaves room for their singularity, but not out of unconcern for what they do. This empathy was painfully missing in the historical process of the Emancipation of the Jews, as is clear from the ordeals of the twentieth century. Therefore, the extraterritorial norm of the political entity is not freedom but the mercy or kindness (*hesed*) depicted by Levinas in his interpretations of singular situations, which constitute the Talmudic readings.

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The location of Levinas's political thinking within an apparently religious discourse—his Talmudic exegeses—may have puzzled readers and discouraged scholars from focusing attention on his political thought. This is so, however, only because in many philosophical circles the Talmud and Levinas's "confessional writings" are viewed (when they are viewed at all) as pious texts, unworthy of serious engagement using critical tools. Levinas was aware of this fact and tried to change it, putting a great deal of effort into explaining to large audiences the rational importance of the Talmudic hermeneutics.

His understanding of politics dialogues with, incorporates, and criticizes the French notion of *laïcité*. This political and at the same time religious context adds another layer of justification for his choice of Talmudic commentary to express his political ideas. Levinas's concept of merciful justice,

therefore, should be seen as a possible foundation for a reformulation and redefinition of the theological-political question—a reformulation and redefinition increasingly necessary in our time of theocratic fundamentalism.

Politics in the Talmudic readings is an original interweaving of the French tradition of secular rights and the Talmudic emphasis on *hesed*. It transforms the French tradition in replacing its fear of sacerdotal influence with an emphasis on transcendent ethics. It transforms no less the Talmudic conception of society in universalizing it: politics, for Levinas, means institutions open to all, including those who believe and behave differently. Without rejecting liberalism *en bloc*, it aims at *more* than what a liberal state can offer: more solidarity and more empathy, less competition and less pursuit of self-realization. Such a vision of politics has a utopian feeling but proves to be realistic: Levinas never forgets or underestimates the pain and violence induced by even the best of politics. His utopia does not consist of an impracticable political society but of a society that, based on the real world, looks for better norms beyond that world.

NOTES

Introduction

1. "For a face is the unique openness in which the signifyingness of the transcendent does not nullify the transcendence and make it enter into an immanent order; here, on the contrary, transcendence asserts itself as the ever bygone transcendence of the transcendent" (TA 277; TO 355).

2. "The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that" (EI 80; EI' 85–86).

3. Ontology is "a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension [*intelligence*] of being" (TI 33–34; TI' 43).

4. See a slightly different version in AE 245; OB 157. See also AE 33; OB 16.

5. As Putnam comments, "What troubles me is the fact that this dialectic of an extreme statement followed by a vague statement to the effect that 'in the concrete, many other considerations intervene and require justice even for me' occurs more than once in Levinas's writing." H. Putnam, "Levinas and Judaism," in R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57. The quotation within the quotation is from EI 96; EI' 99.

6. As Bernasconi puts it, there is an "uncertainty as to how to relate the third party to the face to face relation. Although Levinas sometimes presented the arrival of the third party as taking place in a subsequent stage of narrative that began with the face to face, on other occasions he described the third party as being already within the face of the Other." R. Bernasconi, "The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 30:1, 1999, 76.

7. M. Fagan, "The Inseparability of Ethics and Politics: Rethinking the Third in Emmanuel Levinas," *Contemporary Political Theory* 8:1, 2009, 7.

8. According to Myers, "If the dyad of self and Other . . . never actually exists, that is, if this coupling can never be abstracted from the broader social environment and the many others that inhabit it, what sense does it make to build an ethics around it?" E. Myers, *Worldly Ethics: Democratic Politics and Care for the World* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013), 64. See also S. Žižek, "Neighbors and Other Monsters: A Plea for Ethical Violence," in K. Reinhard, E. L. Santner, and S. Žižek, eds., *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 184.

9. See H. Caygill, *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), 2.

10. Most of the Talmudic readings were given as lectures at the Colloque des intellectuels juifs de langue française, a conference that has been held in Paris since 1957.

11. B. Levy, *Etre juif* (Paris: Verdier, 2003). See my essays "Levy vs. Levinas on Being Jewish," *Modern Judaism* 26:1, 2006, 15–30 and "Retour, retournement et souffrance chez Levinas," *Tsafon* 53, 2007, 161–170.

12. See O. Eisenstadt (Ajzenstat), *Driven Back to the Text: The Premodern Sources of Levinas's Postmodernism* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001); E. Meir, "Les écrits professionnels et confessionnels d'Emmanuel Levinas," in D. Cohen-Levinas and S. Trigano, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophie et judaïsme* (Paris: In Press Editions, 2002), 127–143; E. Meir, *Levinas's Jewish Thought: Between Jerusalem and Athens* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2008); M. Fagenblat, *A Covenant of Creatures: Levinas's Philosophy of Judaism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010).

13. See, for instance, EI 14–15; EI' 24.

14. F. Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1996), 131, trans. J. Robbins and M. Coelen with T. Loebel in J. Robbins, ed., *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 62.

15. E. Levinas, *Les imprévus de l'histoire* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2000), 182, trans. N. Poller, *Unforeseen History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 131. See also TI 70; TI' 73. On the complex relationship between Levinas and Plato, see D. Achtenberg, *Essential Vulnerabilities: Plato and Levinas on Relations to the Other* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

16. Fagenblat, *A Covenant of Creatures*, xiv.

17. See O. Eisenstadt, "Levinas in the Key of the Political," in A. Horowitz and G. Horowitz, eds., *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 65, 73, 76; see also C. E. Katz, *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 8.

18. On the utopian dimensions of Levinas's ethics, see M. Abensour, "Penser l'utopie autrement," in M. Abensour and C. Chalier, eds., *Cahiers de l'Herne, Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: L'Herne, Livre de Poche, 1991), 572–604, and *Emmanuel Levinas, L'intrigue de l'humain: Entre métapolitique et politique. Entretiens avec Danielle Cohen-Levinas* (Paris: Hermann, 2012). See also "The Other, Utopia and Justice," in *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, 200–210.

19. E. Levinas, *Ethique comme philosophie première* (Paris: Payot, 1998), trans. S. Hand and M. Temple, in S. Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 75–87.

20. Here I therefore agree with Leora Batnitsky, who calls into question "the three dominant strands of Levinas interpretation: the first that sees him as a reviver of a Jewish philosophical tradition, the second that understands him in strictly phenomenological terms, and the third that views him as a postmodern philosopher. . . . I maintain that Levinas emerges not as a philosophical defender of 'Judaism,' but as a defender of the need for philosophical activity for social and political purposes after Heidegger." L. Batnitsky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophy and the Problem of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xx.

21. Of the vast literature dedicated to Levinas and the readings, see R. Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 155–175; Z. Harvey, "Levinas on *Temimut*, Naïveté and *'Am-Ha-Aratsut*,'" *Daat* 30, 1993, 13–20; L. Kaplan, "Israel Under the Mountain: Emmanuel Levinas on Freedom and Constraint in the Revelation of the Torah," *Modern Judaism* 18:1, 1998, 35–46; T. Wright, *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy: Emmanuel Levinas' Ethical Hermeneutics* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), 141–172; S. Wygoda, "A Phenomenological Outlook on the Talmud: Levinas as Reader of the Talmud," *Phenomenological Inquiry: A Review* 24, 2000, 117–148; E. Levine, "The Talmud in the Mind of Emmanuel Levinas," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 4:2, 2001, 249–271; C. Chalier, "Levinas and the Talmud," in R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 100–118; H. Maccoby, *The Philosophy of the Talmud*

(London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 208–216; S. Wygoda, "Un *Midrash* philosophique: A propos de la lecture levinassienne du Talmud," *Cahiers d'études lévinassiennes* 4, 2005, 313–352; M. L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 384–395; L. L. Edwards, "'Extreme Attention to the Real': Levinas and Religious Hermeneutics," *Shofar* 26:4, 2008, 36–53; G. D. Mole, "Cruel Justice, Responsibility, and Forgiveness: On Levinas's Reading of the Gibeonites," *Modern Judaism* 31, 2011, 253–271; E. Goldwyn, *Reading Between the Lines: Form and Content in Levinas's Talmudic Readings*, trans. R. Kessel (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2015).

22. Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 130, translated in *Is It Righteous to Be?* 61.

23. About the distance between Levinas and the Talmud, see M. Kavka, "Is There a Warrant for Levinas's Talmudic Readings?" *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 14:1–2, 2006, 153–173.

24. S. Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), 15–16. See also S. Moyn, "Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Readings: Between Tradition and Invention," *Prooftexts* 23:3, 2003, 338–364.

25. J. Rolland, "Quelques propositions certaines et incertaines," in D. Cohen-Levinas and S. Trigano, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophie et judaïsme* (Paris: In Press Editions, 2002), 250.

26. See S. Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*, trans. M. Kigel and S. M. Embree (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2006).

27. See ADV 138; BTV 210: "Ethics—appearing as the prophetic." See also EI 111–113; EI' 113–115; C. F. Alford, "Levinas and Political Theory," *Political Theory* 32:2, 2004, 146; and P. J. Harold, *Prophetic Politics: Emmanuel Levinas and the Sanctification of Suffering* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009).

28. See H. Ben Pazi, *Interpretation as Moral Act: Emmanuel Levinas's Hermeneutics* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012); Goldwyn, *Reading Between the Lines*; Wright, *The Twilight of Jewish Philosophy*. For expansion and explanation of this idea, see Chapter 1.

29. R. Bernasconi, "Different Styles of Eschatology: Derrida's Take on Levinas' Political Messianism," *Research in Phenomenology* 28, 1998, 5.

30. On the philosophical anti-political mood, see H. Arendt's analyses in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. J. Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), as well as in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

31. See S. Mosès, "L'idée de justice dans la philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 62:2/4, 2006, 390.

32. See P. Simon-Nahum, "Une 'herméneutique de la parole': Emmanuel Levinas et les Colloques des Intellectuels Juifs," in D. Cohen-Levinas and S. Trigano, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophie et judaïsme* (Paris: In Press Editions, 2002), 262–263.

33. As Rosen writes, "Levinas's philosophical texts repeatedly condemn politics in the name of ethics. But his Talmudic readings are useful for clarifying the necessary role of politics in his thought." J. Rosen, "From a Memory Beyond Memory to a State Beyond the State," in A. Horowitz and G. Horowitz, eds., *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 296.

34. On "non-indifference," see Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 125, translated in *Is It Righteous to Be?* 58; E. Levinas, "Entretien," in J.-C. Aeschliman, ed., *Répondre d'autrui: Emmanuel Levinas* (Neuchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière, 1989), 10, translated in *Is It Righteous to Be?* 115.

35. In Jewish scholarship, Talmudic passages are referenced by the version (Babylonian or Jerusalem Talmud), tractate, folio, and side (recto or verso). For example, "B. Shabbat 33b"

means Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbat, folio 33, side b. In Levinas's readings, and in the present book, all references relate to the more-studied Babylonian Talmud. Therefore, all Talmudic citations given here include only the tractate, folio, and side.

36. Each page of a standard printed Talmud also contains additional commentaries and explications of the Gemara produced by medieval and early modern rabbis.

37. On midrash, see S. Goodhart, "'A Land That Devours Its Inhabitants': Midrashic Reading, Emmanuel Levinas, and Prophetic Exegesis," *Shofar* 26:4, 2008, 13–35.

Chapter 1

1. J. Derrida, *Sauf le nom* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 19, trans. J. P. Leavey Jr., *On the Name*, ed. T. Dutoit (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 37.

2. E. Levinas, *Œuvres 3: Eros, littérature et philosophie*, ed. D. Cohen-Levinas and J-L. Nancy (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle/IMEC, 2013).

3. See J. Taminiaux, "Art et Destin: Le débat avec la phénoménologie dans 'La réalité et son ombre,'" in J. Hansel, ed., *Levinas: De l'être à l'autre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), 77.

4. See E. Neppi, "Levinas et la crise de l'être dans la littérature moderne: Baudelaire, Rimbaud et quelques autres," in J. Hansel, ed., *Levinas à Jérusalem* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007), 103.

5. When, in countless occurrences in his work, Levinas asserts that the ethical relationship to the other is "disinterestedness" (*désintéressement*), he plays on the Latin roots of that word: dis-inter-esse. Etymologically, disinterestedness means something like "not being together." In Levinas's ethics, it is a temporal movement toward exteriority, or "beyond essence." However, here, in RS, Levinas uses the term *désintéressement* in the exact opposite sense, to mean anethical indifference. The relationship between the two kinds of *désintéressement* is discussed already in EE 84; EE' 52, and returns years later in DO 10.

6. F. Armengaud, "Ethique et esthétique," in M. Abensour and C. Chalier, eds., *Cahiers de l'Herne: Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1993), 605–619; F. Ciaramelli, "L'appel infini à l'interprétation: Remarques sur Levinas et l'art," *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 92:1, 1994, 32–52; F. Armengaud, "Faire ou ne pas faire d'images: Emmanuel Levinas et l'art," *Noesis* 3, 2000; F. Y. Albertini, "The Language of the Meeting with the Other and the Phenomenology of Eros: Traces of Aesthetic Thinking in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas," in J. Hansel, ed., *Levinas in Jerusalem: Phenomenology, Ethics, Politics, Aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Springer, 2009), 157–170.

7. Armengaud, "Faire ou ne pas faire d'images"; D. Cohen-Levinas, "L'instant littéraire et la condition d'otage: Levinas, Proust et la signification corporelle du temps," in D. Cohen-Levinas, ed., *Levinas et l'expérience de la captivité* (Collège des Bernardins: Editions Lethielleux, 2010), 61–62.

8. J. Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 75.

9. Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 78.

10. By "religion" Levinas rarely means institutionalized religion, with its priests, practices, prayer communities, etc. He means the openness to transcendence. See TI 30; TI' 40.

11. Miguel Abensour understands the ethical fracture as "utopian." For him, therefore, there are in Levinas "two possible figures of utopia. The utopia of books and the human utopia." Abensour, *Emmanuel Levinas, L'intrigue de l'humain*, 60.

12. As Robbins notes, the term "poetry" or "poetic order" here, as in TI, "denotes not a genre of art but the work of art in general." *Altered Reading*, 79. As we will see, Levinas makes similar broad use of the terms "rhythm" and "dance."

13. See also EN 22; EN' 10.

14. R. Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation* (London: Routledge, 1991), 18. Levinas said almost the same thing in Christoph von Wolzogen's 1985 interview "L'intention, l'événement et l'autre," published in French in C. Ciocan, ed., *Emmanuel Levinas 100, Proceedings of the Centenary Conference Bucharest 2006* (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2007), 36–37. There, however, he adds that his words are not intended to be racist: "Je dis toujours—mais à mots couverts—que les seules choses humaines qui importent, ce sont les Grecs et la Bible; tout le reste est danse. Je trouve que c'est une évidence qui vaut pour le monde entier, il n'y a là-dedans aucun racisme" (36).

15. S. Critchley, "Five Problems in Levinas's View of Politics and the Sketch of a Solution to Them," in P. Atterton and M. Calarco, eds., *Radicalizing Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 44.

16. The chapter "Substitution" of OB defines ethics as anarchic passivity. See S. Courtine-Denamy, *Le Visage en question: De l'image à l'éthique* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2004), 317.

17. T. C. Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot and Agamben* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

18. Compare Levinas's praise of Sosno's obliterated art and his 1949 praise *and* critique of Michel Leiris's "biffures," which "still agree with the primacy of thought in relation to language" (HS 216; OS 145).

19. Robbins, *Altered Reading*, 79.

20. Compare this with what Levinas says in his 1967 essay "Language and Proximity": "The proximity of things is poetry. . . . The poetry of the world is inseparable from proximity par excellence." EDEHH 318; CP 118–119.

21. As Levinas writes at the beginning of TI: "Ethics is an optics" (TI 8; TI' 23).

22. On the relationship between the "said" and closure, magic, idolatry, and oracle, see my "Levinas and the Unnamed Balaam: On Ontology and Idolatry," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 19:2, 2011, 137.

23. To draw a quick parallel with Buber, "saying" is the language of the primary "I–Thou" relationship, while "said" is that of the "I–It" relationship. See DD 211–230; OG 137–151. On Levinas's critique of Buber, see A. Botwinick, *Emmanuel Levinas and the Limits to Ethics: A Critique and a Re-Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2014), 46–50.

24. As Benjamin Gross explains, "More than a speech act produced by the subject, Saying is the energy, the living breath [*souffle*] that moves speech when it establishes a relationship with the Other." B. Gross, "Langage et discours religieux dans l'œuvre d'Emmanuel Levinas," in J. Hansel, ed., *Levinas à Jérusalem* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007), 295.

25. Levinas writes "mon ravissement au discours," meaning "my being ravished or abducted *from* discourse." The published translation gives "my being ravished into discourse."

26. As Levinas writes, in something of a tongue twister, "The *otherwise than being* is stated in a saying that must also be unsaid in order to thus extract the *otherwise than being* from the said in which it already comes to signify but a *being otherwise*" (AE 19; OB 7). On "saying" and "said," see H. Kenaan, *The Ethics of Visuality. Levinas and the Contemporary Gaze*, trans. B. Stein (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 89.

27. J. Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 13. I borrow the translation of D. B. Allison in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 142.

28. J. Derrida, *Mal d'archive: Une impression freudienne* (Paris: Galilée, 2008), 115; trans. E. Prenowitz, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25:2, 1995, 47. On performative repetition, see p. 45.

29. This displacement of meaning is that which allows for commentary or interpretation. It is striking to compare Derrida's reading of Levinas with Levinas's reading of Derrida in "Tout autrement," where Levinas writes, "At the outset, everything is in place; after a few pages or paragraphs of formidable calling into question, nothing is left inhabitable for thought. This is, all philosophical significance aside, a purely literary effect, a new *frisson*, Derrida's poetry" (NP 66; PN 56). Both Levinas and Derrida emphasize the spatial and temporal transformations within each other's texts, and both understand these transformations as a literary style that reflects a philosophical attitude.

30. J.-L. Nancy, "L'intrigue littéraire de Levinas," in E. Levinas, *Œuvres 3: Eros, littérature et philosophie*, ed. D. Cohen-Levinas and J.-L. Nancy (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle/IMEC, 2013), 15.

31. Nancy, "L'intrigue," 15.

32. Nancy, "L'intrigue," 16, 20.

33. Nancy, "L'intrigue," 20.

34. Nancy, "L'intrigue," 30.

35. P. Ricœur, *Autrement: Lecture d*'Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence *d'Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997). Levinas uses the term "correlation" at the start of *Otherwise than Being* (AE 17; OB 6).

36. Ricœur, *Autrement*, 20, 21.

37. Ricœur, *Autrement*, 25.

38. Ricœur, *Autrement*, 26.

39. Ricœur, *Autrement*, 33.

40. Ricœur, *Autrement*, 35.

41. Victoria Tahmasebi-Birgani goes in the same direction when she writes that, for Levinas, sociality "bypasses the particular-universal dialectic. Indeed, social relations capable of abstraction are always corporeal, and vice-versa. Although irreducible to social relations, the face is already marked by social relations of oppression. In Levinas, the concrete is the concrete plus the abstract." V. Tahmasebi-Birgani, *Levinas and the Politics of Non-Violence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 19.

42. CDC 74.

43. According to Sarah Hammerschlag, in *Broken Tablets: Levinas, Derrida, and the Literary Afterlife of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), "Levinas's choice for religion was distinctly a choice against literature." It was "a choice between upsetting the hegemony of the autonomous I by embracing its nether regions, of embracing a world in which 'everything is permitted,' or choosing justice" (74). My point here is that this choice for religion and justice is emphatically expressed in the distinct style of the readings.

44. Accidentally here means "historically." In the Jewish tradition, the Talmud, or "oral law," was transmitted from master to student and was not originally intended to become a written text. The Talmud was written down for pragmatic reasons during the centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple. The traditional view that affirms the superiority of the "voice" over the written text has been famously (but in other contexts) deconstructed by Derrida. Regardless, there is no doubt that the Talmud is the product of a great literary endeavor.

45. See TA 277; TO 355.

46. See Chapter 4.

47. Emphasis mine.

Chapter 2

1. Bernasconi, "The Third Party," 76–87; Fagan, "The Inseparability of Ethics and Politics," 5–22; D. Perpich, "A Singular Justice: Ethics and Politics Between Levinas and Derrida,"

Philosophy Today 42 (Supplement), 1998, 59–70. See also my "Is Liberalism 'All We Need'? Levinas's Politics of *Surplus*," *Political Theory* 30:2, 2002, 204–227.

2. See also AE 245, OB 157; AE 33, OB 16.

3. See B. Bergo, *Levinas Between Ethics and Politics: For the Beauty That Adorns the Earth* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 182.

4. Bernasconi, "The Third Party," 77.

5. Alford, "Levinas and Political Theory," 148.

6. Alford, "Levinas and Political Theory," 148.

7. Alford, "Levinas and Political Theory," 149–150.

8. Alford, "Levinas and Political Theory," 147.

9. The metaphor was used by Levinas himself in "Enigma and Phenomenon," in which he quotes Ionesco's *La cantatrice chauve*: "En somme, nous ne savons toujours pas si, lorsqu'on sonne à la porte, il y a quelqu'un ou non." Later in the same text he writes, "Someone unknown to me rang my doorbell and interrupted my work" (EDE 283, 287; BPW 66, 68). On the doorbell interruption, see also R. D. N. van Riessen, *Man as a Place of God: Levinas' Hermeneutics of Kenosis* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 159–160.

10. It may be necessary to recall here that "Judaism and Revolution" was delivered as a lecture a few months after May 1968. As will become clear in our discussion and even clearer from Chapter 3 on, Levinas seeks to formulate an alternative position in the general controversy or conflict between the Marxist revolutionary discourse of the time in France and the neo-liberal developments of French society. In the entirety of the readings Levinas criticizes the individualism of the liberal tradition without totally rejecting it and admires Marx's holism without adopting it.

11. The translations from the Mishnah and Gemara are taken from A. Aronowicz's translation of "Judaism and Revolution," in NTR.

12. David Brezis proposes a different and interesting interpretation of this passage: the son represents the Christ, ready to give without condition, while the father symbolizes Jewish economy. See D. Brezis, "Messianisme et pensée sacrificielle: Sur la 'dérive christianisante' de Levinas," *Europe* 991–992, 2011, 245.

13. Fagan, "The Inseparability of Ethics and Politics," 7.

14. Levinas's understanding of the story is original and goes beyond the simple meaning of the Mishnaic text. The plain meaning of the text is that *Jewish* workers have rights (which do not necessarily apply to workers from outside the Jewish community), and therefore *Jewish* employers have responsibilities. In parallel, there is a vast system of Talmudic law regulating the well-being of Jewish slaves: based on biblical law, a Jew can sell him/herself into slavery (or be sold in certain cases), but his/her Jewish master is infinitely responsible for his/her welfare, to such an extent that it is said: "Whoever acquires a Hebrew slave acquires a master upon himself" (*Kiddushin* 20a). The connection between the employer's responsibility for workers and that for Hebrew slaves was made by Rabbi Menahem HaMeiri (1249–1315). As such, therefore, the idea of the infinite responsibility of the employer for his workers (free workers or slaves) is not new and is only reformulated by Levinas. However, the fact that this responsibility is universal, and that its universality is based on Abraham's hospitality, is Levinassian.

15. For Stephane Mosès, "the foundation of the social pact [*le pacte social*] is not a contract but a demand of justice for the other." "L'idée de justice dans la philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas," 384. However, here Levinas overtly uses the word "contract."

16. Levinas's point here is based on a discussion later in the Gemara (*Baba Metsi'a* 87a) on the story of Rabbi Yohanan ben Mathia and his son. That discussion focuses on the word "and"

in the phrase "bread and legumes." Here is Levinas's reading (the translation here uses "dried vegetables" for the word earlier translated as "legumes"): "The menu seems meager, to our taste, at least. Nevertheless, it contains the principle of variety: the conjunction *and*. For a little further on, the Gemara will ask: 'Bread *and* dried vegetables or bread *of* dried vegetables'? In Hebrew, only one letter, the *vav*, needs to be taken out to eliminate the conjunction. The expression would then mean 'bread of dried vegetables.' . . . The answer given is emphatic: 'By God, the conjunction is necessary. The conjunction is as important here as the rudder is necessary to steer a ship in a dangerous river.' Without the conjunction, therefore, there is catastrophe. . . . To feed another is to keep food in its nature as a meal; it is never to transform it into subsistence fare. To a certain degree, it is necessary when feeding another to humor his fancy; otherwise it's a shipwreck" (DSS 21; NTR 100).

17. See Katz, *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism*, 2, 6.

18. As William Paul Simmons writes, "For Levinas, without the a priori rights of the Other, the rights of man will be in danger, and vice versa." W. P. Simmons, *Human Rights and the Marginalized Other* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 98.

19. See EN 218; EN' 158: "Goodness for the first one who happens to come along, a right of man. A right of the other man above all." As Scott Davidson writes, "Although his defense of human rights puts him in common cause with the liberal political tradition, it is perhaps less obvious, but equally true, that the political dimension of Levinas's critique of the totality also targets the 'possessive individualism' assumed by liberal theory." S. Davidson, "The Rights of the Other: Levinas and Human Rights," in S. Davidson and D. Perpich, eds., *Totality and Infinity at 50* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012), 174. See also P. Delhom's comparison between Levinas and Hobbes in "Necessity and Legitimacy of the State," in J. Hansel, ed., *Levinas in Jerusalem: Phenomenology, Ethics, Politics, Aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Springer, 2009), 81–82.

20. See J. Robbins, *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), 53: "The political order—institutions and justice—relieve this incessant responsibility." See also EN 123; EN' 105, and the video recording of Levinas's 1990 interview with Bernard Henri Levy, in which Levinas explains that Hobbes's state limits violence while in his own conception the state limits love. *Levinas* (Paris: Editions Montparnasse, 2013). For a valuable discussion of Levinas's "discourse of responsibility" versus his "discourse of rights," see M. L. Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 92–106.

21. See also EI 74–75; EI' 80: "It is extremely important to know if society in the current sense of the term is the result of the limitation of the principle that man is a wolf to man, or if, to the contrary, it results from the limitation of the principle that man is for one another. Does the social, with its institutions, universal forms and laws, result from limiting the consequences of the war between men, or from limiting the infinity which opens in the ethical relationship of man to man?"

22. The Temple, of course, was no longer standing at the time the Gemara was composed, having been destroyed years before even the Mishnah was put to writing. It has long been remarked that the Talmud dedicates an extraordinary amount of space to ritual matters that were no longer relevant at the time of its composition. The reasons for this are a matter of debate among scholars and are not of interest to Levinas.

23. F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. B. E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 322.

24. On Hegel, Rosenzweig, and Levinas, see Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, in particular chapters 4 and 5, 80–128.

25. For more on Hegel and Levinas, see Chapters 7 and 8. For a detailed review of Levinas's relation to Hegel, see S. Benso, "Gestures of Work: Levinas and Hegel," *Continental Philosophy Review* 40, 2007, 307–330.

26. Gibbs notes that "by the time of *Otherwise than Being*, economics is eclipsed totally and has no place in the text." Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, 235. As we see here, however, economics is very present in readings written around the time of *Otherwise than Being* (1974). "Judaism and Revolution" is from 1969, "Model of the West" from 1976. In other words, the readings emphasize questions that the phenomenological books set aside.

27. Recall that as we saw earlier, the ego is also an "other" to itself: in responsibility, it comes after the other, but in politics, it is one of the various parties that demand to be provided for.

28. This is also the principle of interpretation, and, in particular, of biblical interpretation. The Torah becomes material and acquires meaning only in the form of something that is very different from it and sometimes opposed to it: the Talmud and its subsequent commentaries.

29. E. Weitzman, "Necessary Interruption: Traces of the Political in Levinas," *Theory & Event* 11:2, 2008, at http://muse.jhu.edu/article/240334.

30. J.-F. Rey, *Levinas: Le passeur de justice* (Paris: Michalon, 1997), 53, 67. See also H. Ben Pazi, *Zionism: A Levinasian View. Identity. Ethics. Responsibility* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017), 35.

31. Mosès calls ethics a "condition de possibilité." "L'idée de justice dans la philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas," 389.

32. E. Levinas, "Ethics of the Infinite," in Richard Kearney, ed., *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 64.

33. See TI 30; TI' 40. See also ED 142; WD 95–96.

34. See Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, 410.

35. J. Caro, "Levinas and the Palestinians," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 35:6, 2009, 672.

36. See J.-F. Rey, "Qu'ai-je à faire avec justice? Levinas penseur de la justice," in J. Hansel, ed., *Levinas à Jérusalem* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2007), 272.

37. R. Gibbs, "Verdict and Sentence: Cover and Levinas on the Robe of Justice," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 14:1–2, 2006, 74.

38. Rey, *Levinas: Le passeur de justice*, 45.

39. Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 143; *Is It Righteous to Be?* 68–69.

Chapter 3

1. Most scholars follow Levinas in this matter. See Gibbs's excellent chapter 10 of *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas*, "Marx and Levinas: Liberation in Society," in which, however, "Levinas's social thought" is explored "by coordinating my discussion around the theme of the third person" (230). See also Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, 91: "Politics—if we use this term for what I have just enumerated, our social and political lives."

2. This calls to mind Hannah Arendt's analyses of "loneliness" in totalitarian society and her criticism of the "social" of modernity. See H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1979), and H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

3. On Heidegger and the social, see, inter alia, K. C. Bessant, "Authenticity, Community and Modernity," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 41:1, 2010, 22–32; P. Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*, trans. P. Collier (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

4. J.-P. Sartre, *Huit-Clos* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 93.

5. See J. D. Caputo, "*Adieu-sans Dieu*: Derrida and Levinas," in J. Bloechl, ed., *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 293; H. De Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspective from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 336.

6. Recent works in environmental ethics use Levinas to argue that the technologically advanced West has a responsibility toward the entire earth, which, as a whole, is negatively affected by every step of "progress." See W. Edelglass, J. Hatley, and C. Diehm, eds., *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012); M. Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics and Saving the Natural World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

7. Derrida reads Levinas's pages on the cities of refuge in a very different way. He focuses on these cities' hospitality as the manifestation of a certain right, which he understands as the political right or law of the State, founded on violence. This understanding leads to further thoughts about immigration, asylum, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, etc. See A 177–211; A' 101–123; J. Derrida, *Force de loi* (Paris: Galilée, 2005), trans. M. Quaintance, "Force of Law," in G. Anidjar, ed., *Acts of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 230–298; J. Derrida, *De l'hospitalité* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1997), trans. R. Bowlby, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

8. See V. Tahmasebi, "Levinas, Nietzsche, and Benjamin's 'Divine Violence,'" in A. Horowitz and G. Horowitz, eds., *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 183.

9. L. Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), xiii.

10. Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 315.

11. Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 5.

12. Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 3.

13. C. F. Alford, "Emmanuel Levinas and Iris Murdoch: Ethics as Exit?" *Philosophy and Literature* 26:1, 2002, 37.

Chapter 4

1. The Gemara's sudden turns are not unusual. Levinas, however, has his own approach to the Rabbis' digressions and homogenizes their various stories and rulings to generate a consistent and significant meaning.

2. See tractate *Shabbat* 33b. For an enlightening comparison between Plato's Allegory of the Cave and Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai's cave, see C. E. Fonrobert, "Plato in Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai's Cave (B. Shabbat 33b–34a): The Talmudic Inversion of Plato's Politics of Philosophy," *AJS Review* 31:2, 2007, 277–296.

3. W. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in P. Demetz, ed., *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 284.

4. Derrida, *Force de loi*, 97–98; "Force of Law," 274.

5. See P. Atterton, "Levinas, Justice and Just War," in J. Hansel, ed., *Levinas in Jerusalem: Phenomenology, Ethics, Politics, Aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Springer, 2009), 144.

6. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 286. The founding moment of the State is usually mythic and includes some kind of divine violence.

7. On violence in Benjamin and Levinas, see Tahmasebi, "Levinas, Nietzsche, and Benjamin's 'Divine Violence,'" 183–185.

8. A. Camus, *Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, ed. Roger Quilliot (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1962), 365.

9. J. Rancière, "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," in J. Rajchman, ed., *The Identity in Question* (London: Routledge, 1995), 63.

10. J. Rancière, *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 16.

11. According to Annette Aronowicz, "at this point, Levinas makes a crucial distinction—between police work and political involvement of another kind. What the officer does is clearly police work. . . . He merely carries out the decisions of those in authority. When Rav Eleazar enters politics, on the other hand, he comes with his own understanding of what evil is and where to find it." A. Aronowicz, "Judaism, the Jewish People, and the State," in J. Hansel, ed., *Levinas in Jerusalem: Phenomenology, Ethics, Politics, Aesthetics* (Amsterdam: Springer, 2009), 101. It does not seem to me, however, that Levinas makes such a distinction here. On the contrary, through the advice of Rabbi Eleazar he exposes the essence of the officer's work and shows that policing and politicizing are the same thing.

12. C. Beals, *Levinas and the Wisdom of Love: The Question of Invisibility* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), 18.

13. Derrida adds an interesting twist to his explanation of Levinas's ethical position in his comparison of Levinas and Eric Weil: "The discourse which Weil acknowledges as nonviolent is ontology. . . . 'Harmony between men will be established by itself if men are not concerned with themselves, but with what is.' . . . This coherence in ontology is violence itself for Levinas" (ED 171; WD 315).

14. The Talmud is undoubtedly extremely ironic in suggesting that the Romans do not know how to do efficient police work and that rabbis (who spend their time in studies and have no political power) should teach them.

Chapter 5

1. See E. Levinas, "La souffrance inutile," in J. Rolland, ed., *Les cahiers de la nuit surveillée n. 3, Emmanuel Levinas* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1984), 332–334; E. Levinas, "Useless Suffering," trans. R. A. Cohen in R. Bernasconi and D. Wood, eds., *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other* (London: Routledge, 1988), 156–167. See also R. A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation After Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 266–282.

2. R. Visker, *The Inhuman Condition: Looking for Difference After Levinas and Heidegger* (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 112.

3. As Brian Schroeder shows, even where Levinas describes evil as "excess," this "points to that which is beyond, the Good." B. Schroeder, "A Trace of the Eternal Return? Levinas and Neoplatonism," in B. Schroeder and S. Benso, eds., *Levinas and the Ancients* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 224. See also J. Bloechl, "Levinas, Daniel Webster, and Us: Radical Responsibility and the Problem of Evil," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 38:3, 1998, 259–273.

4. Compare with Heidegger's understanding of evil. On this topic, see, e.g., R. M. Capobianco, "Heidegger and the Critique of the Understanding of Evil as Privatio Boni," *Philosophy and Theology* 5:3, 1991, 175–186.

5. *Le privé* is privacy, while *privé de* means deprived of.

6. See B. Schroeder, "Can Fig Trees Grow on Mountains? Reversing the Question of Great Politics," in A. Horowitz and G. Horowitz, eds., *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 149.

7. Levinas's reading conforms with *Pirkei Avot* 3:10, which holds that "[late] morning sleep, midday wine, chatter of children, and sitting in the assembly houses of the *Am Ha'arets* [unlearned people] remove a person from the world."

8. Eisenstadt's analysis goes in this direction when she writes, "Is community the side by side of a united movement into the future? Or does it also require a kind of face to face?" However, she understands Levinas's justice as the "side by side," namely, as a kind of "unified social action," while I claim that Levinas's non-indifferent justice is the relationship between politics and ethics, namely, the "side by side" together with the "face to face." See O. Eisenstadt, "Levinas in the Key of the Political," in A. Horowitz and G. Horowitz, eds., *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 66.

9. On the conception of the home as hospitality, see H. Cummins, "Sukkot: Levinas and the Festival of the Cabins," in R. Kearney and J. Taylor, eds., *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 78–79.

10. M. Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 1.

11. Viroli, *For Love of Country*, 1–2.

12. M. C. Nussbaum, *For Love of Country?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 9.

13. Nussbaum, *For Love of Country?* 11.

14. Viroli, *For Love of Country*, 162.

15. Viroli, *For Love of Country*, 163.

16. R. Bernasconi, "Strangers and Slaves in the Land of Egypt," in A. Horowitz and G. Horowitz, eds., *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 253. See TI 166; TI' 156.

17. For the Talmudic sages, a scholar was of necessity a teacher and student. The notion of the lone scholar in solitary communion with piles of dusty manuscripts would have been alien to them.

18. See Y. Leibowitz, "Religious Praxis: The Meaning of Halakhah," in E. Goldman, ed., *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992). Leibowitz attacks the "humanist moralists" and the "humanist religion," which "is worship of man, nothing other than the idolatry referred to by the verse 'that you seek not after your own heart.' Anything a man does to satisfy his own needs, whether material or spiritual, is self-service, not divine service" (20). Note that Levinas also associates ideology with idolatry, as I will soon show.

19. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 469.

20. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 470–471.

21. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 470.

22. For a valuable discussion of this reading, see D. Achtenberg, "Bearing the Other and Bearing Sexuality: Women and Gender in Levinas's 'And God Created Woman,'" *Levinas Studies: An Annual Review* 10, 2016, 137–154. The topic of Levinas and the feminine has generated an extremely large body of work, which has convincingly put forward two arguments: first, that Levinas never escapes chauvinistic stereotypes; and second, that often in his work the feminine should be seen as a metaphor of human inclinations that apply to both men and women. Claire Katz proposes a third reading, in which she argues that in Levinas "the feminine is a dynamic structure . . . [which] does indeed play a dual role as both metaphor *and* as referent to empirical women, and that in this dual role the feminine serves as both the interruption of virility and the model for the ethical." C. E. Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 3. My concern in this chapter is not with Levinas's treatment of the feminine. Therefore, in my reading of "And God Created Woman" I do not discuss this aspect of Levinas's argument, which, while proposing an important and novel understanding of evil, undoubtedly reproduces chauvinistic stereotypes.

23. See also DSS 163; NTR 186–187.

24. C. E. Katz, "Raising Cain: The Problem of Evil and the Question of Responsibility," *Crosscurrents* 55:2, 2005, 221.

25. As Bernstein writes, "There is no evil in a world of 'pure being,' just as there is no good in a world of 'pure being.'" See R. J. Bernstein, "Evil and the Temptation of Theodicy," in R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 265.

Chapter 6

1. D. L. Turner, "Levinas, Bataille and the Theology of Animal Life," in C. Blake, C. Molloy, and S. Shakespeare, eds., *Beyond Human: From Animality to Transhumanism* (London: Continuum, 2012), 168.

2. For an interesting analysis of this "contemporary orientation to nature," see the introduction to J. Bennett and W. Chaloupka, eds., *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics, and the Environment* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), ix. Heidegger's position is considerably subtler than we have space to summarize here. However, even he—who understands technology not as antithetical to nature but as the way in which, in modernity, nature is revealed to us—calls attention to the dangerous potential of technology. See M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977), 26–28. See also D. E. Cooper, "Heidegger on Nature," *Environmental Values* 4, 2005, 339–351.

3. These two central elements of Spinozism, monism and conatus, are considered "to accord with basic strivings within the deep ecological movement." A. Naess, "Spinoza and Ecology," *Philosophia* 7, 1977, 46. Levinas's position is undoubtedly utterly opposed to this version of ecological thinking. Among the extensive literature on Spinoza and nature, see G. Sessions, "Spinoza and Jeffers on Man in Nature," *Inquiry* 20, 1977, 481–528; M. P. Levine, "Pantheism, Ethics and Ecology," *Environmental Values* 3:2, 1994, 121–148; K. L. F. Houle, "Spinoza and Ecology Revisited," *Environmental Ethics* 19:4, 1997, 417–431.

4. For some reason, the readings are only seldom mentioned in scholarship on Levinas and the environment. About the meeting of ethics and ontology in Levinas's phenomenological books, see W. P. Simmons, "The Third: Levinas' Theoretical Move from An-Archical Ethics to the Realm of Justice and Politics," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25:6, 1999, 83–104; D. Perpich, "Scarce Resources? Levinas, Animals, and the Environment," in C. Diehm, W. Edelglass, and J. Hatley, eds., *Facing Nature: Levinas and Environmental Thought* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012); Fagan, "The Inseparability of Ethics and Politics"; A. Lourmansky, "Reply to Fagan: Hanging God at Auschwitz: The Necessity of a Solitary Encounter with the Other as the Genesis of Levinasian Ethics," *Contemporary Political Theory* 8, 2009, 23–43.

5. On Levinas's concept of "amphibology," see M. Vanni, "Transcendance et ambiguïté: Quelques problèmes d'interprétation de la pensée de Levinas," *Les études philosophiques* 57, 2001–2002, 103–122.

6. As Levinas emphasized elsewhere, "the Jewish man" is here a metaphor for humanity. See DSS 18, 171; NTR 98, 191.

7. See S. Hammerschlag's chapter "The Ethics of Uprootedness: Levinas's Postwar Project," in her *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 117–165. On Heidegger's hut, see A. Sharr, *Heidegger's Hut* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

8. A. Horowitz and G. Horowitz, "Is Liberalism All We Need? Prelude via Fascism," in A. Horowitz and G. Horowitz, eds., *Difficult Justice: Commentaries on Levinas and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 17.

9. V. Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. R. Chandler (London: Fontana, 1986), 407. See C. Chalier, "Levinas and the Feminine," in R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 120.

10. The link between fire and evil, and then epidemic and hunger, is explicit in the rabbinic text. Levinas follows the Talmudic line but gives it a contemporary twist.

11. J. Llewelyn, "Am I Obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)," in R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 234.

12. In their interview with Levinas, Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes, and Alison Ainley made some effort to pin him down on whether an animal could be the "other." Unable to avoid the question entirely, Levinas remained steadfastly ambiguous in his answers: "One cannot entirely refuse the face of an animal. . . . I don't know if a snake has a face. I can't answer that question. A more specific analysis is needed" (PM 169, 172). See also EN 115; EN' 105, and IEP 1–8; EP 289–297.

13. C. Diehm, "Facing Nature: Levinas Beyond the Human," *Philosophy Today* 44:1, 2000, 52.

14. The problem of this position is evident: it is Levinas who judges nature as facing or not facing the other. How can Levinas know nature's subjectivity? Buber made a simpler but also more convincing point in discussing the two types of relationships, I–It (which is similar to what Levinas calls the ontological) and I–Thou (which is close but not identical to what Levinas calls the ethical), using in both cases the example of looking at a tree. In Buber's text, subjectivity always belongs to the human "I." See M. Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R. G. Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 7. On the non-definition of the other, see L. Irigaray, "Six Questions to Emmanuel Levinas: On the Divinity of Love," in R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, eds., *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 109–118.

15. My reading therefore differs from that of David Clark, who reads Levinas's rejection of the Odyssey model as evidence that Bobby's behavior is only a "kind of simulation . . . [a] substitute for true dutifulness." See D. Clark, "On Being 'the Last Kantian in Nazi Germany': Dwelling with Animals After Levinas," in B. Gabriel and S. Ilcan, eds., *Postmodernism and the Ethical Subject* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 64.

16. See M. Calarco, "Faced by Animals," in P. Atterton and M. Calarco, eds., *Radicalizing Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 114–116.

17. By contrast, Deborah Bird Rose argues that Levinas "rejects Bobby in the end, in order to hold on to a universalizable ethics." However, she then mentions the possibility of another reading and wonders, "Did Levinas seek to escape his own abstractions by situating himself with the dog, rather than with the humans? Is he advocating the proposition that Bobby's call delivers us from the tyranny of abstractions?" D. B. Rose, *Wild Dog Dreaming* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 36.

18. See C. Welz, "A Wandering Dog as the 'Last Kantian in Nazi Germany': Revisiting the Debate on Levinas's Supposed Antinaturalistic Humanism," *Levinas Studies: An Annual Review* 6, 2011, 78; Perpich, "Scarce Resources," 71.

19. See also EN 176–179; EN' 159–178.

20. As Levinas emphasizes, this text makes no claim to historical authenticity.

21. He could have avoided all ambiguity by writing "c'est là qu'on pense à Dieu."

22. "At the same time": just as there are distinct kinds of space, there are two distinct kinds of time. Ontology functions as historical time; ethics is related to an immemorial time.

Chapter 7

1. See A. Alpert, "Not to Be European Would Not Be 'To Be European Still': Undoing Eurocentrism in Levinas and Others," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 23:1, 2015, 23; J. Drabinski, "Who Are His Poor? Reading Levinas with Rancière," *International Studies in Philosophy* 39:4, 2007, 1–14; Z. Zalloua, "The Ethics of Trauma/The Trauma of Ethics," in J. R. DiLeo and U. Mehan, eds., *Terror, Theory and the Humanities* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2012).

2. For instance, M. Jay, "Hostage Philosophy: Levinas's Ethical Thought," *Tikkun* 5:6, 1990, 85–87; M. J. Shapiro, "The Encounter: Unreading, Unmapping the Imperium," in D. Campbell and M. J. Shapiro, eds., *Moral Spaces: Rethinking Ethics and World Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 57–91; M. Cauchi, "Otherwise than *Laïcité*? Toward an Agonistic Secularism in Levinas," *Levinas Studies: An Annual Review* 10, 2007, 187–219.

3. O. Eisenstadt and C. E. Katz, "The Faceless Palestinian: A History of an Error," *Telos* 174, 2016, 32. Eisenstadt and Katz's remark was made in the specific context of the misreadings of Levinas's interview on the Sabra and Shatila massacres.

4. This comparison has often been suggested. See Alpert, "Not to Be European," 21; Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 159; Critchley, "Five Problems in Levinas's View of Politics," 43.

5. See J. Cohen, "Religion Against Politics: Versions of the State in Modern Jewish Thought," *Jewish Quarterly* 49:4, 2002, 23.

6. On the frequent use of the term "intrigue" in Levinas, see J. Dudiak, *The Intrigue of Ethics: A Reading of the Idea of Discourse in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); Abensour, *Emmanuel Levinas, L'intrigue de l'humain*.

7. The fact that in the Bible as we have it 1 Samuel is placed after Deuteronomy is here irrelevant, because in all likelihood these are different sources written at different times and edited into their present form much later.

8. Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 160.

9. Levinas celebrates "the exceptional essence epitomized in France, in which political and moral life came together" (DL 362; DF 261). See also Levinas's 1948 letter to Blanchot on the creation of the State of Israel, in which Levinas explains the "secular eternity" of France and of the French language. "Lettre à Maurice Blanchot: Sur la création de l'État d'Israël," in *Etre juif* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2015), 71–77, trans. S. Hammerschlag, "Letter to Maurice Blanchot on the Creation of the State of Israel," *Critical Inquiry* 36:4, 2010, 645–648. As Fagenblat rightly emphasizes, "In no case are [France and Israel] privileged over other secular republics based on a heritage of thinking, any heritage of thinking, that points to 'ethics.'" Fagenblat, *A Covenant of Creatures*, 184. However, their being not privileged does not imply that they are not *particular*, each in their own way. Each expresses a particular path toward ethics.

10. See also DL 139; DF 96.

11. On the differences between Levinas's messianic Zionism and Yeshayahu Leibowitz's "minimalist" Zionism, see T. Sessler, *Leibowitz and Levinas: Between Judaism and Universalism* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008), 89. See also D. Banon, "E. Levinas et Y. Leibovitz," in D. Cohen-Levinas and S. Trigano, eds., *Emmanuel Levinas: Philosophie et judaïsme* (Paris: In Press Editions, 2002), 79–86.

12. See also IEL 89.

13. On the interpretations and misreadings of that interview, see Eisenstadt and Katz, "The Faceless Palestinian."

14. Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 217.

15. Levinas, "Lettre à Maurice Blanchot," 75; "Letter to Maurice Blanchot," 647.

16. See my "The Fate of the Canaanites and the State of Israel in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas," in K. Berthelot, J. David, and M. Hirshman, eds., *The Gift of the Land and the Fate of the Canaanites in Jewish Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 445–455.

17. For another discussion of "Promised Land or Permitted Land?" see Goodhart, "'A Land That Devours Its Inhabitants.'"

18. E. Levinas, "Un langage qui nous est familier," in J. Rolland, ed., *Les cahiers de la nuit surveillée n. 3, Emmanuel Levinas* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1984), 327, trans. D. Collins, "A Language Familiar to Us," *Telos* 44, 1980, 200. In September 1981 Levinas writes, "Today, I will no longer say refugees, but Palestinians" (ADV 14; BTV xvi).

19. On Levinas's reaction to the massacres and his answers in IEP, see Eisenstadt and Katz, "The Faceless Palestinian," and Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, chap. 10.

20. Poirié, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 167; *Is It Righteous to Be?* 81–82.

21. Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, 159.

22. Note that "The State of Caesar and the State of David," published in 1982 in *Beyond the Verse*, dates in fact to 1971. It first appeared in E. Castelli, ed., *La théologie de l'histoire: Révélation et histoire* (*Actes du Colloque organisé par le Centre international d'études humanistes et par l'Institut d'études philosophiques de Rome, les 5–11 janvier 1971 à Rome*) (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1971), 71–80.

23. Critchley, "Five Problems in Levinas's View of Politics," 43.

24. See also DSS 18, 171; NTR 98, 191, and DL 121; DF 83. On the universal and the particular in Levinas's Zionism, see Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, 201–202.

25. Interview with Salomon Malka, in *Is It Righteous to Be?* 94.

26. Levinas, "Un langage qui nous est familier," 327; "A Language Familiar to Us," 201.

27. On Levinas and Hegel on the question of alterity, see R. Bernasconi, "Levinas Face to Face—With Hegel," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 13:3, 1982, 267–276; B. Schroeder, "The (Non) Logic of Desire and War: Hegel and Levinas," in H. J. Silverman, ed., *Philosophy and Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 45–62.

28. Note that in *Adieu* Derrida is much less critical of Levinas's Hegelianism.

Chapter 8

1. Published in G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 1–36.

2. For the relationship between Scholem's concept of messianism and that of Levinas, see J. Mattern, "Mémoire et messianisme: Sur l'idée messianique chez G. Scholem, J. Taubes et E. Levinas," *Cahiers d'études lévinassiennes* 4, 2005, 223; P. Bouretz, "Pour ce qui est du monde qui vient," *Rue Descartes* 19, 1998, 108; Batnitsky, *Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas*, 161.

3. A. Neher, ed., *La conscience juive: Données et débats* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), 268. This volume contains the proceedings of the first three conferences and includes transcripts of the debates that followed the lectures. This is an inestimable tool for understanding the historical context of Levinas's first readings. It is also of great help in clarifying certain nuances that are underdeveloped in the readings.

4. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 1.

5. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 31.

6. See A. Engel, *Gershom Scholem: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 141–147.

7. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 30.

8. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 19.

9. Note that Levinas also begins his 1947 essay "Being Jewish" by referencing Scholem's work, and immediately adds, "We would like to attempt something different." E. Levinas, "Etre juif," *Cahiers d'études lévinassiennes* 1, 2002, 101, trans. M. B. Mader, "Being Jewish," *Continental Philosophy Review* 40, 2007, 206.

10. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 8–9.

11. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 21.

12. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 25.

13. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 30.

14. For Gibbs, "There is, I would say, in the law a call to go beyond the law—and so the Talmud itself is that exploration of law and its edge, is itself not against the law or even outside the law, but is within the law." Gibbs, "Verdict and Sentence," 79.

15. A. Bielik-Robson, "Tarrying with the Apocalypse: The Wary Messianism of Rosenzweig and Levinas," *Journal for Cultural Research* 13:3–4, 2009, 256–258.

16. Neher, *La conscience juive*, 269.

17. I allude here to Scholem's masterpiece, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

18. On Levinas's "counterhistoricism," see Moyn, "Emmanuel Levinas's Talmudic Readings," 345–346.

19. Of course, interpretation also characterizes what Levinas does in the readings. Therefore, ethics (or the Law, through its interpretation), as the openness to the other, and interpretation, as the openness to the other of the text, are one and the same gesture. See NLT 32; NewTR 68.

20. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 347–348.

21. Bielik-Robson, "Tarrying with the Apocalypse," 260.

22. Bielik-Robson, "Tarrying with the Apocalypse," 263.

23. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 272.

24. Bielik-Robson, "Tarrying with the Apocalypse," 259.

25. See G. Bensussan, *Ethique et expérience: Lévinas politique* (Strasbourg: La Phocide, 2008), 45–47.

26. Brezis, "Messianisme et pensée sacrificielle," 243.

27. See C. Chalier, "Le bonheur ajourné," *Rue Descartes* 19, 1998, 38; and C. Chalier, "L'utopie messianique," in J.-C. Aeschliman, ed., *Répondre d'autrui: Emmanuel Levinas* (Neuchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière, 1989), 53–69.

28. Brezis, "Messianisme et pensée sacrificielle," 263.

29. M. Vanni, "Messianisme et temporalité: Eschatologique dans la philosophie d'Emmanuel Levinas," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 130, 1998, 38.

30. On how the time of the other disrupts the ego's time, see R. A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 147.

31. Jean Wahl (1888–1974) was a French scholar and a specialist on Hegel and Kierkegaard. On Wahl and other participants of the colloques, see Hammerschlag, *Broken Tablets*.

32. Neher, *La conscience juive*, 138.

33. Neher, *La conscience juive*, 148.

34. Levinas, *Les imprévus de l'histoire*, 136; *Unforeseen History*, 97.

35. Neher, *La conscience juive*, 148.

36. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 7–8.

37. Z. Harvey, "Post-Biblical and Post Philosophical Myth," in H. Pedaya, ed., *Myth in Judaism* (Be'er Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1996), 114. On the difference between Scholem's dialectics and Hegel's, see also N. Rotenstreich, *Essays in Jewish Philosophy in the Modern Era* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1996), 299.

38. Auguste Comte, *Discours sur l'esprit positif* (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 2–16.

39. Neher, *La conscience juive*, 147. On Levinas's critique of Hegel's judgment of history, see J.-F. Rey, "Le maître absolu: Hegel et Hobbes dans la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas," *Revue internationale de philosophie* 235, 2006, 80.

40. J. Halperin and G. Levitte, eds., *Colloque des Intellectuels Juifs: Politique et religion. Données et débats* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 46.

41. Vanni, "Messianisme et temporalité," 49.

42. Vanni, "Messianisme et temporalité," 49.

43. M. Kavka, "Reading Messianically with Gershom Scholem," in M. L. Morgan and S. Weitzman, eds., *Rethinking the Messianic Idea in Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 414.

44. Kavka, "Reading Messianically with Gershom Scholem," 413.

45. Kavka, "Reading Messianically with Gershom Scholem," 414.

46. M. Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

47. Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, 29.

48. Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, 179.

49. Kavka, "Reading Messianically with Gershom Scholem," 414.

50. J. Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 102, trans. P. Kamuf, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), 74.

51. J. Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), trans. G. Collins, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 1997), 104.

52. Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, 20.

53. Note again that "The State of Caesar and the State of David" dates to 1971. *Otherwise than Being* was published in 1974. In other words, in the 1970s the contradictions and dialectics expressed in the readings appear *alongside* the ethical claims, as they did in the 1960s when Levinas wrote both *Totality and Infinity* and the "Messianic Texts."

54. Kavka, *Jewish Messianism and the History of Philosophy*, 29.

55. See A. Aronowicz, "The State and the Jews: Reflections on *Difficult Freedom*," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 14:1–2, 2006, 109–130.

Conclusion

1. P. Simon-Nahum, "'Penser le judaïsme': Retour sur les Colloques des intellectuels juifs de langue française (1957–2000)," *Archives Juives* 38:1, 2005, 79–106.

2. Mortley, *French Philosophers in Conversation*, 18.

3. Levinas, *Les imprévus de l'histoire*, 150; *Unforeseen History*, 108.

4. See R. Bernasconi, "Extraterritoriality: Outside the Subject, Outside the State," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35, 2008, 167.

5. Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, 147. See also chap. 5.

6. Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, 135.

7. Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, 133. See Bernasconi, "Extraterritoriality," 173–174, 178.

8. And of Kant and Fichte. Morgan, *Levinas's Ethical Politics*, 128.

9. The question of Hegel's liberalism is debated. See J. Drydyk, "Hegel's Politics: Liberal or Democratic?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16:1, 1986, 99–122; F. R. Cristi, "Hegel's Conservative Liberalism," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 22:4, 1989, 717–738; S. B. Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); P. Franco, "Hegel and Liberalism," *Review of Politics* 59:4, 1997, 831–860; L. Siep, "Hegel's Liberal, Social and 'Ethical' State," in D. Moyar, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Hegel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199355228.013.24.

10. On the postwar French intellectual milieu, see Moyn, *Origins of the Other*, 220.

11. Abensour, *Emmanuel Levinas, L'intrigue de l'humain*, 29–30.

12. Bernasconi, "Extraterritoriality," 170.

13. As has been widely documented in recent years, this conception of *laïcité* is currently under challenge from segments of the Muslim community and proponents of identity politics.

14. In her anthology of French Jewish thought, Sarah Hammerschlag notes that at the end of the nineteenth century, "French Jews had come to see France itself as the inheritor of the Mosaic legacy." Levinas seems here to share this conception, at least in part. S. Hammerschlag, introduction to *Modern French Jewish Thought: Writings on Religion and Politics* (Waltham, Mass.: Brandeis University Press, 2018), xiii.

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