

Alterity, Asymmetrical Relationships, and Allegiance: A Historical Approach to Levinas

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Abstract: The economic shift initiated in the 1980s, the reign of the market and the computer, often resulted in the reappearing of a “feudal legal structure . . . consisting of networks of allegiance.”¹ This paradox (ultra-modernity and neo-feudalism) is rarely considered a historical tool for studying late twentieth-century philosophy. This article is a first step in that direction, using Supiot’s characterization of the period as a “shift from law to tie” to approach the work of Levinas. In *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas defends a revelation of or exposure to the Other directed against the “neutralization of the Other” as being, object, or phenomenon. It is meant to liberate an interpellation by the Other before and beyond any general constitution of the object by the subject. Can this shift in twentieth-century philosophy be reconsidered if we add to Levinas’s own account Supiot’s historical understanding concerning the withering-away of general normative forms in favor of personal ties of allegiance?

Keywords: Levinas, alterity, twentieth-century philosophy, modern Jewish philosophy

Introduction

In his lectures at the Collège de France in the years 2012–2014 titled *La Gouvernance par les nombres* (*Governance by Numbers*), legal historian Alain Supiot describes a far-reaching shift in human practice and social representations developing and expanding since the 1980s:

The overthrow of the reign of the law by governance by numbers enacts the dream of an arithmetically attainable social harmony. . . . People are no longer expected to act freely within the limits laid down by the law, but to react

¹Alain Supiot, *Governance by Numbers: The Making of a Legal Model of Allegiance*, 10.

in real time to the multiple signals they receive, in order to meet the targets they are assigned.²

The shift from the rule of law to the governance by numbers, mapped and analyzed by Supiot, is not a regular historical transformation. It involves no less than the “withering-away of the state,”³ or at least the redefinition⁴ of this major Western institution, built and developed from the twelfth century, to the welfare state of the decades following World War II. The bold thesis of the distinguished *professeur* at the Collège de France is a paradox. The governance by numbers expands its scope of influence, replacing the Fordist model in economy and the sovereignty of the modern state in politics with a new computerized management of enterprises and nations according to immanent changing quantitative objectives fixed by the global market. While this viral shift is affecting progressively the entire planet with the mundialization of the 1980s, “a typically feudal legal structure is re-emerging, consisting of networks of allegiance within which each person seeks the protection of someone stronger than he is, or the support of someone weaker.”⁵ For David Harvey, however, the salient characteristic of this shift is the “political project . . . to restore the power of economic elites.”⁶ In any case, the more the late twentieth-century economic turn progresses, the more a model of allegiance or subordination returns, re-appearing from behind the withering-away of the rule of law. By the re-emerging of the feudal model of allegiance, Supiot intends a transformation at three levels: the individual worker, the transnational companies, and the states. In the new emerging context, the individual worker is being asked to abandon the contractual exchange of hours of work against a wage for a total mobilization of his or her labor capacities for the changing objectives of the company. In parallel, the transnational firm leaves “the Fordist model of an integrated and highly hierarchical organization,” creating instead transnational “networks of autonomous legal and economic entities, in a typically feudal structure.”⁷ As for the states, they evolved from sovereignty to a voluntary allegiance to suzerain structures incarnating the global market.⁸ At these three levels, Supiot observes a recurrent and systemic transformation, the “shift from law to tie” (*le déplacement de la loi au lien*).⁹

The “shift from law to tie” brilliantly analyzed by Supiot is rarely used as a historical and hermeneutical tool to study the history of twentieth-century philosophy. This article is a first step in that direction. Can we use Supiot’s an-

²Supiot, *Governance by Numbers*, 10.

³Supiot, *Governance by Numbers*, 10.

⁴David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 3–38.

⁵Supiot, *Governance by Numbers*, 10.

⁶Harvey, *History of Neoliberalism*, 19.

⁷Supiot, *Governance by Numbers*, 272.

⁸Supiot, *Governance by Numbers*, 215.

⁹Supiot, *Governance by Numbers*, 217.

alytical category of a “shift from law to tie” to approach the work of Levinas? In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas famously defends a revelation of the Other, defined as “the manifestation of a face over and beyond form.”¹⁰ Levinas’s notion of a manifestation over and beyond form is directed against the “neutralization of the other” as being, object, or phenomenon. As a consequence, general norms are not capable of expressing this manifestation but by a certain neutralization, a general characterization of human beings, their rights and duties. Levinas’s new approach is meant to liberate an interpellation, a call, a revelation of the other and by the other beyond any general constitution of the object by the subject or disclosure of the Being of being by the Heideggerian *Dasein*. Prima facie, one can identify in Levinas’s interpellation of the other before any objective or normative neutralization Supiot’s analytical category of a “shift from law to tie”—or at least a renewed philosophical insistence in an individual intersubjective relationship before and beyond the general epistemological and normative definition of man.

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas deepens his affirmation defining the earliest or immemorial stage of subjectivity, not in the general terms of cognitive and moral autonomy but as:

an allegiance of the same to the other, imposed before any exhibition of the other, preliminary to all consciousness—or a being affected by the other whom I do not know and who could not justify himself with any identity, who as other will not identify himself with anything.¹¹

Before the thematization of the individual consciousness or the norms of the community, a primitive tie of “responsibility of the same for the other” is retrieved by Levinas as the forgotten “latent birth of consciousness itself.”¹² It is affirmed as a pre-contextual exposure to a “sociality,” to a tie without objective content and contours, “to which finite truth—being and consciousness—are subordinate.”¹³ The repeated appearance of the term “allegiance” in *Otherwise than Being* is not a linguistic curiosity.¹⁴ It points at a philosophical shift, already

¹⁰Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 66. For the French original: “L’expérience absolue n’est pas dévoilement, mais révélation: coïncidence de l’exprimé et de celui qui exprime, manifestation privilégiée d’Autrui, manifestation d’un visage par-delà la forme” (*Totalité et infini: Essai sur l’extériorité*, 61).

¹¹Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 25. For the French original: “une allégeance du Même à l’Autre, s’imposant avant toute exhibition de l’Autre, préliminaire à toute conscience, ou une affection par l’Autre que je ne connais pas et qui ne pourrait justifier d’aucune identité, et qui ne s’identifiera, en tant qu’Autre, à rien” (*Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence*), 47.

¹²Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 26; *Autrement qu’être*, 47.

¹³Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 26; *Autrement qu’être*, 48.

¹⁴The term “allegiance” appears six times in *Otherwise than Being* (23, 25, 49, 126, 150); *Autrement qu’être* (43, 47, 83, 235). “Allegiance” appears nine times in Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays in Judaism* (46, 50, 252, 259, 260, 264, 288); *Difficile liberté*:

present in *Totality and Infinity*, replacing the privileged model of objectivity or ontology with an ethical tie—which renders possible but also subordinates any objective, normative, or ontological category.

Can this point in the history of twentieth-century philosophy be reconsidered if we add to Levinas's own account of his contribution Supiot's historical understanding concerning the withering-away of general normative forms in favor of personal or direct ties of allegiance? The following pages are an attempt to expand our historical understanding of Levinas's motif of allegiance and related asymmetrical relationships, exploring their doctrinal content not only against the backdrop of earlier philosophy, but also in view of their relationship with a later period in the twentieth century which corresponds to Supiot's "shift from law to tie."

A central motif in *Totality and Infinity*, and to a lesser extent in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, will serve here as a red thread to address the question raised. It is the connection that Levinas establishes in his works between the infinity, the transcendence, the Other, the face, the stranger, the poor, the master, and God.¹⁵ These words, and the list is not exhaustive, are not equivalent. Yet, they constitute a series of terms through which Levinas's critical approach to the philosophical privilege granted to objectivity and ontology deploys its meaning and implications. The link between this philosophical critique and the aforementioned series of terms will allow us to reconstruct Levinas's diffuse notion of allegiance and related asymmetrical relationships. Indeed, these interrelated terms should not be considered as part of the conventional relationship of a new philosophical thesis with its rhetorical illustration. The difference can be sensed in these words of Levinas:

To think the infinite, the transcendent, the Stranger, is hence not to think an object. But to think what does not have the lineaments of an object is in reality to do more or better than think.¹⁶

Essais sur le judaïsme (80, 86, 376, 385, 386, 393, 429). It appears also in the 1979 renewed preface to Levinas, *Time and the Other (and Additional Essays)*, 32.

¹⁵The terms "infinity" and "infinite" appear 209 and 128 times, respectively, in *Totality and Infinity*, and 57 and 121 times in *Otherwise than Being*. "Transcendence" and "transcendent" appear 176 and 42 times, respectively, in *Totality and Infinity*; and 68 and 11 times in *Otherwise than Being*. The term "Other" appears 974 times in *Totality and Infinity* and 787 times in *Otherwise than Being*. "Face" appears 401 in *Totality and Infinity* and 90 times in *Otherwise than Being*. "Stranger" appears 29 times in *Totality and Infinity* and 4 times in *Otherwise than Being*. "Poor" appears 6 times in *Totality and Infinity*. "Poverty" appears 5 times in *Totality and Infinity* and 7 times in *Otherwise than Being*. "Master" and "mastery" appear 35 and 23 times, respectively, in *Totality and Infinity*, and 4 times and twice in *Otherwise than Being*. "God" appears 62 times in *Totality and Infinity* and 91 times in *Otherwise than Being*.

¹⁶Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 49. "Penser l'infini, le transcendant, l'Étranger ce n'est pas penser un objet. Mais penser ce qui n'a pas les linéaments de l'objet, c'est en réalité faire plus ou mieux que penser" (Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 41).

In *Totality and Infinity*, followed and extended by *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas succeeds in introducing a new sense for transcendence in philosophical discourse through his post-phenomenological understanding of the other subject as inverting the direction of intentionality.¹⁷ Levinas's post-phenomenological descriptions of the Other displace the intentionality from the I, from my subjectivity cognizing and possessing an object, to the other subject, which precedes and addresses me, and thus ceases to be an object or a phenomenon partly constructed or projected by me. The reversal of the rational constitution of the object by the I into the ethical interpellation of the subject by the Other is a complex move defended by Levinas. On the one hand, it aims "to separate oneself from a whole philosophical tradition that sought the foundation of the self in the self,"¹⁸ while on the other it promises to accomplish metaphysics and the critical dimension of knowledge in "tracking back to what precedes freedom."¹⁹ Both facets of Levinas's reversal or correction are intimately linked to the aforementioned series of interrelated terms which unveil, through a wide range of asymmetrical ties, the social, religious, and political meaning of Levinas's conceptual shift.

The following text will develop a threefold analysis of this series of terms: philosophical, biographical, and historical. Thus, its aim is to demonstrate that Levinas's thesis on alterity and reversal of philosophy adopts a certain social and political form expressed in the mentioned series of interrelated terms. This form stems from a rich and traumatic biographical background in the first half of the twentieth century, but also resonates strongly with a new and later historical shift: the "shift from law to tie." The tipping of Levinas's correction of philosophy out of a traumatic experience of modernity into a reclaiming of primitive asymmetrical ties, presenting family resemblance with certain re-emerging ties of allegiance described by Supiot, points at a historical ambiguity in Levinas's work that the present article aims at elucidating—an ambiguity to be understood as the complex articulation of the composition period of Levinas's *oeuvre* and its effect and reception in a later historical phase.

Alterity and Figures of Asymmetrical Relations

Let us begin by understanding Levinas's own philosophical justification for the cultural, social, religious, and political expansion of his core philosophical thesis on otherness, as expressed in the connection he establishes between the Other, or the face, and the following five terms: the stranger, the poor, the divine, religion, and the master. The study of these five motifs will shed light on Levinas's renewed pondering on a set of ancient asymmetrical relations.

¹⁷For a presentation of Levinas's concept of alterity in these two books, see Richard A. Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas*, 145–60.

¹⁸Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 88; *Totalité et infini*, 87.

¹⁹Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 85; *Totalité et infini*, 83.

The face, the subjective or psychic interiority that withdraws the other subjectivity from the phenomenal field of perception, is, in technical philosophical terms, the origin of a phenomenon of radical strangeness, a level of strangeness that no object can reach. Moreover, as developed in *Otherwise than Being*, this radical strangeness escapes the homogenous time of the perceptive and cognitive consciousness, splitting the present with the “anachronous immediacy” of the face, or with the presence-absence of the trace. Thus, the split of the homogenous time of the perception, the radical strangeness introduced in the phenomenal field, creates an infinite obligation, beyond any positive norm: “A face is a trace of itself, given over to my responsibility, but to which I am wanting and faulty.”²⁰ Levinas does not content himself with this somewhat formal notion of the strangeness of the Other, or of the face. Rather, he endows it with wider cultural and social connotations, as can be seen in the following passage:

The transcendence of the face is at the same time its absence from this world into which it enters, the exiling of a being, his condition of being stranger destitute, or proletarian. The strangeness that is freedom is also strangeness-destitution. Freedom presents itself as the other to the same, who is always the autochthon of being, always privileged in his own residence. The other, the free one, is also the stranger.²¹

Totality and Infinity and later *Otherwise than Being* accomplish a shift from the modern philosophical model of the object constitution to the model of the ethical interpellation. However, this shift does not limit itself to the abstract or rather phenomenological description of the non-phenomenality or non-objectivity of the other subjectivity, as referred to in the passage quoted above via the expression “its absence from this world into which it enters.” Levinas adds a cultural and social layer to his post-phenomenological prose. The ethical interpellation by the other subjectivity also engages with the motifs or images of the stranger and the poor, linking it to two massive contemporary phenomena of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernity: mass emigration and *proletarianization*; but also to more traditional, or even biblical, representations of the stranger and the poor. Moreover, Levinas contrasts the strangeness of the Other, “uprooted, without

²⁰Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 91. “Trace de lui-même, ordonné à ma responsabilité et que je manque, fautif, comme si j’étais responsable de sa mortalité et coupable de survivre, le visage est une immédiateté anachronique plus tendue que celle de l’image offerte à la droiture de l’intention intuitive” (*Autrement qu’être*, 145).

²¹Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 75. “La transcendence du visage est, à la fois, son absence de ce monde où il entre, le dépassement d’un être, sa condition d’étranger, de dépouillé ou de prolétaire. L’étrangeté qui est liberté, est aussi l’étrangeté-misère. La liberté se présente comme l’Autre; au Même qui, lui; est toujours l’autochtone de l’être, toujours privilégié en sa demeure. L’autre, le libre est aussi l’étranger” (*Totalité et infini*, 72–73).

country,”²² with the national-territorial sense of belonging of the same. The phenomenological strangeness and destitution of the Other, her non-phenomenality and non-objectivity (no properties) as explained by Levinas, partially overlaps with the ethical and social concerns for the cultural isolation of the stranger and the social distress of the poor. Yet, it transforms strangeness and poverty from a social-political question agitating nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe into an unsettling call from the radical asymmetry of the Other. A call, an obligation, all the more unsettling as it cannot be adequately enounced nor resolved in the objective discourse of rights and distributive justice.

Levinas does not stop the expansion of his philosophical thesis at the opposition between “strangeness-destitution” and “the autochthon of being, always privileged in his own residence.” He adds:

To posit the transcendent as a stranger and poor one is to prohibit the metaphysical relation with God from being accomplished in the ignorance of men and things. The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face. A relation with the Transcendent free from all captivation by the Transcendent is a social relation.²³

Levinas deploys his philosophical transformative understanding of the other subject beyond the cultural and national divide of the stranger and the autochthon toward a religious direction. The inaccessibility of the other subjectivity is not only experienced in social differentiation; it also reopens the dimension of the divine transcendence in the human face. Instead of the cosmological God, repeatedly pronounced dead during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Levinas’s otherness paves new avenues for divinity, understood as the profound and lately forgotten dimension of the social bound—the primitive asymmetry in every relation between the I and the other transcendent subject. This primitive yet never extinguished social bound involves an immemorial experience of divine transcendence revived and reformulated by Levinas. In *Otherwise than Being*, he defines this immemorial dimension as a pre-subjective exposure to the Other, a “trauma suffered prior to any auto-identification, in an unrepresentable before.” Since subjectivity is elaborated out of this primordial exposure, in a sit-

²²Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 91. “Il n’a pas d’autre lieu, non autochtone, déraciné, apatride, non habitant, exposé au froid et aux chaleurs des saisons” (*Autrement qu’être*, 145).

²³Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78. “Poser le transcendant comme étranger et pauvre, c’est interdire à la relation métaphysique avec Dieu de s’accomplir dans l’ignorance des hommes et des choses. La dimension du Divin s’ouvre à partir du visage humain. Une relation avec le Transcendant—cependant libre de toute emprise du Transcendant—est une relation sociale” (*Totalité et infini*, 76).

uation of “being hostage,” Levinas concludes that “the impossibility of escaping God lies in the depths of myself as a self, as an absolute passivity.”²⁴

Religion is another term through which Levinas fleshes out his philosophical thesis:

For the relation between the being here below and the transcendent being that results in no community of concept or totality—a relation without relation—we reserve the term religion . . . Religion, where relationship subsists between the same and the other despite the impossibility of the Whole—the idea of Infinity—is the ultimate structure.²⁵

Religion is another name for the relation without relation between the I and the Other. It points not only to the divine dimension of the intersubjective encounter, but also to the ultimate social structure.²⁶ This ultimate structure means the radical plurality of human beings and the impossibility of overcoming the face-to-face of the I and the Other into a totality, a community, or a state. This phenomenological rediscovery of human plurality and rejection of any foundational community or unity (nature, life, or human collective) result in affirming the positivity and irreducibility of religion, together with and beyond the religious institutions and systems of beliefs variously secularized during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The source of religion, social radical plurality, is inextinguishable; every political construction ultimately relies on it, and maybe returns to it, whether traumatically or messianically.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas speaks of a “religious plot.”²⁷ This formulation attempts to express the reversal of the immemorial traumatism of the Other into the subject’s responsible consciousness and performance of an obligation toward the Other:

But this singular obedience to the order to go, without understanding the order, this obedience prior to all representation, this allegiance before any oath, this responsibility prior to commitment, is precisely the other in the same, inspiration and prophecy, the *passing itself* of the Infinite.²⁸

²⁴Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 128. “L’impossibilité d’échapper à Dieu (qui, en cela au moins, n’est pas une valeur parmi les valeurs) gît au fond de moi comme soi, comme passivité absolue” (*Autrement qu’être*, 204).

²⁵Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 80. “Nous réservons à la relation entre l’être ici-bas et l’être transcendant qui n’aboutit à aucune communauté de concept ni à aucune totalité—relation sans relation—le terme de religion. . . . La religion, où le rapport subsiste entre le Même et l’Autre en dépit de l’impossibilité du Tout—l’idée de l’Infini—est la structure ultime” (*Totalité et infini*, 78–79).

²⁶For a recent presentation of the concept of religion in Levinas’s work, see chap. 3 in Jeffrey Bloechl, *Levinas on the Primacy of the Ethical: Philosophy as Prophecy*.

²⁷Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 147. “Intrigue qu’on est tenté d’appeler religieuse” (*Autrement qu’être*, 230).

²⁸Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 150; emphasis in original. “Mais cette singulière obéissance à l’ordre de se *rendre*, sans entente de l’ordre, cette obéissance antérieure à la

The religious plot never imposes a structure of correlation between the Infinite and the subject. The Infinite “passes”; it happens in the religious-ethical interiorization or dramatization of alterity. Building on the Hebrew biblical expression *na’aseh venishmah* in Exodus 24:7 (“Everything that *Adonai* has spoken, we will do and later understand [or obey]”), Levinas designs a notion of “allegiance before any oath,” meaning a commitment to obey the Other or God before any conscious formulation of the content of the obligation. The pre-conscious and pre-objective nature of the allegiance is referred to in *Difficult Freedom* in regard to the uniqueness of Jewish identity: “this absolute and unshakable sense of identity, which is founded on an adherence that pre-exists any form of [conscious] allegiance,” a responsibility “for the whole edifice of the creation.”²⁹ This archaic notion of allegiance is connected, and to a certain extent opposed, to the conscious nature of the allegiance to the French constitution.³⁰

Levinas’s otherness is linked to another notion in *Totality and Infinity*, that of the master, which will close this brief description of Levinas’s cultural, social, and religious widening of his philosophical thesis.

The “communication” of ideas, the reciprocity of dialogue, already hide the profound essence of language. It resides in the irreversibility of the relation between me and the other, in the Mastery of the Master coinciding with his position as other and as exterior.³¹

The transcendence of the Other, the impossibility to resorb the speaker in the ideational content of her message, stops and inverts the transitivity and reciprocity of modern communication, based on the commerce of information, more and more detached from a committing intersubjective encounter. Levinas’s ethical suspension of communication makes the master’s teaching re-emerge, a setting in which the asymmetric relation informs decisively the message—even before the message itself in accordance with aforementioned model of “allegiance before any oath.” In *Otherwise than Being*, the figure of the master is not present as such. It appears in all of Levinas’s Talmudic lessons. Nonetheless, the difference between the saying and the said (*le Dire et le Dit*) in *Otherwise than Being* resorts also to a pre-communational stage of language: “Before putting itself at the service of life as an exchange of information through a linguistic system,

représentation, cette allégeance d’avant tout serment, cette responsabilité préalable à l’engagement est précisément l’autre-dans-le-même, inspiration et prophétisme, *le se passer de l’Infini*” (*Autrement qu’être*, 235).

²⁹Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 50–51.

³⁰Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 260–61.

³¹Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 101. “La communication des idées, la réciprocity du dialogue, cachent déjà la profonde essence du langage. Celle-ci réside dans l’irréversibilité de la relation entre Moi et l’Autre, dans la Maîtrise du Maître coïncidant avec sa position d’Autre et d’extérieur” (*Totalité et infini*, 104).

saying is witness; it is saying without the said, a sign given to the other.”³² By this radical gesture, communication and, more broadly, human exchanges are brought back to their background and condition of possibility: the immemorial exposure to the Other moving the subject to testify of and toward the Other. Be it with the figure of the master in *Totality and Infinity* or the “exposing of the exposure” in *Otherwise than Being*, language is primarily emerging out of an asymmetric relation to the master or the trace of the Other.

This brief review of five motifs in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* has shown how Levinas’s otherness widens its primary philosophical meaning by becoming the ethical interpellation of the stranger and the poor, by illuminating the divine transcendence embedded in intersubjective relationships, by pointing at the religious dimension involved in the irreducible social plurality, and by revealing magisterial or immemorial authority as the initial condition for human communication. If we shift the focus from Levinas’s critique of philosophy in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* to its reception in the late twentieth century, an overlooked phenomenon appears. Levinas’s ethical interpellation of modern objectivity, subjectivity, and political organization draws attention back toward the value of a set of ancient asymmetrical relations. In the historical context of Levinas’s enhanced reception from the 1980s on, the rediscovery by the readers of the asymmetrical relations described in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* fused with a social-political environment undergoing a different yet parallel evolution: the shift described by Supiot “from law to tie”; that is, the withering-away of general norms in favor of direct ties of allegiance. The critique of modern subjectivity, objectivity, phenomenology, and ontology developed in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* has at least two faces, one turned to the earlier history of philosophy, the other to its successful reception during the economic and legal shift initiated in the 1980s. Depending on the approach adopted, toward the past or toward the reception, the meaning of Levinas’s reversal evolves, as will be demonstrated in the next two sections of this article.

A Biographical Approach

Having briefly illuminated Levinas’s cultural, social, religious, and political deployment of his core philosophical thesis on otherness in the afore-studied series of asymmetric relations, this second section will point briefly to the biographical background of these terms, considering them partly as philosophical elaborations of Levinas’s life trajectory.

For the motif of the stranger and to a lesser extent of the poor, a look at Levinas’s migratory trajectory from his birth in 1905–1906 in Kovno (which

³²Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 150. “Avant de se mettre au service de la vie comme échange d’informations à travers un système linguistique, le Dire est témoignage, Dire sans Dit, signe donné à Autrui” (*Autrement qu’être*, 235–36).

then belonged to Tsarist Russia) through the two world wars until his full integration in French university life during the 1960s easily explains the embeddedness of his philosophical creativity in his experience of strangeness and poverty.³³ In the concluding pages of *Time and the Other* (1948), Levinas defines the kind of philosophical quest which he developed along his traumatic migratory path: “I have tried to find the temporal transcendence of the present toward the mystery of the future.”³⁴ Levinas understood this transcendence as a liberation from “an enchainment of the ego to the self”³⁵ in a “face-to-face without intermediary.” Having moved (and often suffered from) one national collective to the other, Levinas formulates his notion of liberation not in the restored national collective, but in the very possibility of alterity, of strangeness, of mystery that interrupts and opens the subjective and collective closure. The first four decades of Levinas’s trajectory suffice to establish a clear nexus between his early philosophical quest of liberation in the alterity and his long and complex experience of migration, wars, revolutions, making him a stranger (and to a lesser extent a member of the poor) in many places.

For the motifs of the divine and religion, it suffices to mention that Levinas’s integration into French society and its philosophical scene went hand in hand with a religious and philosophical elaboration of Judaism, which was part of his professional activities from the 1930s onwards in the framework of the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the École Normale Israélite Orientale (ENIO).³⁶ This Jewish quest reached an existential and traumatic intensity with his own destiny and the fate of his family during the Shoah. In the second notebook of captivity, Levinas formulated the acuity of this questioning with an almost Shakespearean

³³Levinas began, in 1914, a long and complex experience of migrations, revolutions, and wars, moving at the beginning of World War I to the city of Kharkov in Ukraine, and returning to Kovno in 1920, in the aftermath of the October Revolution and the end of World War I. In 1923, he crossed Europe to study in the newly French city of Strasbourg, staying there seven years but also spending time in Freiburg and Davos to attend lessons given by Husserl and Heidegger. In 1930, he moved to Paris after graduating. In 1931, he received French citizenship, and in 1932 he traveled back to Kovno-Kaunas to marry the daughter of his former neighbors, returning afterwards to Paris with his wife. From 1937 to 1945, Levinas was drafted to the French army, and experienced the “debacle” and then captivity and forced labor in a German camp between Bremen and Hannover while his wife and daughter were hidden in France and his parents and siblings were murdered in Kovno. He returned to Paris at the age of almost forty and joined his wife and daughter, while discovering the tragedy of the rest of his family and people. Three years later, he published *Time and the Other*, which in many aspects constitutes the blueprint for his 1961 doctoral dissertation *Totality and Infinity*. For more details, see Salomon Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas: His Life and Legacy*.

³⁴Levinas, *Time and the Other (and Additional Essays)*, 94. “J’ai cherché une transcendance temporelle d’un présent vers le mystère de l’avenir” (*Le temps et l’autre*, 89).

³⁵Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 92.

³⁶Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 53–63, 84–106.

alternative: “Starting from the *Dasein* or starting from J[udaism].”³⁷ After 1945, Levinas participated actively in the spiritual reconstruction of French Judaism together with the other figures of the School of Paris.³⁸ Using modern means of colloquia, Levinas’s Talmudic lectures were intended to make the Talmud again “a living tradition” in France; that is, “the fact of being linked in an immediate way to the present and to the present’s understanding.”³⁹ Following the Six-Day War (1967) and the ensuing crisis between France and Israel, Levinas elaborated a nuanced notion of a “double allegiance”⁴⁰ of French Jews. If the “moment during which they obtained [French] citizenship was a solemn act that reverberated throughout their inner lives,”⁴¹ twentieth-century anti-Semitism generated a “new vigilance”⁴² vis-à-vis the promises of modern emancipation and affected a new “reunion with an old religious experience” which endowed “the resurrection of the State of Israel”⁴³ with religious meaning.

Concerning the motif of the master, Levinas was, for all of his professional life, a teacher and a professor, be it at the ENIO School in Paris, in several French-Jewish contexts, and eventually in French universities. His intellectual life was marked by encounters with great masters like Heidegger and Chouchani,⁴⁴ and probably by his own desire to become a master himself. Here also the opening words of *Quatre lectures talmudiques* are very instructive: “Preceding each lesson is the translation of the Talmudic text of which it is the commentary.”⁴⁵ The magister defended by Levinas is not rooted in the self-proclaimed innovation of the thinker, but in re-establishing within modern communication the authority of the rabbinic tradition in the living commentary of the new-old interpreter.

This brief survey of Levinas’s trajectory demonstrates the embeddedness of his philosophical renewal within several features of his biography: his repeated and harsh experience of migrations; his religious, existential, and political engagement with the question of Judaism in the twentieth century; his encounters

³⁷Levinas, *Carnets de captivité suivi de Ecrits sur la captivité et Notes philosophiques diverses*, 75; my translation.

³⁸Exemplary of this reconstructionist intention are the opening words of his 1968 *Quatre lectures talmudiques*: “The four Talmudic readings brought together in this volume represent the texts of talks delivered between 1963 and 1966 at the Colloquia of Jewish Intellectuals that the French section of the World Jewish Congress has organized in Paris every year since 1957” (*Nine Talmudic Readings*, 3).

³⁹Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 6; *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, 17.

⁴⁰Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 259.

⁴¹Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 260.

⁴²Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 262.

⁴³Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, 264.

⁴⁴Malka, *Emmanuel Levinas*, 35–52, 125–39, 161–71.

⁴⁵Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 3. “La reproduction de chacune de ces leçons est précédée de la traduction du texte talmudique dont elle apporte le commentaire” (*Quatre lectures talmudiques*, 9).

with great masters; and his own becoming a master in several contexts. The series of terms or motifs from *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* discussed here is, in many respects, a philosophical elaboration of Levinas's life trajectory. By the philosophical elaboration of a life trajectory, I mean a philosophical elaboration in which personal, family, and collective experiences are processed to a high degree of abstraction into new philosophical conceptions, while leaving personal traces, like the series of terms reviewed before. This mixing of the individual, the collective, and the philosophical discourse in the series of terms or motifs analyzed here constitutes much of the strength, the truth, and the appeal of Levinas's philosophy. It points to, and successfully elaborates, a group of experiences, facts, and conceptual problems in Levinas's life and historical environment, as the opening words of the preface of *Totality and Infinity* make clear:

Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality.

Does not lucidity, the mind's openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war?⁴⁶

The dreadful sequence of events of the twentieth century seems to have suspended trust in moral bounds in favor of a defense mechanism before the return of the traumas. Levinas asks: Is this right? Is this the only refuge? This question resonated strongly with Levinas's biography and surely with the concerns of his contemporaries who also went through the first half of the twentieth century. Was the repetition of wars and political upheavals the only horizon from World War I to the Algerian War (1954–1962)? Or is there something in human bounds that reaches deeper and beyond? Levinas's notion of alterity, phenomenologically defined and widened through the series of terms previously analyzed, gave a strong affirmative answer which attracted progressively wider and wider circles of readers troubled by similar experiences and questions. In this perspective turned toward the traumatic past that marked Levinas and his generation, Levinas's thesis on the Other, the stranger, the poor, God, and the master is a successful critique and corrective of modernity. This critique and corrective is expressed at the end of *Otherwise than Being* by the alternative: whether “the rational necessity that coherent discourse transforms into sciences, and whose principle philosophy wishes to grasp, has thus the status of an origin [. . .] or if this necessity presupposes a hither side, a pre-original, a non-presentable, an

⁴⁶Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21. “On conviendra aisément qu’il importe au plus haut point de savoir si l’on n’est pas dupe de la morale. La lucidité—ouverture de l’esprit sur le vrai—ne consiste-t-elle pas à entrevoir la possibilité permanente de la guerre?” (*Totalité et infini*, 5).

invisible.”⁴⁷ The French “*en-deçà*” (hither side) sums up Levinas’s restitution of a primordial and obliterated dimension before the auto-foundation of modernity—an eclipsed dimension informed by different asymmetric relationships. This complex or ambiguous understanding of modernity constituted the first major form of the encounter between Levinas, his readership, and the historical context. Yet, if we consider Levinas’s reception in European and American intellectual circles in relation not only to the first half of the twentieth century, but also to the shift initiated in the 1980s, we get another picture to which the following section is devoted.

Ambiguity

This mode of depriving the known being of its alterity can be accomplished only if it is aimed at through a third term, a neutral term [. . .] This third term may appear as a concept thought. Then the individual that exists abdicates into the general that is thought.⁴⁸

This critique of the abstraction, generalization, and ontologization found in *Totality and Infinity* receives a novel treatment in *Otherwise than Being* with the notion of “the third party” (*le tiers*). Levinas develops there a captivating ambiguity: translation and betrayal. On the one hand, the “extraordinary commitment of the other to the third party calls for control, a search for justice, society and the State.”⁴⁹ On the other, “justice, society and truth itself [. . .] must not be taken for an anonymous law of the ‘human forces’ governing an impersonal totality.”⁵⁰ The danger of the betrayal of the anarchic relation with the alterity is balanced with the possibility of its partial translation into the realms of science, society, and politics. “The relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of

⁴⁷Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 160. “Il n’est pas non plus sans importance de savoir, en ce qui concerne la philosophie, si la nécessité rationnelle que le discours cohérent transmue en sciences et dont la philosophie veut saisir le principe a, ainsi, le statut d’origine [. . .] ; ou si cette nécessité suppose un *en-deçà*, un pré-originel, un non représentable, un invisible” (*Autrement qu’être*, 249).

⁴⁸Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 42. “Cette façon de priver l’être connu de son altérité ne peut s’accomplir que s’il est visé à travers un troisième terme—terme neutre—qui lui-même n’est pas un être. En lui, viendrait s’amortir le choc de la rencontre entre le Même et l’Autre. Ce troisième terme peut apparaître comme concept pensé. L’individu qui existe abdique alors dans le général pensé” (*Totalité et infini*, 32).

⁴⁹Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 161. “L’extra-ordinaire engagement d’Autrui à l’égard du tiers en appelle au contrôle, à la recherche de la justice, à la société, à l’Etat . . .” (*Autrement qu’être*, 251).

⁵⁰Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 161. “Modalité de la proximité, la justice, la société et la vérité elle-même [. . .] ne doivent pas être prises pour une loi anonyme des ‘forces humaines’ régissant une totalité impersonnelle” (*Autrement qu’être*, 251).

the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is looked at.”⁵¹ “Ambivalence” is the term chosen by Levinas to describe the articulation of the ethical interpellation and the socio-political normativity.

Modern scientific, legal, and political knowledge brings about an ambiguous and precarious reconciliation of beings in their general characteristics, while always risking to deny subjectivity at its deepest level.⁵² In his philosophical approach targeted against or at least raising the ambiguity of neutralization and ontologization, Levinas joins the defense of individual difference against its reductive general characterization in the political and scientific realms with the affirmation of radical alterity and transcendence. This dual positioning confronts modern scientific and political discourses with their partial incapacity to address individual subjectivity as well as alterity and transcendence. Therefore, Levinas affirms that:

*The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation: a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of the Other [. . .].*⁵³

Expression and revelation are combined in Levinas’s critique of the scientific and political order. The expression by the Other of its otherness (or in the language of *Otherwise than Being*, the exposure) is a possible revelation for the I, meaning a unique relation with transcendence, and with the teaching of a master, since: “Speech, better than a simple sign, is essentially magisterial.”⁵⁴

The moment in which the I and the Other liberate themselves from their general definition as objects of science or modern political entities—affirming

⁵¹Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 158. “La relation avec le tiers est une incessante correction de l’asymétrie de la proximité où le visage se dé-visage” (*Autrement qu’être*, 246).

⁵²“Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. It issues in the State and in the non-violence of the totality, without securing itself against the violence from which this non-violence lives, and which appears in the tyranny of the State. Truth, which should reconcile persons, here exists anonymously. Universality presents itself as impersonal; and this is another inhumanity” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46). “L’ontologie comme philosophie première, est une philosophie de la puissance. Elle aboutit à l’Etat et à la non-violence de la totalité, sans se prémunir contre la violence dont cette non-violence vit et qui apparaît dans la tyrannie de l’Etat. La vérité qui devrait réconcilier les personnes, existe ici anonymement. L’universalité se présente comme impersonnelle il y a là une autre inhumanité” (*Totalité et infini*, 37).

⁵³Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65–66. “L’expérience absolue n’est pas dévoilement mais révélation: coïncidence de l’exprimé et de celui qui exprime, manifestation, par là même privilégiée d’Autrui, manifestation d’un visage par-delà la forme” (*Totalité et infini*, 61).

⁵⁴Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 69. “La parole, mieux qu’un simple signe, est essentiellement magistrale. Elle enseigne avant tout cet enseignement même . . .” (*Totalité et infini*, 65–66).

both their individuality and their alterity—is also a moment in which is added to the modern scientific and political order a new, or rather an ancient, relationship to the stranger, the transcendent, the divine, and the master. To the general definitions of science and the general categories of politics is now added an individual relationship of obedience-responsibility to an individual transcendent Other, stranger, God, or master. The re-emergence of an individual relationship of obedience-responsibility is displayed in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* as a partial critique and correction to modern abstract collective characterizations and agreements. This tension between the ethical and the ontological, between the Same, the Other, and the third party, makes Levinas a powerful thinker and actor regarding our contemporary historical transformation. The shift from the modern project of general agreements in the social, economic, and political spheres to its limitation and partial supplementation by individual and communal forms of allegiance to new and ancient authorities in the social, religious, and economic realms is the definition given by Supiot for the “shift from law to tie” initiated in the 1980s. Major features of this shift appear in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* for biographical and historical reasons analyzed in the previous section. While Levinas’s intentions in the described intellectual shift were corrective, it is arguable that the reception of his work was informed by some communalities between his philosophical innovations and the contemporary normative shift toward re-emerging ties of allegiance.

Conclusion

The list of Levinassian terms analyzed in this article gave us the opportunity to appreciate how Levinas’s thesis on alterity develops into an innovative correction of philosophy that is socially, culturally, and religiously informed, stemming from a rich and traumatic biographical background. As much as it answers deep concerns about the dreadful traumas of the twentieth century and a possible ethical, metaphysical, and religious way to overcome it, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* sow the seeds for a new and later historical shift, especially in the later reception of the work. This collision of Levinas’s correction of philosophy out of a traumatic experience of modernity and the late twentieth-century shift from law to new ties of allegiance constitutes both its force and its ambiguity. It offers a powerful justification for a plurality of normative obligations (ethical, religious, political, scientific), but does not offer more on their articulation, beyond a suggestion of their possible harmony:

Religion is Desire and not struggle for recognition. It is the surplus possible in a society of equals, that of glorious humility, responsibility, and sacrifice, which are the condition for equality itself.⁵⁵

Justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work are comprehensible out of proximity [of the one for the other]. This means that nothing is outside of the control of the responsibility of the one for the other.⁵⁶

The decades following *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* have not confirmed this vision. Instead of a harmonization of the plural normative obligations, “a typically feudal legal structure is re-emerging, consisting of networks of allegiance,” the *professeur* at the Collège de France taught us. The application of Supiot’s category, the “shift from law to tie,” to certain motifs in Levinas’s magnum opuses *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* has revealed a perplexing proximity, a historical ambiguity between his correction of philosophy on the one hand, and its later unintended proximity with the re-emerging of ties of allegiance on the other.

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⁵⁵Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 64. “La religion est Désir et non point lutte pour la reconnaissance. Elle est le surplus possible dans une société d’égaux, celui de la glorieuse humilité, de la responsabilité et du sacrifice, condition de l’égalité elle-même” (*Totalité et infini*, 58).

⁵⁶Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 159. “La justice, la société, l’Etat et ses institutions—les échanges et le travail compris à partir de la proximité—cela ne signifie que rien ne se soustrait au contrôle de la responsabilité de l’un pour l’autre” (*Autrement qu’être*, 248).

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