

here have a signification different from the Eleatic or Platonic signification. There is a multiplicity and a transcendence in the verb to exist, a transcendence which is lacking to even the boldest existentialist analyses. Moreover, the son is not any event whatsoever that happens to me, as for example my sadness, my trial or my suffering. It is an ego, a person. Lastly, the alterity of the son is not that of an *alter ego*; paternity is not some sympathy through which I can put myself in the son's place; it is through my being that I am my son and not through sympathy. [. . .] It is not according to the category of cause, but according to the category of the father that freedom occurs and time is accomplished. [. . .] Paternity is not simply a renewal of the father in the son and his confusion with him. It is also the exteriority of the father in relation to the son. It is a pluralist existing."⁴

4. *Le Temps et l'Autre*, pp. 82-87.



Six

Secrecy and Freedom

Ph.N.: We will speak today about *Totality and Infinity*, a book dated 1961 which, with *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, is one of your principal works of philosophy. The title contains in itself a problem or a question. In what are "totality" and "infinity" opposed to one another?

E.L.: In the critique of totality borne by the very association of these two words, there is a reference to the history of philosophy. This history can be interpreted as an attempt at universal synthesis, a reduction of all experience, of all that is reasonable, to a totality wherein consciousness embraces the world, leaves nothing other outside of itself, and thus becomes absolute thought. The consciousness of self is at the same time the consciousness of the whole. There have been few protestations in the history of philosophy against this totalization. In what concerns me, it is in Franz Rosenzweig's philosophy,

which is essentially a discussion of Hegel, that for the first time I encountered a radical critique of totality. This critique starts from the experience of death; to the extent that the individual included within the totality has not vanquished the anxiety about death, nor renounced his particular destiny, he does not find himself at ease within the totality or, if you will, the totality has not "totalized" itself. In Rosenzweig there is thus an explosion of the totality and the opening of quite a different route in the search for what is reasonable.

Ph.N.: A route that Western philosophy has not explored, and to which it has heavily preferred that of systems?

E.L.: It is in fact the whole trend of Western philosophy culminating in the philosophy of Hegel, which, for very good reason, can appear as the culmination of philosophy itself. One can see this nostalgia for totality everywhere in Western philosophy, where the spiritual and the reasonable always reside in knowledge. It is as if the totality had been lost, and that this loss were the sin of the mind. It is then the panoramic vision of the real which is the truth and which gives all its satisfaction to the mind.

Ph.N.: This globalizing vision, which thus characterizes the great philosophical systems, ap-

pears to you to be an affront to another experience of meaning?

E.L.: The irreducible and ultimate experience of relationship appears to me in fact to be elsewhere: not in synthesis, but in the face to face of humans, in sociality, in its moral signification. But it must be understood that morality comes not as a secondary layer, above an abstract reflection on the totality and its dangers; morality has an independent and preliminary range. First philosophy is an ethics.

Ph.N.: Opposing the idea that one can ultimately totalize all meaning within a single knowledge, there are things you call "non-synthesizables." These will thus be the ethical situations?

E.L.: The relationship between men is certainly the non-synthesizable par excellence. One can also wonder if the idea of God, especially such as Descartes thinks it, can be made part of a totality of being, or if it is not, much rather, transcendent to being. The term "transcendence" signifies precisely the fact that one cannot think God and being together. So too in the interpersonal relationship it is not a matter of thinking the ego and the other together, but to be facing. The true union or true togetherness is not a togetherness of synthesis, but a togetherness of face to face.

Ph.N.: There is another example of the non-synthesizable that you cite in the book. A human life, with birth and death, can be written about by someone else, by someone who is thus not dead, who you call the survivor or historian. Now everyone perceives that there is an irreducible difference between the course of one's life and what in it will then be registered in the chronological succession of the events of history and the world. My life and history thus do not form a totality?

E.L.: Indeed, the two points of view are absolutely non-synthesizable. That sphere of the common which every synthesis presupposes is absent between men. The common element which permits us to speak of an objectified society, and through which man resembles things and individualizes himself like a thing, is not primary. The true human subjectivity is indiscernable, according to Leibniz's expression, and consequently it is not as the individuals of a genus that men are together. One has always known this in speaking of the secrecy of subjectivity; but this secrecy has been ridiculed by Hegel: speaking thus was good for romantic thought . . .

Ph.N.: In the thoughts of the totality there is totalitarianism since there secrecy is inadmissible?

E.L.: My critique of the totality has come in

fact after a political experience that we have not yet forgotten.

Ph.N.: Let's speak of political philosophy. In *Totality and Infinity*, you try to ground "sociality" in something other than a global and synthetic concept of "the" society. You write this sentence: "The real must not only be determined in its historical objectivity, but also from interior intentions, from the secrecy that interrupts the continuity of historical time. Only starting from this secrecy is the pluralism of society possible."¹ A society respectful of freedoms would thus not simply have "liberalism" for its foundation, an objective theory of society which posits that society functions best when one lets things go liberally. Such a liberalism would make freedom depend on an objective principle and not on the essential secrecy of lives. Freedom would then be but entirely relative: it would suffice that one objectively prove the greater efficiency, from a political or economic point of view, of a given type of organization, for freedom to remain speechless. To ground an authentically free society nothing less is necessary than the metaphysical idea of "secrecy"?

E.L.: *Totality and Infinity* is my first book which goes in that direction. It aims to pose the problem of the intersubjective relationship's content. For what

1. *Totalité et infini*, p. 29/ *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 57-58.

ETHICS AND INFINITY

we have said up to now is only negative. What positively does this "sociality" differ from total and additive sociality consist in? It is this that preoccupied me in what followed. The sentence you read remains still rather formal in relation to what today appears to me as the essential.

For it is not necessary, from what I have just said, to deduce any underestimation of reason and reason's aspiration to universality. I only try to deduce the necessity for a social rationale of the very exigencies of the intersubjective such as I describe it. It is extremely important to know if society in the current sense of the term is the result of a limitation of the principle that men are predators of one another, or if to the contrary it results from the limitation of the principle that men are *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?

Ph.N.: In the first case, one has a conception of the political which makes it an internal regulation of society, as in a society of bees or ants; it is a naturalist and "totalitarian" conception. In the second case, there is a higher regulation, of another nature, ethical, standing above politics?

E.L.: Politics must be able in fact always to be checked and criticized starting from the ethical. This

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second form of sociality would render justice to that secrecy which for each is his life, a secrecy which does not hold to a closure which would isolate some rigorously private domain of a closed interiority, but a secrecy which holds to the responsibility for the Other. This would be a responsibility which is inaccessible in its ethical advent, from which one does not escape, and which, thus, is the principle of an absolute individuation.



Seven

The Face

Ph.N.: In *Totality and Infinity* you speak at great length of the face. It is one of your frequent themes. What does this phenomenology of the face, that is, this analysis of what happens when I look at the Other face to face, consist in and what is its purpose?

E.L.: I do not know if one can speak of a "phenomenology" of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So, too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightforward ethical. You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eyes! When one observes the color of the eyes one is not in social relationship with the Other. The relation with the

face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that.

There is first the very uprightiness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill.

Ph.N.: War stories tell us in fact that it is difficult to kill someone who looks straight at you.

E.L.: The face is signification, and signification without context. I mean that the Other, in the recititude of his face, is not a character within a context. Ordinarily one is a "character": a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice, son of so-and-so, everything that is in one's passport, the manner of dressing, of presenting oneself. And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context: the meaning of something is in its relation to another thing. Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you. In this sense one can say that the face is not "seen". It is what cannot become a content, which your thought

would embrace; it is uncontrollable, it leads you beyond. It is in this that the signification of the face makes it escape from being, as a correlate of a knowing. Vision, to the contrary, is a search for adequation; it is what par excellence absorbs being. But the relation to the face is straightaway ethical. The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose *meaning* consists in saying: "thou shalt not kill." Murder, it is true, is a banal fact: one can kill the Other; the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity. The prohibition against killing does not render murder impossible, even if the authority of the prohibition is maintained in the bad conscience about the accomplished evil — malignancy of evil. It also appears in the Scriptures, to which the humanity of man is exposed inasmuch as it is engaged in the world. But to speak truly, the appearance in being of these "ethical peculiarities" — the humanity of man — is a rupture of being. It is significant, even if being resumes and recovers itself.

Ph.N.: The Other is face; but the Other, equally, speaks to me and I speak to him. Is not human discourse another way of breaking what you call "totality"?

E.L.: Certainly. Face and discourse are tied. The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse. I have just refused

the notion of vision to describe the authentic relationship with the Other; it is discourse and, more exactly, response or responsibility which is this authentic relationship.

Ph.N.: But since the ethical relationship is beyond knowledge, and, on the other hand, it is authentically assumed through discourse, it is thus that discourse itself is not something of the order of knowledge?

E.L.: In discourse I have always distinguished, in fact, between the *saying* and the *said*. That the *saying* must bear a *said* is a necessity of the same order as that which imposes a society with laws, institutions and social relations. But the *saying* is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it. The saying is a way of greeting the Other, but to greet the Other is already to answer for him. It is difficult to be silent in someone's presence; this difficulty has its ultimate foundation in this signification proper to the saying, whatever is the said. It is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him.

Ph.N.: In the face of the Other you say there is an "elevation," a "height." The Other is higher than I am. What do you mean by that?

E.L.: The first word of the face is the "Thou shalt not kill." It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a "first person," I am he who finds the resources to respond to the call.

Ph.N.: One is tempted to say to you: yes, in certain cases. But in other cases, to the contrary, the encounter with the Other occurs in the mode of violence, hate and disdain.

E.L.: To be sure. But I think that whatever the motivation which explains this inversion, the analysis of the face such as I have just made, with the mastery of the Other and his poverty, with my submission and my wealth, is primary. It is the presupposed in all human relationships. If it were not that, we would not even say, before an open door, "After you, sir!" It is an original "After you, sir!" that I have tried to describe.

You have spoken of the passion of hate. I feared a much graver objection: How is it that one can punish and repress? How is it that there is justice? I answer that it is the fact of the multiplicity of men and the presence of someone else next to the Other, which condition the laws and establish justice. If I

am alone with the Other, I owe him everything; but there is someone else. Do I know what my neighbor is in relation to someone else? Do I know if someone else has an understanding with him or his victim? Who is my neighbor? It is consequently necessary to weigh, to think, to judge, in comparing the incompatible. The interpersonal relation I establish with the Other, I must also establish with other men; there is thus a necessity to moderate this privilege of the Other; from whence comes justice. Justice, exercised through institutions, which are inevitable, must always be held in check by the initial interpersonal relation.

Ph.N.: The crucial experience is thus here in your metaphysics: that which permits escaping Heidegger's ontology as an ontology of the Neutral, an ontology without morals. Is it starting from this ethical experience that you construct an "ethics"? For it follows, ethics is made up of rules; it is necessary to establish these rules?

E.L.: My task does not consist in constructing ethics; I only try to find its meaning. In fact I do not believe that all philosophy should be programmatic. It is Husserl above all who brought up the idea of a program of philosophy. One can without doubt construct an ethics in function of what I have just said, but this is not my own theme.

Ph.N.: Can you specify in what this discovery of ethics in the face breaks with the philosophies of totality?

E.L.: Absolute knowledge, such as it has been sought, promised or recommended by philosophy, is a thought of the Equal. Being is embraced in the truth. Even if the truth is considered as never definitive, there is a promise of a more complete and adequate truth. Without doubt, the finite being that we are cannot in the final account complete the task of knowledge; but in the limit where this task is accomplished, it consists in making the other become the Same. On the other hand, the idea of the Infinite implies a thought of the Unequal. I start from the Cartesian idea of the Infinite, where the *ideatum* of this idea, that is, what this idea aims at, is infinitely greater than the very act through which one thinks it. There is a disproportion between the act and that to which the act gives access. For Descartes, this is one of the proofs of God's existence: thought cannot produce something which exceeds thought; this something had to be put into us. One must thus admit to an infinite God who has put the idea of the Infinite into us. But it is not the proof Descartes sought that interests me here. I am thinking here of the astonishment at this disproportion between what he calls the "objective reality" and the "formal reality" of the idea of God, of the very paradox — so anti-Greek — of an idea "put" into me, even though Socrates

taught us that it is impossible to put an idea into a thought without it already having been found there.

Now, in the face such as I describe its approach, is produced the same exceeding of the act by that to which it leads. In the access to the face there is certainly also an access to the idea of God. In Descartes the idea of the Infinite remains a theoretical idea, a contemplation, a knowledge. For my part, I think that the relation to the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a Desire. I have tried to describe the difference between Desire and need by the fact that Desire cannot be satisfied; that Desire in some way nourishes itself on its own hungers and is augmented by its satisfaction; that Desire is like a thought which thinks more than it thinks, or more than what it thinks. It is a paradoxical structure, without doubt, but one which is no more so than this presence of the Infinite in a finite act.



Eight

Responsibility for the Other

Ph.N.: In your last great book published, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, you speak of moral responsibility. Husserl had already spoken of responsibility, but of a responsibility for the truth; Heidegger had spoken of authenticity; as for yourself, what do you understand by responsibility?

E.L.: In this book I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility.

I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face.

Ph.N.: How, having discovered the Other in his face, does one discover him as he to whom one is responsible?

E.L.: In describing the face positively, and not merely negatively. You recall what we said: meeting the face is not of the order of pure and simple perception, of the intentionality which goes toward adequation. Positively, we will say that since the Other looks at me, I am responsible for him, without even having taken on responsibilities in his regard; his responsibility is *incumbent on me*. It is responsibility that goes beyond what I do. Usually, one is responsible for what one does oneself. I say, in *Otherwise than Being*, that responsibility is initially *a for the Other*. This means that I am responsible for his very responsibility.

Ph.N.: What in this responsibility for the Other defines the structure of subjectivity?

E.L.: Responsibility in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another. In the book, the proximity of the Other is presented as the fact that the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself — insofar as I am — responsible for him. It is a structure that in nowise resembles the intentional relation

which in knowledge attaches us to the object — to no matter what object, be it a human object. Proximity does not revert to this intentionality; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the Other is known to me.

Ph.N.: I can know someone to perfection, but this knowledge will never by itself be a proximity?

E.L.: No. The tie with the Other is knotted only as responsibility, this moreover, whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, whether able or unable to do something concrete for the Other. To say: here I am [*me voici*].¹ To do something for the Other. To give. To be human spirit, that's it. The incarnation of human subjectivity guarantees its spirituality (I do not see what angels could give one another or how they could help one another). Dia-chrony before all dialogue: I analyze the inter-human relationship as if, in proximity with the Other — beyond the image I myself make of the other man — his face, the expressive in the Other (and the whole human body is in this sense more or less face), were what *ordains* me to serve him. I employ this extreme formulation. The face orders and ordains me. Its signification is an

1. Cf., *Genesis* 22, lines 1, 7 and 11, and *Isaiah* 6, line 8, for *Hineni*. Also, cf., Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Philosophy Today*, Vol. XXII, no. 2, Summer 1978, pp. 127-145. [Tr. note]

order signified. To be precise, if the face signifies an order in my regard, this is not in the manner in which an ordinary sign signifies its signified; this order is the very signifyingness of the face.

Ph.N.: You say at once "it orders me" and "it ordains me." Is this not a contradiction?

E.L.: It orders me as one orders someone one commands, as when one says: "Someone's asking for you."

Ph.N.: But is not the Other also responsible in my regard?

E.L.: Perhaps, but that is *his* affair. One of the fundamental themes of *Totality and Infinity* about which we have not yet spoken is that the intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity, were I to die for it. Reciprocity is *his* affair. It is precisely insofar as the relationship between the Other and me is not reciprocal that I am subjected to the Other; and I am "subject" essentially in this sense. It is I who support all. You know that sentence in Dostoyevsky: "*We are all guilty of all and for all men before all, and I more than the others.*"¹ This

2. Cf., Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, transl. by Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1957), p. 264.

is not owing to such or such a guilt which is really mine, or to offenses that I would have committed; but because I am responsible for a total responsibility, which answers for all the others and for all in the others, even for their responsibility. The I always has one responsibility *more* than all the others.

Ph.N.: That means that if the others do not do what they ought to do, it is owing to me?

E.L.: I have previously said elsewhere — I do not like mentioning it for it should be completed by other considerations — that I am responsible for the persecutions that I undergo. But only me! My "close relations" or "my people" are already the others and, for them, I demand justice.

Ph.N.: You go that far!

E.L.: Since I am responsible even for the Other's responsibility. These are extreme formulas which must not be detached from their context. In the concrete, many other considerations intervene and require justice even for me. Practically, the laws set certain consequences out of the way. But justice only has meaning if it retains the spirit of disinterestedness which animates the idea of responsibility for the other man. In principle the I does not pull itself out of its "first person"; it supports the world.

Constituting itself in the very movement wherein being responsible for the other devolves on it, subjectivity goes to the point of substitution for the Other. It assumes the condition — or the unconditional — of hostage. Subjectivity as such is initially hostage; it answers to the point of expiating for others.

One can appear scandalized by this utopian and, for an I, inhuman conception. But the humanity of the human — the true life — is absent. The humanity in historical and objective being, the very breakthrough of the subjective, of the human psychism in its original vigilance or sobering up, is being which undoes its condition of being: *dis-interestedness*. This is what is meant by the title of the book: *Otherwise than Being*. The ontological condition undoes itself, or is undone, in the human condition or unconditional. To be human means to live as if one were not a being among beings. As if, through human spirituality, the categories of being inverted into an “otherwise than being.” Not only into a “being otherwise”; being otherwise is still being. The “otherwise than being,” in truth, has no verb which would designate the event of its un-rest, its *dis-interestedness*, its putting-into-question of this being — or this *estedness* — of the being.

It is I who support the Other and am responsible for him. One thus sees that in the human subject, at the same time as a total subjection, my primogeniture manifests itself. My responsibility is untransferable, no one could replace me. In fact, it is a

matter of saying the very identity of the human I starting from responsibility, that is, starting from this position or deposition of the sovereign I in self-consciousness, a deposition which is precisely its responsibility for the Other. Responsibility is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what, *humanly*, I cannot refuse. This charge is a supreme dignity of the unique. I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject. It is in this precise sense that Dostoyevsky said: “*We are all responsible for all for all men before all, and I more than all the others.*”



Nine

The Glory of Testimony

Ph.N.: The ethical relationship makes us escape the "solitude" of being. But if we are then no longer in being, are we only in a society?

E.L.: You are thinking: what becomes of the Infinity that the title *Totality and Infinity* announced? I am not afraid of the word God, which appears quite often in my essays. To my mind the Infinite comes in the signifyingness of the face. The face *signifies* the Infinite. It never appears as a theme, but in this ethical signifyingness itself; that is, in the fact that the more I am just the more I am responsible; one is never quits with regard to the Other.

Ph.N.: There is an infinity in the ethical exigency in that it is insatiable?

E.L.: Yes. It is the exigency of holiness. At no time can one say: I have done all my duty. Except the

hypocrite . . . It is in this sense that there is an opening beyond what is delimited; and such is the manifestation of the Infinite. It is not a "manifestation" in the sense of "disclosure," which would be adequation to a given. On the contrary, the characteristic of the relation to the Infinite is that it is not disclosure. When in the presence of the Other, I say "Here I am!"; this "Here I am!" is the place through which the Infinite enters into language, but without giving itself to be seen. Since it is not thematized, in any case originally, it does not appear. The "invisible God" is not to be understood as God invisible to the senses, but as God non-thematizable in thought, and nonetheless as non-indifferent to the thought which is not thematization, and probably not even an intentionality.

I am going to tell you a peculiar feature of Jewish mysticism. In certain very old prayers, fixed by ancient authorities, the faithful one begins by saying to God "Thou" and finishes the proposition thus begun by saying "He," as if, in the course of this approach of the "Thou" its transcendence into "He" supervened. It is what in my descriptions I have called the "illeity" of the Infinite. Thus, in the "Here I am!" of the approach of the Other, the Infinite does not show itself. How then does it take on meaning? I will say that the subject who says "Here I am!" testifies to the Infinite. It is through this testimony, whose truth is not the truth of representation or perception, that the revelation of the Infinite occurs.

It is through this testimony that the very glory of the Infinite glorifies *itself*. The term "glory" does not belong to the language of contemplation.

Ph.N.: But wait: who testifies to what and to whom in testimony? What has the witness or the prophet of whom you speak seen happen, about which he has to render testimony?

E.L.: You continue here to think of testimony as based on knowledge and thematization. The concept of testimony I am trying to describe surely implies a mode of revelation, but this revelation *gives* us nothing. Philosophical speech as such always comes back to a thematization . . .

Ph.N.: . . . however one could ask you why you yourself thematize all this, and at this very moment. Is this not also in a sense to testify?

E.L.: Naturally I have myself made this objection. I have spoken somewhere of the philosophical *saying* as a saying which is in the necessity of always unsaying itself. I have even made this unsaying a proper mode of philosophizing. I do not deny that philosophy is a knowledge, insofar as it names even what is not nameable, and thematizes what is not thematizable. But in thus giving to what breaks with the categories of discourse the form of the *said*,

perhaps it impresses onto the said the traces of this rupture.

Ethical testimony is a revelation which is not a knowledge. Must one still say that in this mode one only "testifies" to the Infinite, to God, about which no presence or actuality is *capable* of testifying. The philosophers said there is no present infinite. What may pass for a "fault" of the infinite is to the contrary a positive characteristic of it — its very infinity.

In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* I wrote this: "The subject, or the other in the Same, insofar as the Same is for the other, testifies to the Infinite, of which no theme, no present, is capable. Here the difference is absorbed in the measure that proximity is made closer and through this very absorption stands out gloriously and always accuses me more. Here the Same, in its bearing as Same, is more and more extended with regard to the other, extended up to substitution as hostage, in an expiation which coincides in the final account with the extraordinary and diachronic reversal of the Same into the other in inspiration and psychism."¹ I mean that this way in which the other or the Infinite manifests itself in subjectivity is the very phenomenon of "inspiration," and consequently defines the psychic element, the very pneumatic of the psychism.

Ph.N.: That is to say, the Spirit. Thus, if God

1. *Autrement qu'être*, pp. 186-187/*Otherwise than Being*, p. 146.

is not seen, he has testimony rendered to Himself; if he is not thematized, he is attested.

E.L.: The witness testifies to what was said by himself. For he has said "Here I am!" before the Other; and from the fact that before the Other he recognizes the responsibility which is incumbent on himself, he has manifested what the face of the Other signified for him. The glory of the Infinite reveals itself through what it is capable of doing in the witness.

Ph.N.: For to say "Here I am!" even though life seems to go in an entirely contrary direction, since life only wants itself and commands only persistence in being, is by contrast to manifest something superior to life and death, thus glorious . . .

E.L.: The "otherwise than being" is the glory of God. "The idea of the Infinite which in Descartes is lodged in a thought that cannot contain it, expresses the disproportion between glory and the present, a disproportion which is inspiration itself. Under the weight that exceeds my capacity, a passivity more passive than all passivity correlative of acts, my passivity breaks out in saying: "Here I am!" The exteriority of the Infinite somehow becomes "interiority" in the sincerity of the testimony."²

2. *Autrement qu'être*, p. 187/*Otherwise than Being*, pp. 146-147.

Ph.N.: For want of being known, the infinite is absorbed?

E.L.: No. It commands.

Ph.N.: At least in this sense it is not exterior: it has decisively approached.

E.L.: Indeed; it commands and in this sense it is interior. "The glory which does not affect me as a representation or as an interlocutor before which and before whom I put myself, glorifies itself in my saying, commanding me through my mouth. Interiority is consequently not a secret place somewhere in me. It is that reverting in which the eminently exterior, precisely in virtue of this eminent exteriority, this impossibility of being contained and consequently entering into a theme, infinite exception to essence, concerns me and circumscribes me and orders me by my own voice. The commandment is stated through the mouth of him it commands, the infinitely exterior becomes an interior voice, but a voice testifying to the fission of the interior secrecy, signalling to the Other. Sign of this very donation of the sign. Crooked road. Claudel chose as an epigraph for his *Satin Slipper* a Portuguese proverb that can be understood in the sense I have just put forth: 'God writes straight with crooked lines.'³

3. *Autrement qu'être*, p. 187/*Otherwise than Being*, p. 147.



Ph.N.: Is there not an indirect definition of prophetism in this insistence upon testimony, irreducible to a thematizing knowledge?

E.L.: Prophetism is in fact the fundamental mode of revelation — on condition one understands prophetism in a very much larger sense than that admitted by the gift, the talent or the special vocation of those whom one calls the prophets. I think prophetism as a moment of the human condition itself. For every man, assuming responsibility for the Other is a way of testifying to the glory of the Infinite, and of being inspired. There is prophetism and inspiration in the man who answers for the Other, paradoxically, even before knowing what is concretely required of himself. This responsibility prior to the Law is God's revelation. There is a text of the prophet Amos that says: "God has spoken, who would not prophecy?"¹

1. *Amos*, 3.8.

where prophecy seems posited as the fundamental fact of man's humanity. This being so, next to the unlimited ethical exigency, prophecy interprets itself in concrete forms, where it has become book and text. In these concrete forms, become religions, men find consolations. But this by no means puts the rigorous structure I have tried to define back into doubt; in which it is always I who am responsible and I who support the universe, whatever happens next.

Apropos of these few reflections I have just set forth, I was once asked if the messianic idea still had meaning for me, and if it were necessary to retain the idea of an ultimate stage of history where humanity would no longer be violent, where humanity would have broken definitely through the crust of being, and where everything would be clear. I answered that to be worthy of the messianic era one must admit that ethics has a meaning, even without the promises of the Messiah.

Ph.N.: The positive religions, or at the least the three great religions of the Book recognized in the West, are each defined by the relation to a definitely established text, containing the Revelation; now when you speak of the "revelation" brought about by "testimony" you seem to find another origin for religious truth, and in the very present.

E.L.: What I say here of course only commits me! It is on these grounds that I answer this ques-

tion. I am convinced that the Bible is the outcome of prophecies and that in it ethical testimony — I do not say "experience" — is deposited in the form of writings. But this perfectly agrees with the humanity of man as responsibility for the Other which has been set forth in our interviews. That modern historical criticism has shown that the Bible had multiple authors spread over very different periods, contrary to what was believed several centuries ago, changes nothing of this conviction, to the contrary. For I have always thought that the great miracle of the Bible lies not at all in the common literary origin, but, inversely, in the confluence of different literatures toward the same essential content. The miracle of the confluence is greater than the miracle of the unique author. Now the pole of this confluence is the ethical, which incontestably dominates this whole book.

Ph.N.: Would you go so far as to say that an ethical man could, at all times and places, give written or oral testimonies which could eventually constitute a Bible?

Or, that there could be a common Bible between men who belong to different traditions or who do not acknowledge themselves to be a part of any religious tradition?

E.L.: Yes, ethical truth is common. Bible reading, even if it is diverse, expresses in its diversity what each person brings to the Bible. The subjective

condition of the reading is necessary to the reading of the prophetic. But one must certainly add to this the necessity of confrontation and dialogue, and consequently the whole problem of the call of tradition emerges, which is not an obedience but a hermeneutic.

Ph.N.: That goes without doubt for the reading of the same Bible by Jews and Christians. But my question went farther. I meant: if it is the testimony of the ethical which reveals the glory of the Infinite, and not a text containing a knowledge, what is the privilege of the Bible itself? Can one not read Plato as a Bible, or other great texts where humanity has acknowledged a testimony to the Infinite?

E.L.: In describing a moment ago — in passing — the human as a breakthrough that occurs in being and *puls into question* the proud independence of beings in their identity which it subjects to the *other*, I did not invoke the "fathomless" and utopian depths of "interiority." I have spoken of Scripture and the Book. I thought of their firmness which already tightens, hard as a verse, in all languages, before becoming letters traced by a stylet or quill. What one calls written in souls is at first written in books. Their status has always been too quickly made commonplace among the tools or cultural products of Nature or History. Even though their literature effects a rupture in being and does not come down to some

unknown intimate voice, or to the normative abstraction of "values" that the world itself where we are cannot reduce to the objectivity of objects. I think that across all literature the human face speaks — or stammers, or gives itself a countenance, or struggles with its caricature. Despite the end of Europeanism, disqualified by so many horrors, I believe in the eminence of the human face expressed in Greek Letters and in our own, which owe the Greeks everything. It is thanks to them that our history makes us ashamed. There is a participation in Holy Scripture in the national literatures, in Homer and Plato, in Racine and Victor Hugo, as in Pushkin, Dostoyevsky or Goethe, as of course in Tolstoy or in Agnon. But I am sure of the incomparable prophetic excellence of the Book of Books, which all the Letters of the world awaited or upon which they comment. The Holy Scriptures do not signify through the dogmatic tale of their supernatural or sacred origin, but through the expression of the face of the other man that they illuminate, before he gives himself a countenance or a pose. It is an expression as irrecusable as are imperious the worries of the everyday world of the historical beings that we are. The Holy Scriptures signify to me by all that they awakened in their readers in the course of centuries, and by all they received from exigences and their transmission. They *command all the gravity of the ruptures* where in our being the good conscience of its being-there is put into question. Therein resides their very holiness, outside of

every sacramental signification; a unique status, irreducible to that of the dreams of "beautiful souls," if one can still call status this wind of crisis — or this spirit — which blows and rends, despite the knots of History which retie themselves.

Ph.N.: The approach of the Infinite is thus essentially the same for every man. Nonetheless, only the particular religions give men consolations. The ethical exigency is universal, but consolation is a family affair?

E.L.: Religion in fact is not identical to philosophy, which does not necessarily bring the consolations which religion is able to give. Prophecy and ethics in no way exclude the consolations of religion; but I repeat again: a humanity which can do without these consolations perhaps may not be worthy of them.

Ph.N.: Let's speak about your most recent work. Nowadays you extend your meditation on responsibility for the Other by a meditation on responsibility for the Other's death. What should we understand by that?

E.L.: I think that in responsibility for the Other, one is, in the final analysis, responsible for the death

of the other. Is not the rectitude of the other's look an exposure par excellence, an exposure unto death? The face in its uprightnes is what is aimed at "point blank" by death. What is expressed as demand in it certainly signifies a call to *giving* and *servng* — or the commandment to giving and serving — but above this, and while including it, the order is to not let the Other alone, be it in the face of the inexorable. This is probably the foundation of sociality and of love without *eros*. The fear for the death of the other is certainly at the basis of the responsibility for him.

Such a fear is something other than fright. I think this notion of fear for the other man contrasts with the brilliant analyses Heidegger made of affectivity, sentiments, emotion, *Befindlichkeit*. Every emotion has, according to him, what he calls a double intentionality: it is an emotion *before* something and *for* something. Fear is fear *about* what is terrifying and always also fear *for* myself. Heidegger insists on the fact that in German verbs expressing emotions are always reflexive, as in French are the verbs to be moved, to be frightened, to be sad, etc.. Anxiety, according to him, is an exceptional emotion wherein the *about* and the *for* coincide: anxiety *about* finitude is anxiety *for* my finitude and, in a certain sense, all emotion, because of this return to the self, goes back to anxiety. It seems to us that the fear for the other does not have this return to the self. Is it not in it that the emotion of fear of God regains its sense, disengaged from every reference to the idea of a jealous God?

Ph.N.: In what sense?

E.L.: Dis-inter-ested fear; timidity, shame . . .
In any case, not fear of sanction.

Ph.N.: But if one fears for the Other and not
for oneself, can one even live?

E.L.: This is in fact the question one must
ultimately pose. Should I be dedicated to being? By
being, by persisting in being, do I not kill?

Ph.N.: To be sure, now that the biological
paradigm has become familiar to us, we know that
every species lives at the expense of another, and that
at the interior of each species every individual re-
places another. One cannot live without killing.

E.L.: In society such as it functions one cannot
live without killing, or at least without taking the
preliminary steps for the death of someone. Conse-
quently, the important question of the meaning of
being is not: why is there something rather than
nothing—the Leibnizian question so much comment-
ed upon by Heidegger — but: do I not kill by being?

Ph.N.: Even though, from this acknowledge-
ment that one cannot live without murder, or at least

without struggle, others draw the conclusion that it is
necessary in fact to kill, and that violence serves life
and rules evolution, you refuse this answer?

E.L.: The explosion of the human in being, the
breakthrough of being about which I have spoken in
the course of these interviews, the crisis of being, the
otherwise than being, are indeed marked by the fact
that what is most natural becomes the most problem-
atic. Do I have the right to be? Is being in the world
not taking the place of someone? The naive and
natural perseverance in being is put into question!

Ph.N.: In an epigraph to *Otherwise than Being*
you cite a sentence of Pascal: "This is my place in the
sun. That is how the usurpation of the whole world
began", and "They have used concupiscence as best
they could for the general good. But it is only pre-
tense, and a false image of charity. For at bottom it is
only hatred."²

However, if one agrees with you that this ques-
tion is the ultimate question, or first, of metaphysics,
how are you committed to your own answer? Will
you go so far as to say that you do not have the right
to live?

E.L.: In no way do I want to teach that suicide
follows from the love of the neighbor and the truly

2. Pascal, *Pensées*; Brunschvicg 295 and 451/LaFuma 112 and 404.

human life. I mean to say that a truly human life cannot remain life *satis-fied* in its equality to being, a life of quietude, that it is awakened by the other, that is to say, it is always getting sobered up, that being is never — contrary to what so many reassuring traditions say — its own reason for being, that the famous *conatus essendi* is not the source of all right and all meaning.

Major Works of Emmanuel Levinas¹

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1. The most complete bibliography of Levinas' published works, as well as secondary publications (to 1981), is *Emmanuel Levinas* by Roger Burggraeve, issued in 1982 by the Center for Metaphysics and Philosophy of God, Institute of Philosophy, Kardinaal Mercierplein 2, 3000 Leuven, Belgium.