



Ethics of Responsibility and Ambiguity of Politics in Levinas's Philosophy

Luc Anckaert

University of Louvain
Email luc.ankaert@kuleuven.be
ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1523-5940>

Abstract. The destruction of man in the Shoah or Holocaust did not mean that Levinas argues in favor of turning away from the socio-historical reality to cultivate his own little garden. The deepest truth of subjectivity can be found in an alterity that calls for a socio-political responsibility. The political implications are rooted in different layers of Levinas's thought. In his Talmudic comments, Levinas questions the reality of war as the truth of politics. But his explorations of subjectivity, ethical relationality and society allow to understand different political options such as contract theory (responsibility in the first person), liberation philosophy and human rights (responsibility in the second person) and the necessity of building a just society (ethics in the third person). Paradoxically, a just and equitable society ignores the uniqueness of the unique other. While organized responsibility is necessary, it introduces a new form of violence. In this article, we bring together the different layers in Levinas's political vision and we explore its limits. A fundamental question is whether Levinas's vision of politics is based on ethics or whether his ethics is a critique of politics.

Keywords: Levinas; Ethics; Politics; Violence; Messianic Peace; Justice; Responsibility

Atsakomybės etika ir politikos dviprasmybė Levino filosofijoje

Santrauka. Žmogaus sunaikinimas Šoa ar Holokauste nereiškė Levino atsitraukimo nuo socioistorinės realybės ir užsidarymo savo mažame sodelyje. Giliausia subjektyvumo tiesa gali būti rasta kitybėje, kuri kviečia imtis sociopolitinės atsakomybės. Levino minties politinės prasmės išaknytos skirtinguose jo mąstymo sluoksniuose. Savo Talmudo komentaruose Levinas kvestionuoja karo tikrovę kaip politikos tiesą. Tačiau jo subjektyvumo, etinio santykiškumo ir visuomenės tyrinėjimai leidžia suprasti tokias skirtingas politines galimybes kaip kontrakto teorija (pirmojo asmens atsakomybė), išsilaisvinimo filosofija ir žmogaus teisės (antrojo asmens atsakomybė) ir būtinybė kurti teisingą visuomenę (trečiojo asmens etika). Paradoksalu tai, kad teisinga ir lygi visuomenė ignoruoja unikalumą kito unikalumą. Organizuota atsakomybė yra būtina, tačiau ji įveda naują prievartos formą. Šiame straipsnyje sugretinami skirtingi Levino politinės vizijos sluoksniai ir ieškoma tos vizijos ribų. Iškeliamas esminis klausimas: ar Levino politikos vizija pagrįsta etika, ar jo etika yra politikos kritika?

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: Levinas, etika, politika, prievarta, mesianistinė taika, teisingumas, atsakomybė

Received: 02/12/2019. Accepted: 11/02/2020

Copyright © Luc Anckaert, 2020. Published by Vilnius University Press.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

The French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1905–1995) was driven by the inhumanity of the political reality to develop an ethics of responsibility. This ethics has different layers which can be called the responsibility in the first, the second and the third person (Burggraeve 2002). The presence of the other man is an appeal for ethical and political commitment. The deepest truth of subjectivity can be found in an alterity that calls for a socio-political responsibility.

1. Politics and the Messianic Era

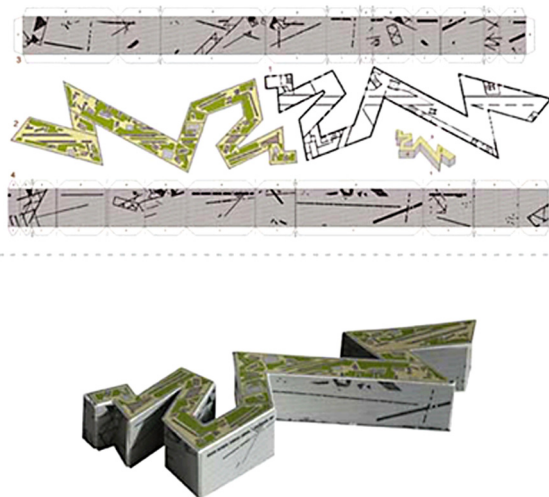
Levinas has been severely affected by the unmistakable violence that has ravaged the twentieth century. The political reality of various forms of nationalism resulted in a major worldwide fire that began with the assassination of the Crown Prince of Austria-Hungary and ended somewhere with the disintegration of the Balkans. The war is the truth of Europe. *Otherwise than Being* is therefore dedicated to the victims of Nazism:

To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists, and to the millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-Semitism (Levinas 1981, v).

There was not only the Shoah in the narrow sense, but also imperialism, the two World Wars, genocides, fascism and National Socialism, Stalinism, the poverty of the Third World, terrorism, unemployment, the ecological crisis, and so on (Levinas 1996, 163). Politics appears as a horrific reality and the Messianic era can only break through when the political oppression is broken.

In his Talmudic comments, Levinas brings up the conflict between the war and the Messianic peace. In *Beyond Memory* he talks about the liberation of the Egyptian yoke as an event that governs Judaism and mankind (Levinas 1994a). This past carries with it the promising future. But there are also new but unheard and horrible things to happen: “And

what is the meaning of (Isaiah 43:19): Behold, I will do new things – See, they are already unfolding?” (Levinas 1994a, 83). Talmudic wisdom does not bring any glorious promise! The savant Rav Yosef taught: “It is the war Gog and Magog” (Levinas 1994a, 83). Levinas does not interpret this as a war, but as *the* war. What is more, the mythical war of Gog and Magog (Buber 1996) has already begun in the age of the Shoah. As the ground-plan of the *Jüdisches Museum* in Berlin shows, the Shoah represents a radical caesura in the course of history.



The Messianic peace, on the other hand, breaks through when one is freed from the political domination by the people. The Messianic peace does not change the ethical and social reality. The poor remain present. But with the abolition of the political alienation, one can really assume one's ethical responsibility. The idea goes back via Maimonides to a statement by the Babylonian teacher from the third century, (Bar)Samuel: "There is no difference between this world and the days of the Messianic except (that in the latter there will be no) bondage of foreign Powers" (Levinas 1990, 61).

In the *Preface to Totality and Infinity*, Levinas connects war with politics: "The art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means – politics – is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason" (Levinas 1969, 21). However, war is not only connected with a political form of rationality. War also appears "as the pure experience of pure being" (Levinas 1969, 21). Levinas explicitly refers to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, according to whom war is the father of all things. Of course, Heidegger's text *An Introduction to Metaphysics* plays an important role in the background (Heidegger 1959). In opposition to war, which is associated with ontology, "eschatology institutes a relation with being *beyond the totality* or beyond history" (Levinas 1969: 22).

2. The Inhumanity and the Position of Subjectivity

Thinking "probably begins through traumatism or groping to which one does not even know how to give a verbal form: a separation, a violent scene, a sudden consciousness of the monotony of time" (Levinas 1985, 21). Against the trauma, Levinas develops a concept of humanity that is "a defense of subjectivity" (Levinas 1969, 26). It is right and legitimate to interpret Levinas's philosophy as a philosophy of the human face. This fortunate expression may be the highest though not the first expression of Levinas's ethics. The face of the other presupposes quite a lot that is linked to human subjectivity. The relation of alterity with the transcendent is reflected within the intimacy of subjectivity: "This 'beyond' the totality and objective experience, is however, not to be described in a purely negative fashion. It is reflected *within* the totality and history, within experience" (Levinas 1969, 23). The consequence of this interpretation (fully argued in Anckaert 2006), is that the ethical concern of Levinas is not only situated in the intersubjective relation with the other, but has to be understood on different levels in Levinas's philosophy. Ethics is a dialectical phenomenology that describes the movement from inhumanity through subjectivity to relationality (Levinas 1994b & 2001a).

The Inhumanity of the Violence Endured

The inhumanity of violence is the starting-point. Levinas calls it the *There is* (Levinas 1994b & 2001a; Anckaert 2017). The *There is* is pure being, the massive pressure of being, the unbearable weight of being, the unorientated night. In fact, it is very difficult to give a definition of the *There is*. The *There is* is not a substance or thing between things, but the absence of any objectivity. It is a shifter that can be interpreted in many ways, a visor with which one can envisage different forms of inhumanity. It is the anonymity in which

subjectivity and objectivity are engulfed. There are no longer any distinctions. When the differences disappear, indifference arises. Everything is the same and everything is equal. The *There is* is the sea of being in which man drowns.

In the extermination camps, the victims were completely dehumanized. They were reduced to an animal existence and often radically reduced to nothing: the gas chambers and the crematoria. The unforgettable figure of the *Muzelman* as the living dead is the extreme literary expression of depersonalization (Levi 1987) or naked life (Agamben 2002).

The Position of Subjectivity

Man seeks to escape from the *There is*. This happens in the hypostasis. This hypostasis has a fundamentally positive meaning. Man feels the threat of the *There is* and wants to resist the violation of his being a person. Self-loss and world-loss are the first ground experience of being. Man is positing himself by attributing the initiative of his existence to himself. He does not only exist as a person involved in the world and its history, but he coincides with his own being: “it is not just that one is, one is oneself” (Levinas 2001a, 16). Man has an irreducible first name and a surname, a proper name. As a person with a name, man takes the initiative for an auto-position. He finds a point of reference to establish his identity.

Particularly noteworthy is the Pinkas synagogue in Prague, which was completely emptied after the Shoah and where only the names of the victims are painted on the walls: the name is irreducible. In Birkenau (*Auschwitz II*) drawings and calculations can be seen on the walls of one of the preserved barracks: mothers wanted to teach their children. In spite of the anonymity of the world history, they kept an obstinate pride that expressed itself in a hopeless perspective for the future of their offspring. It is a form of inner freedom and self-respect by which one remains a person, even in the most inhuman circumstances.

Cathérine Chalié, who has developed from a Levinas scholar into an independent and highly original thinker, combines the irreducibility of the name and the generations with sacred history. The meaning of humanity does not lie in the world history with its violence, but in a transhistorical experience of time as eternity. The irreducible names that inscribe themselves in the intergenerational ties (*toldot*), are the expression of a meaning that transcends the anonymity of the *There is*.

It [= the Hebrew language that speaks of the *toldot*] learns that history as the quest to give a meaning to becoming human is not related to the struggle for power that seeks to impose itself or to the violence of the states that are eager for power and recognition, but with the possibility of pronouncing proper names, which are in their turn the source of other proper names (Chalié 1992, 23).

By positing oneself as hypostasis, man can escape anonymity. At the same time, however, he is thrown back on his own.

It is forever bound to the existence which it has taken up. This impossibility for the ego to not be a self constitutes the underlying tragic element in the ego, the fact that it is riveted to its own being (Levinas 2001a, 84).

As a protest against inhumanity, man is first and foremost lonely. It is not a psychological, but a structural loneliness. No one else can bear the tragic existence in his place.

3. Building a World

The structural loneliness of the hypostasis shows the subjectivity as being thrown back on itself. The reflexivity of the hypostasis is an inescapable burden of being. Like an Atlas, man carries his own being. Enjoyment offers the possibility to escape from the weight of the own existence (Levinas 1969, 122–142).

Enjoyment

Man can approach the world as a source of enjoyment. Enjoying the good things in life withdraws man from coinciding with himself. In enjoyment, man experiences himself as a physical subject. The fact that life is rooted in enjoyment means that man belongs in the world and is not an unworldly spirit. Enjoyment expresses a primary experience of harmony. Man lives in the *Element*. Levinas summarizes enjoyment as “something that one masters. It is the harmonious moment of an experience” (Levinas 1982, 128). The experience of unity is grafted on the hypostasis and precedes the ontological level with its constituent subjectivity and correlative representations. The immersion of the subjectivity in the elemental world is primary to the subject-object relations.

The enjoyment is characterized by an oblivion of time. Enjoyment means a suppression of the *Retention* and the *Protention*, so that man lives in the actual moment. As a result, enjoyment is not only the carefree relationship with the world as source of abundance. The world has a flipside. As pure quality that is not carried by a substantive, the milieu comes to us from nowhere. This delimitation of the *Element* is the inner limit of enjoyment. The qualities lose themselves in the nowhere, in the *Apeiron*. The uncertain future of the *Element* is experienced concretely as the mythical divinity of the *Element*. The dark future without a face is the *There is* that manifests itself again. The *There is* is the permanent threat of the loss of enjoyment. The *There is* and the *Element* are the two sides of the same reality. The uncertainty for the future is a fundamental threat to man. The presence must be transcended because of the insecurity of existence.

Working and Thinking

In order to overcome the uncertainty of enjoyment, man must engage himself in the world. This presupposes a dwelling place or a house (Levinas 1969, 152–174). The house is the place where one is at home with oneself. It forms an anchor in the vicissitudes of enjoyment. Man leaves his house to conquer the world. The outer nature is thus transformed into culture. Levinas gives the example of *meubles*. Furnishings are in French “movables”, derived from the Latin *moveri*, which means ‘to move’ (Levinas 1969, 131). Man leaves his house to transform a piece of nature into a piece of furniture (i.e. a thing that serves to dwell) and to bring it into his house. Through the furnishing of the house, man can acquire the security of existence in the face of the ephemerality of enjoyment.

The conquering movement towards the world happens in a double two way. In labor, man manipulates things in order to bring them into his sphere of life. Work is fundamentally ‘eco-nomy’ or directed at the law (*nomos*) of the house (*oikos*). But there is also thinking. Knowledge is a form of power, every understanding (*comprendre*) is a form of grasping (*prendre*). In knowledge, one first analyses the world in order to be able to control it. Work and knowledge are the two ways in which man builds his existence. The things of the world do not appear merely as a source of enjoyment, but as things that are juxtaposed with man and on which man wants to gain an intentional grip. Through the activity of thinking and acting, man acquires certainty for the future. The negativity of pleasure is overcome.

Politics as Organized Self-interest

The subject as outlined so far is primarily an active subject who wants to safeguard his own right to exist in a *conatus essendi* (Levinas 1981, 118). It takes on a certain responsibility for his own existence. This is the responsibility in the first person. On the one hand, this subject means the break-up of the totalitarian violence of the blind powers of pure being. The person posits himself as a free individual that develops an economic life. On the other hand, it is self-involved and not open to an ethical relation with the other. At most, only a form of cooperation with other subjects can arise out of self-interest. The political contract theories are the expression of this. The confrontation with one’s own deficits calls for cooperation. Besides, it is easier to restrict one’s own possessiveness and to respect each other’s property than to constantly have to defend it. The benevolent cooperation, however, is never guaranteed, and politics can also degenerate into a curbed war, all against all. The state is then the Leviathan who, with the means of power, forces the subdued subjects into peace.

4. Suffering and Ethical Sociality

The active concept of subjectivity that underlies this political option runs into the inescapable experience of suffering. As totalizing, the Western subject integrates the possibilities into its own thinking and life. But there is also the confrontation with the reality of the impossible, that what man cannot manage.

Suffering as the Failure of Active Subjectivity

In two less studied articles, Levinas develops how the confrontation with physical suffering reveals a form of ethical sociality (Levinas 1982 & 2006). Both enjoyment and knowledge — with their associated manipulative attitude towards reality — are characterized by a harmonizing tendency. As knowing, the subject is intentionally oriented towards the world. The Kantian *Ich Denke* as an active synthesis is able to reunite the most heterogeneous and disparate phenomena into a harmonious order and to integrate them into a system of unity and meaning (Kant 1998, B106). As well known, this is the result of the three categories of modality: the possibility (“Pierre says that the moon is an immobile

star”: this is possible, but not real); the reality (“Pierre says that the moon rotates around the earth”: this is not only possible, but also real); the necessity (“Pierre says that the sum of the angles of a triangle is 180 degrees”). Also the non-real but possible is integrated.

The physical suffering, however, is refractory: it is real but not possible. The suffering is a break with the experiences of consciousness. Suffering is a “permanent gap” in the world (Levinas 1982, 127). Physical suffering is the content-based refutation of the synthesis of pleasure and knowledge. Suffering can never be integrated within an emotional unity or a rationality. Every theodicy attempt is doomed to failure.

In addition, physical suffering also indicates the mode of resistance. It is the formal refusal of the possible integration of the heterogeneous data into a sensible whole. Physical suffering falls outside every category, including that of possibility. For the Western, active subject, suffering is therefore an impossibility. Suffering is a content that refuses to become content. It is the reality of the impossible. Levinas speaks of “useless suffering”. Suffering falls outside every category of utility.

In suffering, man is thrown back onto his body. As flesh, the pure body is the material resistance to all categorical thinking and acting. World literature gives us three telling examples. In *The Magic Mountain* the Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann writes about the ill Joachim Ziemssen:

And yet look he is developed, like a picture in a book, a regular Apollo Belvedere, except from the hair. But the disease makes him ailing within and fevered without; disease makes man more physical, it leaves them nothing but body (Mann 1928, 178).

Jean Améry describes the tortured man in the Nazi cellars:

But only in torture does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete. Frail in the face of violence, yelling out in pain, awaiting no help, capable of no resistance, the tortured person is only a body, and nothing else beside that (Améry 1980, 33).

Vasily Grossman gives a description of the gas chamber as the industrial reduction of organic life:

The floor consisted of heavy, movable slabs in metal frames; the joints between these frames were close and perfect. A mechanism operated from the control-room allowed the slabs to be raised on end in such a way that the contents of the chamber were evacuated into a hall beneath. Here the organic matter was examined by teams of dentists who extracted any precious metals used in dental work. Next, a conveyer-belt leading to the crematoria themselves was set in motion; there the organic matter, already without thought or feeling, underwent a further process of decomposition under the action of thermal energy and was transformed into phosphate fertilizer, lime, cinders, ammoniac, and sulphurous and carbonic acid gas (Grossman 2006, 459).

The extreme limit experience of disease, torture and destruction of the body shows that only the body remains. It is the unintegrable rest of the subjectivity, the material

resistance to any dialectic synthesis (Adorno 1983). In *Auschwitz I* there is an urn with ashes: the ashes remain (Agamben 2002).

Physical suffering shows that the “defense of subjectivity” as enjoyment and knowledge fails and is limited by its own boundaries. In bodily suffering, a radical passivity appears. Human activity is thwarted by suffering and death. Man is radically confronted with his physical and psychological shortcomings and thrown back to his loneliness and finiteness. Man cannot take an adequate attitude to suffering. The threat of meaninglessness is a relapse into the *There is*. Does the meaninglessness of death signify the end of meaning of all human actions?

An Ethical Sociality

In the aforementioned articles, Levinas works out how the confrontation with suffering and vulnerability provides the basis of a sociality. In physical suffering a mutual radical passivity appears. The subject can experience the passivity both in himself and in others. The passivity of physical suffering shows an “ontological commitment” of people to each other within which the voice of ethics can be heard. The resistance of the body is an appeal to which one cannot remain indifferent. The “non-indifference” points to an inescapable involvement or sociality of people on each other. People are brothers (Levinas 1969, 278–280). In suffering “a blossoming of meaning, a sign of sociality, a beginning of sense emerges” (Levinas 1982, 133). The sociality is not quantitative, phenomenal or sociological – as if the size and amount of suffering were the most important thing – but qualitative. Suffering is not only the content of a resistance, but the resistance itself. This has to do with the ethical order. The qualitative dimension allows the defense of subjectivity to be deepened to its ethical basis.

The appeal of the other resounds in a double way. As the prohibition of murder it is the question whether the own way of existence, the concrete development of life in enjoyment, work and knowledge in order to build his own house or life, does not mean a curtailment of the existence of the other. Moreover, man experiences the need of the other as an ethical obligation to help: “You won’t kill means you’ll do anything to make the other person live” (Levinas 1983, 41). The other’s naked paltriness is an appeal that urges a fundamental choice: the other person’s need demands obedience. However, this does not mean slavish submission. Obedience consists in responding to the call of the other person’s naked face. It is a care for the good of the other. The poverty of the other person sounds from the heights as an imperative to sensitivity and dedication. The demand for obedience is not a humiliation, but an election.

The ethical appeal is a disturbance of the order. It runs counter to the personal and social political order, which is based on the hypostatic subjectivity. It is a question of rethinking politics in function of the other. The individuals own possibilities for existence are not denied, but are questioned and oriented towards the other. In short, by the other person, the subject is called upon to respond to the needs of the other. Man is torn away from his self-interested existence and directed at the other.

Philosophy of Liberation as a Socio-political Interpretation

Enrique Dussel's philosophy of liberation, which explicitly refers to Levinas, is the radical, political expression of this ethical event (Dussel 1985). Dussel starts from the concrete experience of suffering which reveals the passivity of existence. On the one hand, this calls for a Marxist-inspired analysis of society in which the ethical question of the prohibition of murder is placed in the concrete, political history. Dussel develops an incarnated historiography in which the alterity of the face is replaced by the physical people (*el pueblo*) and the physical other: *el campesino, el indigeno*. On the other hand, there is the call for concrete political praxis of liberation that sometimes has to overthrow the existing social order. According to Dussel, the practice of liberation consists of four categories: the political, erotic and pedagogical liberation and anti-fetishism (Tort 2018).

Human Rights and Hospitality

The ethical sociality can take the form of societal hospitality. As *conatus essendi*, the subject has established itself in the world of work and knowledge. The *Declaration of Human Rights* guarantees the fundamental rights of the individual. Levinas radicalizes the problem. It are the rights of the other that matter.

It is in the dialogue of transcendence that the idea of the good arises, merely by the fact itself that, in the encounter, the *other counts* above all else. The Relationship where the I encounters the You is the original place and circumstance of the ethical coming (*avènement*). The ethical fact owes nothing to values; it is values that owe everything to the ethical fact. The concreteness of the good is the worth (*le valoir*) of the other man (Levinas 1998a, 147).

This means a radical recalibration of all values. The values derive their importance from the ethical fact in which the other comes first. Responsibility is a responsibility in the second person. In this sense, Levinas can speak of the human rights of the other (Levinas 1988b; 1989; 1996; 2008). Not only are the human rights the discourse that allows the subject to legitimately defend his or her own existence, but the human rights are the duty to safeguard the very existence of the others. This means a reversal of one's own existence. The house takes on the meaning of hospitality: the economy is the material possibility of doing justice to the other.

5. The Necessity and the Limits of a Social and Political Order

The other appears as the reference for each value. This radicalism is the limit of responsibility in the second person. Ethical responsibility does not only take place in the exclusive encounter between two persons. There is also the presence of thirds.

The Thirds and the Necessity of a Political Order

The thirds do not make a direct appeal. They are present in their absence. Their importance is threefold. The ethical responsibility can easily degenerate into a psychological *narcissisme à deux*. The irreducible presence of the thirds breaks this down:

The third – always present – liberates from the psychological disaster of the insular relation in which the one only exists by the other, it breaks through the drunkenness of a pure mutual satisfaction, of the saturation and of any fulfillment. By bringing an opening to the idea of a beyond, by breaking the illusion of the other as a mirror and an equal, the third demands to get rid of the images of the one, the fullness and of the ultimately accomplished life (Chalier 2000, 33).

Moreover, there is the paradox of the hospitality (Derrida 2000). When the absolute duty of concrete hospitality is realized, the exclusion of the thirds is a consequence. Ethical commitment to the immediate other intrinsically carries the risk of injustice. Listening and being open to the needs or problems of the unique other means a deafness to the histories of the invisible and absent thirds. This is the tragedy of interpersonal goodness. Therefore, a broader reality is needed to realize societal responsibility.

But above all there is the presence of the many others who are involved in the ethical process. Levinas devotes a great deal of attention to this, especially in his later texts (Levinas 2001b). The expression *le tiers* has different meanings. Quantitatively, the word includes all the people who fall outside the own world, but who are invisibly present. They are spatially removed, but invade in our lives. Qualitatively, the term refers to the alterities that one does not like to allow in one's own life world. In addition, the thirds are also those who are absent in time, the so-called fourth or future generation.

Because of the multiple meaning of the thirds, responsibility must be organized in a structural way. The social and political field of action is the necessary result of the appearance of the many thirds who demand fair and equitable handling. The radical responsibility for one another is limited by the appearance of the thirds who also have their rights. The potential conflict between the rights of the second and the third others requires the installation of a more or less equitable system. Justice meets the needs of the various others. Responsibility undergoes a profound change. Instead of paying attention to the uniqueness of the other, the responsibility must compare the different others in order to become a just and equitable responsibility:

But the order of justice of individuals responsible for one another does not arise in order to restore that reciprocity between the I and its other; it arises from the fact of the third who, next to the one who is an other than me, is “another other” to me. The I, precisely as responsible for the other and the third, cannot remain indifferent to their interactions, and in the charity for the one cannot withdraw its love to the other. The self, the I, cannot limit itself to the incomparable uniqueness of each other, which is expressed in the face of each other... This is the hour of inevitable justice – required, however, by charity itself. The hour of justice, of the comparison between incomparables who are grouped by human species and genus. And the hour of institutions empowered to judge, of states within which institutions are consolidated, of universal law which is always a *dura lex*, and of citizens equal before the law (Levinas 1988b, 205–206).

In this way, Levinas integrates the economy and politics into responsibility. The incomparable uniqueness of the many thirds can only be appreciated by the organization of a system of equality. It is the responsibility in the third person.

The Fundamental Ambiguity of Organized Politics

The paradox and tragedy of organized solidarity lies in the fact that everyone is considered as equal. For the sake of fairness and justice, each system ignores the concrete face of the other. A system that wants to organize justice for several people becomes, in a way, inhumane.

In his later texts Levinas echoes the political critique of Vasily Grossman and is surprised by the resemblance with the small goodness (Anckaert 2016 & 2020). Grossman works out how the pursuit of justice sometimes brings about evil in a paradoxical way:

I have seen the unshakeable strength of the idea of social good that was born in my own country. I saw this struggle during the period of general collectivization and again in 1937. I saw people being annihilated in the name of an idea of good as fine and humane as the ideal of Christianity. I saw whole villages dying of hunger; I saw peasant children dying in the snows of Siberia... This idea was something fine and noble – yet it killed some without mercy, crippled the lives of others, and separated wives from husbands and children from fathers (Grossman 2006, 390–391).

Grossman sets the small goodness against totalitarian goodness, a concept that Levinas frequently agrees with.

Yes, as well as this terrible Good with a capital G, there is everyday human kindness. The kindness of an old woman carrying a piece of bread to a prisoner, the kindness of a soldier allowing a wounded enemy to drink from his water-flask, the kindness of youth towards age, the kindness of a peasant hiding an old Jew in his loft. The kindness of a prison guard who risks his own liberty to pass on letters written by a prisoner not to his ideological comrades, but to his wife and mother (Grossman 2006, 391–392).

Grossman vigorously argues for the small goodness from a disillusionment with the great ethical ideals. The goodness from one person to another is lost as soon as it is organized within the universality of a system.

At this point, Levinas distances himself from Grossman. The possibility that responsibility is perverted by the organization does not imply that every system as such should be condemned. *Abusus non tollit usum*. On the contrary, the totalizing elements must be constantly questioned and criticized by the original goodness. Since each system ignores the concrete face of the other, the system must be constantly corrected. Levinas is thus well aware of the intrinsic inhumanity of the system. That is why the system, which must be used to organize responsibility, has to be constantly criticized. The correction is made with the small goodness in mind. It is the shelter for the good in the world of being.

A justice always to be perfected against its own harshness. That is perhaps the very excellence of democracy, whose fundamental liberalism corresponds to the ceaseless deep remorse of justice: legislation always unfinished, always resumed, a legislation open to the better. It attests to an ethical excellence and its origin in goodness, from which, however, it is distanced – always a bit less perhaps – by the necessary calculations imposed by a multiple sociality, calculations constantly starting over again (Levinas 1998b, 206).

Grossman and Levinas give a similar description of the ethical commitment. Grossman exclusively believes in the power of small goodness, while Levinas considers it also to be the basis of organized legislation and political order, which in her calculations, however, always means a perversion of goodness. That is why Levinas also understands goodness as a correction to the impersonality of the system that tries to realize justice, but ignores the invisible tears of the people who, despite everything, fall outside the system.

Conclusion

Political power has an ambiguous character. Within a political order, the state has a monopoly on violence, and violence is then called power. However, there is a deep gap between the exercise of legitimate power and the undergoing of it. In *Wet en Geweld*, Jos Defoort argues that the law itself introduces a form of violence as a means of curbing violence: “For those who commit (legal) violence, it is about justifying that violence. For those who suffer, any justification is irrelevant” (Defoort 1994, 142). The law only becomes effective when it inscribes itself in the bodies of the subjects. Perhaps no one has evoked this more forcefully than Franz Kafka in his remarkable story *In the Penal Colony* (Kafka 1971). With the literal inscription of the verdict in the body, man no longer even knows that he has been condemned. The demarcation between law and violence is razor-thin. The convicted person regards the execution of the legitimate sentence as brutal violence. The verdict is fair and the expression of a structural legal system. It is the metaphor for the ambiguity in Levinas’s political vision. On the one hand, there is the need for an organized political order which, on the other hand, can become unjust and even violent for the subjects. We have seen that a lot of political options can be linked with different aspects of Levinas’s philosophy: the contract-theories with the concept of subjectivity, the liberation philosophy and the discourse on human rights with the intersubjective responsibility; the organized political order with the question of the thirds. But does this implicate that Levinas’s ethics can be a foundation for politics?

The strength of Levinas’s political vision lies rather in the fact that, like a Socratic hornet, he questions every system that may well be necessary: what is the ethical meaning of the system – what does it mean for concrete people? Levinas reacts to the intrinsic violence of the political order. On the one hand, this reaction is inspired by his religious background and leads to his ideas on messianism; on the other hand it is a consequence of the ambiguity of organized politics, also evoked by Grossman. His thinking can be understood as a defense of subjectivity. This subject breaks through totalitarian violence and his appearance is a liberation and openness to the transcendent. Moreover, this subject is made possible by the transcendent. Man lives from the beyond of being, which in its pure form can appear as violence. At this level we find Levinas’s brilliant criticisms of the *il y a*-tic reality, of the totality, of the possible degeneration of justly intended and necessary social structures.

References

- Adorno, T.W., 1983. *Negative Dialectics*. Translated by E.B. Ashton. New York: Continuum.
- Agamben, G., 2002. *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by D. Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books.
- Améry, J., 1980. At the Mind's Limits. Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities. Translated by S. Rosenfeld & S.P. Rosenfeld. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Anckaert, L., 2006. *A Critique of Infinity. Rosenzweig and Levinas*. Leuven-Paris-Dudley: Peeters.
- Anckaert, L., 2016. The Thunderbolt of Evil and Goodness without Witnesses: In Conversation with Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*. In: *Religija ir kultūra, 18–19*, 22–37.
- Anckaert, L., 2017. The Problem of the “Nichts” (Rosenzweig) and the “Il y a” (Levinas) as a Correlate of the Human Identity. In: *Man and the Word* 19, n° 4: 25–41.
- Anckaert, L., 2020. Goodness without Witnesses. Vasily Grossman and Emmanuel Levinas. In: A. Cools (Eds.), *Levinas and Literature*. Berlin: De Gruyter (to be published).
- Buber, M., 1996. *Gog and Magog. A Novel*. Translated by L. Lewisohn. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Burggraeve, R., 2002. *The Wisdom of Love in the Service of Love. Emmanuel Levinas on Justice, Peace, and Human Rights*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- Chalier, C., 1992. *L'Histoire Promise*. Paris: Cerf.
- Chalier, C., 2000. *Les Matriarches. Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel et Léa*. Paris: Cerf.
- Defoort, J., 1994. *Wet en Geweld*. Kapellen: Pelckmans.
- Derrida, J., 2000. *Of Hospitality*. Translated by R. Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Dussel, E., 1985. *Philosophy of Liberation*. Translated by A. Martinez and C. Morkovsky. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Grossman, V., 2006. *Life and Fate*. Translated by R. Chandler. London: Vintage.
- Heidegger, M., 1959. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. Translated by R. Manheim. New Haven-London: Yale University Press.
- Kafka, F., 1971. In the Penal Colony. Translated by W. Muir and E. Muir. In: Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*. Edited by N.N. Glatzer. New York: Schocken Books, 140–167.
- Kant, I., 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by P. Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levi, P., 1987. *If this is a Man. The Truth*. Translated by S. Woolf. London: Sphere Books.
- Levinas, E., 1969. *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by A. Lingis. Pittsburgh-The Hague: Pittsburgh University Press-Martinus Nijhoff.
- Levinas, E., 1981. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Translated by A. Lingis. The Hague-Boston-London: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Levinas, E., 1982. Une Ethique de la Souffrance. Entretien avec Emmanuel Lévinas. In : *Autrement* 142, 127–138.
- Levinas, E., 1983. *Transcendence et Intelligibilité. Suivi d'un entretien avec Jean Halpérin*. Genève: Labor et Fides.
- Levinas, E., 1985. *Ethics and Infinity. Conversations with Philippe Nemo*. Translated by R.A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E., 1988. Les Droits de l'Autre Homme. In: *Les Droits de l'Homme en Questions*. Edited by Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits De L'Homme. Paris: La Documentation Française, 43–45.
- Levinas, E., 1989. Droits de l'Homme et Bonne Volonté. In: *Le Supplément*, n° 168, 57–60.
- Levinas, E., 1990. Messianic Texts. In: *Difficult Freedom Essays on Judaism*. Translated by S. Hand. London: The Athlone Press, 59–96.
- Levinas, E., 1994a. Beyond Memory. In: *In the Time of the Nations*. Translated by M.B. Smith. London: The Athlone Press, 76–91.

- Levinas, E., 1994b. *Time and the Other*. Translated by R.A. Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E., 1996. Peace and Proximity. In: *Basic Philosophical Writings*. Edited by A.T. Peperzak. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 161–170.
- Levinas, E., 1998a. *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Translated by B. Bergo. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Levinas, E., 1998b. The Other, Utopia, and Justice. Translated by M.B. Smith. In: Levinas, E. (2001). *Is it righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Edited by J. Robbins. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 200–201.
- Levinas, E., 1999. *Alterity and Transcendence*. Translated by B.M. Smith. London: Athlone Press.
- Levinas, E., 2001a. *Existence and Existants*. Translated by A. Lingis. Pittsburgh-Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press.
- Levinas, E., 2001b. *Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Edited by J. Robbins. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Levinas, E., 2006. Useless Suffering. In: *Entre Nous. Thinking-of-the-Other*. Translated by M.B. Smith & B. Hashav. London-New York: Continuum, 78–87.
- Levinas, E., 2008. The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other. In: *Outside the Subject*. Translated by M.B. Smith. New York: Continuum, 116–125.
- Mann, T., 1928. *The Magic Mountain*. Translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter. London: Secker & Warburg.
- Tort, J., 2017. *The Meeting Place of Love and Hunger: Vision, the Body, and Politics in Levinas and Dussel*. MA diss., KULeuven.