

Ethical anarchy

Emmanuel Levinas' heteronomies

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“The Good is anarchy.”

“No one is the slave of the Good.”

Emmanuel Levinas¹²

“Loving God is the only way to have no master.”

Paul Claudel³

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu'être, ou au-delà de l'essence* [1974], Paris, Le Livre de Poche, « Biblio Essais », 1990, p. 88.

² *Ibid.*, p. 176.

³ Paul Claudel, cité par Michel Autrand, « Les saisons noires du jeune Claudel, 1882- 1895 », *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1999/3, no 99, p. 400.

From dissociation

Schürmann and Levinas obviously never met. However, their “anarchies” have at least one thing in common: the clear separation from political anarchism.

No doubt this is one of the reasons why Levinas chooses sometimes to write the word with a hyphen, an-archie, as to distinguish it from its usual understanding. “The notion of an-archy as we introduce it [...], he says, precedes the political (or anti-political) sense that is popularly attributed to him¹.”

The “idea of *anarchy*, in Levinas,” writes Miguel Abensour, “is not not reduced to its political significance. Levinas is concerned to distinguish an-archy or an-archic in the sense in which he understands it — the plot of the human, the plot of responsibility — from anarchism. Anarchism, a political doctrine, is constituted and affirmed by the detour of a principle and by recourse to a principle, namely the invocation of the principle of reason against the principle of authority. The same is not true of an-archy².”

Thus, in Levinas’s work, one will not find any reference to to anarchism. Neither to traditional political anarchism nor to messianic anarchism of thinkers like Scholem, Landauer or Benjamin³. For the author of *Totality and Infinity*, an-archy is not devoid of political significance, but the latter owes nothing to the theorists of anarchism.

The similarities with Schürmann’s thinking, however, end there quickly. Levinasian anarchy is indeed alien to deconstruction and also resists the logic of the *double bind*. It will therefore be necessary to take a special path to access the secret region where denial is woven.

It will be thought that the reason for the dissociation between anarchy and anarchism is actually very clear: if Levinas is not an anarchist, it is because such a position is not compatible with his defence of the state of Israel and the claim of a certain Zionism. Levinas would deny anarchism so as not to have to explain the alleged contradiction between his concept of anarchy and the acceptance of — or even adherence to — Israel’s nationalistic and colonialist territorial policy. This reason is not a bad one, but it is too simple, too fast. While it should not be dismissed, it should be seen as only the tip of the iceberg. I would argue that the motive of anarchy in Levinas’s work conceals a more obscure point that has not been the subject of any study to date, of any elucidation.

¹ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu’être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

² Miguel Abensour, *Emmanuel Levinas, l’intrigue de l’humain. Entre métapolitique et politique. Entretiens avec Danielle Cohen-Levinas*, Paris, Hermann, 2012, p. 47.

³ Voir Michael Löwy, *La Révolution est le frein d’urgence. Essais sur Walter Benjamin*, Paris, Éditions de L’Éclat, 2019, chap. « Walter Benjamin et l’anarchisme ».

Beyond deconstruction

Levinas does not situate his thought in the wake of deconstruction. This is why he does not seek to elucidate the relationship between traditional metaphysics and anarchy. For him, “metaphysics” already means overcoming metaphysics, “transcendence¹”. The true “exteriority” of metaphysics is its irreducibility to ontology².

As early as 1930, in *La Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, Levinas announces, on the basis of this foreignness and the exoticism of his own thinking, the “exit from Greece³”. An exit that also includes the exit of deconstruction. The Heideggerian enterprise of *Destruktion* or of *Abbau* is perhaps an impeachment of the teleocracy, as stated by Schürmann, but it does not break with the structure of the archic paradigm.

Indeed, “the ‘egoism’ of ontology is maintained even when, denouncing Socratic philosophy as already oblivious to being and early on towards the notion of the ‘subject’ and technical power, Heidegger finds, in pre-Socratism, thought as *obedience to the truth of being*”, says Levinas⁴. Heideggerian thought thus remains a governed thought. There is precisely no anarchy in Heidegger, not even in principle. The ontological difference is only a new version of the relationship between command and obedience. It remains for this reason a prisoner of the archic totality. By contrast, Levinas argues, the “notion of the transcendent places us beyond of the categories of being, if the notions of totality and being overlap [...] The transcendent is that which cannot be encompassed⁵.”

Therefore, any journey that does not exceed the ontological categories is an “allergic” journey, reactive to otherness, colonizing, imperialist. Any journey guided by “certainty, which remains the guide and the guarantee of the whole spiritual adventure of Being” remains an odyssey. He remains Greek in his exile, even in the middle of the Andes. À Schürmann, Levinas could have said: “That is why this [your] adventure is precisely not an adventure. It is never dangerous. It is self-possession, principality, *arkhe*. What can happen to it of the unknown is revealed in advance, open, manifest, moulded in known and cannot come as a complete surprise⁶.”

¹ Comme cela apparaît dès les premières lignes de *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'intériorité*, (1961), Paris, Le Livre de poche, « Biblio Essais », 1990.

² *Ibid.*, p. 338.

³ E. Levinas, *La Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* [1930], Paris, Vrin, 2000.

⁴ E. Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, *op. cit.*, p. 37. Je souligne.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

The possibility of a destitution of the archic paradigm cannot then be due to the fragility of its foundations or to internal exhaustion. The paradigm, in itself, of itself, is not at all exhausted. This

possibility comes from elsewhere, from that outside which is the ethical injunction as exposure to Other. Outside absolute, without negotiation or compromise: the “ends of the thread cut by Fate [are] not renewed after cut⁷”. Impossible to renew the severed links of ethics and ontology⁸.

The anarchy that haunts Levinas’ texts since his youth to the last Talmudic lessons thus becomes, at the turn of the 1960s, the very name of the ethical question. Anteriority older than the *a priori*, continuous passivity of a past without present, exposure to Other marks the place where ethics and anarchy coincide: the responsibility. *Anarchic responsibility*. This is the oxymoron of the transcendence.

⁷ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu’être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Substitution without double injunction

The outside is certainly experienced within. If exposure to the Other is not never a fact of consciousness, if it is older than the ego, it is first of all experienced within him. “It is from the subjectivity as oneself” that “the relationship with the other¹” is established. The de-subjectification caused by the call from outside is therefore first of all a subjective test. But responsibility reveals at the same time the secondary character of subjectivity, its delay in relation to this Other which precedes it by dwelling in it. This is why the subject, taken hostage, “does not appear but immolates itself²”.

The chapter of *Otherwise than Being*, “The Substitution”, which takes up the text from 1965, offers perhaps the most striking analysis of this ordeal, which confronts the arche of the self and the anarchy of the other, insofar as they share, from the outside, the same inside. They are together in the same body, the same skin that is too tight. “In responsibility as one assigned [...] the subject is accused in its skin, too tight for its skin. Cutting across every relation³.” In this skin, “The relationship with the other precedes the auto-affection of certainty⁴”.

There is a paradox in the substitution, as Levinas knows, which speaks of a possible “skepticism”. Isn’t substitution simply a form of alienation? Coexistence, diachronic and not synthetic, of the I and the Other in the I, here is “an ambiguous speech”, he says, which requires “as much audacity as the skepticism that does not fear to affirm the impossibility of the statement while daring to *realize* this statement by the very statement of this impossibility⁵.”

The enigma of substitution is, however, only an enigma for ontological thought, which rests, whatever it says, on the “eternal presence to itself⁶” of the self. In reality, “the onself escapes from *relations*⁷”, it does not enter into a relationship with the other but lets him come. But “it is perhaps there, in this reference to a background of anarchic passivity, that the thought [...] differs from ontological thinking.”⁸

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

² *Id.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 167. [Translation from *The Levinas Reader* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989).]

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 189. [Translation from *The Levinas Reader*.]

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

The substitution takes shape in the consciousness but is not based in it and does not derive from it either. It is precisely this non-principle and non-derivative character of substitution which makes it the anarchic radical phenomenon. What can be the mode of being of that which thus “is not,” cannot be founded or deduced? Levinas answers: obsession.

We have called this irreducible relationship to consciousness obsession: relationship with exteriority, “prior” to the act that would open it, a relationship which, precisely, is not act, is not thematization, is not position in the Fichtean sense... The obsession crosses the consciousness against the current, inscribing itself in it as foreign: as imbalance, as delirium, defying thematization, escaping the *principle*, the origin, the will, the *arkhe* that occurs in every glimmer of consciousness. Movement, in the original meaning of the term, an-archic⁹.

It is therefore not certain that we should see the complexity of this relationship between outside and inside, which holds the other and the same together and infinitely separate at the same time, as a logic of *double bind*. Nor that we should follow Derrida when he says: “this thought of substitution leads us to a barely thinkable, almost unspeakable logic, that of the possible-impossible, the iterability and replaceability of the unique”, “dreadful fatality of a double bind”. Even if “Levinas never refers to it so¹⁰.”

Precisely, Levinas never refers to it in this way.

Between I and the Other, a movement similar to that which animates the tension between the Saying and the Said. It is true that this tension can evoke an economy of the “possible-impossible”. How, asks Levinas, to say the an-archic in the absence of anarchy of language? The predicative proposition, the “apophantic” “Said”, is the *princeps* form of language, even if “the Saying does not exhaust itself in *apophansis*”¹¹ “It is not exhausted in it and yet there is only one language. Impossible to find an off-screen of speech, a phrasing absolutely irreducible to the propositional form. From then on, an-archy can only be said at the cost of an outrage at the preaching within the preaching, an “abuse” of language within language. Levinas “exaggerates”, “abuses” by dramatizing, in the strong sense, the breakthrough of the anarchic in the established order of the thematic word¹². The lexicon of pain — persecution, trauma, hostage, “expulsion from essence¹³” — which accompanies the substitution, does not destroy the sentence but makes it falter by its excessiveness. Just as the substitution “exaggerates” the narrowness of the I without destroying it.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹⁰ J. Derrida, *Adieu. À Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris, Galilée, 1997, p. 66–67.

¹¹ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹² Voir Jean-Luc Marion, intervention au colloque « René Girard – Emmanuel Levinas : du sacré au saint », tenu le 4 novembre 2013 à l'École normale supérieure à Paris, disponible en ligne.

¹³ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

If anarchy could speak its own language, it would betray “that it is impossible for the anarchical to be constituted as a sovereignty — which implies the unconditionality of anarchy¹⁴.”

Anarchy, in struggle against predicative logic and its authoritarian inclination, can only leave a wake, “a trace which speech, in the pain of expression, seeks to state. But there is only a trace¹⁵”. This trace, imperceptible but outrageous, changes everything however, it is the streak of “thought that differs from ontological thought¹⁶ “.

Anarchy does not show itself through the cracks of the archic paradigm. Nor is it assignable to the schizoid mechanics of the disjunction. That the self is substitutable does not immobilize it in the trampling of the impossible.

If there is a flaw in the archic paradigm, it lies precisely in its lack of flaw, to its blindness “where good logic can lead to and against which Western philosophy had not not secure enough¹⁷.” Logic that led to the “bloody barbarism of the National Socialism”. This is not to say that the archic paradigm is the “elemental evil”. Nor that evil would somehow have “escaped” philosophy, which thought it was doing the right thing. Evil does not come from a defect in the construction of the *arkhe*, any more than from “any contingent anomaly of human reasoning, of some misunderstanding¹⁸”. It is therefore impossible in this sense to deconstruct.

If “elemental evil” is a “possibility that is part of the ontology of being”, that is, in the whole history of philosophy finally culminating in Heideggerian thought, it is not because philosophy would be the possibility of evil. It is because the possibility of philosophy is from the start an indifference to the Other, and thus an indifference and insensitivity to evil. Being is the wall of indifference of philosophy. What we can’t really know is whether, for Levinas, philosophy is guilty because it does evil or because it is that she doesn’t care.

In spite of everything, the distance of ethics, its transcendence, opposes an infinite resistance to this indifference. The ethical injunction has a form so that it cannot be definitively stifled. Its exteriority is irreducible.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184. [Translation from *The Levinas Reader*]

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 160. [Translation from *The Levinas Reader*]

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

¹⁷ E. Levinas, *Quelques réflexions sur la philosophie de l’hitlérisme*, Paris, Payot, 1997, p. 25.

¹⁸ *Id.*

Two, but not double

However, Levinas says, it is necessary to distinguish between injunction and injunction. And it is precisely because there are two types of injunction that there is no double injunction. The two types of injunction, which cannot be confused, are on the one hand, the ordinary injunction, the commandment

to do this or that, on the other hand, the ethical injunction. The first is structured by the clear partition between order given and order executed. In the case of the ethical injunction, on the other hand, this relationship is deeply turned upside down. Indeed, in it, *obedience precedes command*. Being responsible means answering before you even hear the call, before you even to internalize it, to let it enter the economy of auto-affection and representation. By taking too much time to hear, we can no longer hear. But it is already very late. “I am at once a servant of the neighbor, already late and guilty of delay. I am, as it were, ordered by the outside world — traumatically ordered — without internalizing through the concept of the authority that commands me¹. Everything happens as if the first movement of responsibility could consist neither in waiting nor even in welcoming the order [...], but in obeying this order before it is formulated. Or as if it were formulated before anything else possible present, in a past that shows itself in the present of obedience without *remembering* it, without coming to it from memory by formulating, by the one who obeys in this very obedience².”

The *double bind* is a command that can only be obeyed by disobedience. The ethical injunction absolutely disarticulates any relationship between command and obey, and between obedience and disobedience, simply because it does not give orders, does not does not govern. Any imperative in the usual sense is then doubled, taken by this “obedience preceding any listening to the commandment³”, that “obedience to an order fulfilled before order is not heard, even anarchy⁴.”

¹ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

² *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

Heteronomies

The interruption of the logic of government, which constitutes the absolute singularity of Levinas' thought, gives rise to one of his most important concept: *heteronomy*. Heteronomy- literally the law of the other — is not, as one might think, an alienation. The other does not dictate to me. Indeed, the other has never to be the other, which is why he does not stand in one point from which he could begin to command. From where he could begin to be. Heteronomy appears as the mark of the “precedence of responsibility and obedience over order¹.” Responsibility only responds to the absence of an order- which is precisely what it is responsible for.

The anarchic injunction is heteronomous in that it responds to those “we don't even know²” — echoing the voices that have victims who were killed without ever having been officially heard, victims whose names are not written on any stele. Silence of the disappeared. “Fate, says Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, is the history of historiographers, narratives of the survivors, who interpret, that is, use the works of the dead. The historical perspective that makes this historiography, this violence, this is measured by the time it takes for the will completely lose his work. The historiography tells of the way whose survivors appropriate the works of dead wills; it is based on the usurpation by the victors, that is, by the survivors³.”

The 1934 text on Hitlerism states this with sobriety: history is the history of the victors, but “man, in his own right, has strictly speaking, no history. The other has no history. It does not begin, it does not end.

Anarchic, the responsibility is implacable but not hegemonic. Traumatic, the responsibility is persecutory but not hierarchical. Its law, its *nomos*, is from before me and yet I do not come from it, I do not remember it.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

² *Ibid.*, p. 159.

³ E. Levinas, *Totalité et infini, op. cit.*, p. 253.

Autonomy second

Is the affirmation of the indissoluble link between ethics and heteronomy not shocking in spite of everything? Levinas takes Kant in reverse, who states that heteronomy is the source of all illegitimate principles of morality.¹ For Kant, the *nomos* of heteronomy is not, despite its name, a law. Or rather, this law is not really a law since it is subordinate to something other than itself. It has no law the name only and therefore remains outside the law. In a word, it is not binding.

Very early on, in 1957, in “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite”, taken up in *Discovering Existence with Husserl and Heidegger* (1967), Levinas explains the paradoxical ethical privilege he grants to heteronomy over autonomy. He is well aware that the “heteronomy thesis [...] breaks with a very venerable tradition²” — that of the primacy of autonomy, precisely. Primacy of freedom defined as obedience to the law that one has prescribed for oneself.

But let us remember that there is an injunction and an injunction. At the same time, there is also heteronomy and heteronomy. Heteronomy is thus heteronomous to itself. One is based on the dissymmetry between command and obey. This is ordinary heteronomy. The other eclipses this asymmetry — it is ethical heteronomy, obedience, as we have seen, does not follow any order.

Kantian autonomy, for Levinas, is still archaic: it is reduced to command, as is evident from the definition of the categorical imperative. Autonomy has no other content than itself, merges with the consciousness it has of itself and is therefore only what it is at the price of excluding otherness. “This is the [traditional] definition of freedom: to hold oneself against the other, in spite of any relationship with the other, to ensure the autarky of a self³.” As a result, “Freedom denotes the way of remaining the Same within the Other⁴.”

The ethical injunction cannot be its own source. Otherwise, how can it be ethical? It is the Other, it is “the face of the Other [which is] the very beginning.”

If freedom, says Levinas, is “difficult”, it is because it is not first. The responsibility precedes it infinitely. The Infinite affects the “I without the I being able to dominate it, without the I being able to ‘assume’ through the *arche* of the *Logos* the unbounded

¹ Voir Emmanuel Kant, *Fondements de la métaphysique des mœurs*, trad. fr. Alexis Philonenko, Paris, Vrin, 1980, p. 120–121.

² E. Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (1949, 1967), Paris, Vrin, 2002, p. 178.

³ E. Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, op. cit., p. 37.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

nature of the Infinite thus *anarchically* affecting the I, imprinting itself as a trace in the absolute passivity, prior to all freedom, showing itself as a ‘Responsibility-for-the-Other’ to which this affection gives rise⁵.”

⁵ E. Levinas, *Difficile liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme* [1963], Paris, Le Livre de poche, « Biblio Essais », 1984, p. 411. [Translation from *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1990).

Election and slavery

Here we reach a decisive moment in the analysis. Specifying the distinction between the two heteronomies, Levinas still characterizes it as the difference between *election* and *slavery*. There is the heteronomy of the elected and the heteronomy of the slave.

To be able to obey without any rule presenting itself to the conscience or to the will is a sign of *election*. It is the election that replaces the logic of government. I am “elected without assuming the election¹!” Without ever experiencing it as an order, without needing to wear it either weight. Election dispenses with coercion. Being elected means not having need to be commanded nor governed. Anarchy and election are sisters. The heteronomy of election is thus rigorously opposed to the heteronomy of slavery.

But aren't they all the same? “Not being *able to* escape responsibility, is this not servitude? In what way does this passivity place the subject ‘beyond the free and the unfree’?”, asks Levinas in “Humanism and An-archy².” The answer is clear: “No slavery is included in the obligation of the Same for the Other³.” The election is a “service without slavery⁴”. Or again: “no slavery is included in the alienation of the Same which is for the other⁵.” There is no doubt that if the submission implied by the responsibility is total, without possible desertion, the “antinomy of a non-servile obligation is the testimony of the Good⁶”.

In other words, the heteronomy of election is *free*. There is nothing contradictory with what we have just said. Freedom is not first, it is not the past of responsibility. That is true. But we can understand now that it is the future. In heteronomy of election, “Others do not offend against freedom, but invest in it⁷.” Ethical heteronomy thus appears in the end as the true autonomy. The order, coming from the Other, ends up coming from oneself: “possibility to find, anachronistically, order in obedience itself and even to receive the order from oneself — [...] reversal of heteronomy into autonomy⁸”. Heteronomy, once again, does not alienate. “No one is a slave to the Good⁹.” The

¹ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

² E. Levinas, « Humanisme et an-archie », in *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Paris, Fata Morgana, 1972, p. 76.

³ E. Levinas, *Dieu, la Mort et le Temps* [1975–1976], Paris, Le Livre de Poche, « Babelio Essais », 1995, p. 174.

⁴ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁵ E. Levinas, *Dieu, la Mort et le Temps*, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

⁶ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁷ E. Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, *op. cit.*, p. 60–61.

⁸ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

submission implied by the Responsibility “is cancelled out by the goodness of the Good that commands. The obedient rediscovers, beyond enslavement, his integrity. The responsible is not dominated¹⁰.”

In contrast to the “anarchic plot,” which is not “slave alienation¹¹,” there is a bonded, chained heteronomy.

By rigorously distinguishing between two types of “services”: anarchic bondage and alienated servitude, Levinas makes it clear that the slave is the foil of the chosen one.

¹⁰ E. Levinas, « Humanisme et an-archie », art. cité, p. 77.

¹¹ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu'être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

The figure of the subject subservient to the tyrant

But who is the slave? There are two contrasting figures, the subject of the tyrant and the proletarian, who share a common characteristic: the decisive relationship to a master.

The motif of slavery appears in two key texts: “Liberty and Command” (1953) and “Humanism and An-archy” (1972). In the first, in the course of a reading of Plato’s *Republic*, Levinas names the citizen who, subjected to tyranny, loses all initiative to resist and ends up loving the master. What does it mean to love the master? An individual subject, as well as a people, reaches this extreme when the consciousness of their oppression vanishes. The political slave of the tyrant is the moronic offspring of the archic paradigm, which arises when the asymmetry between command and obedience is so considerable that it collapses into its own abyss.

To have the soul of a slave is not to be able to be hit, not to be able to to be commanded. The love of the master fills the soul to such an extent that the soul no longer distances itself. Fear fills the soul to such an extent that one no longer sees it, but one sees from it¹.”

In “Humanism and An-archy”, Levinas again asserts an irreducible distance between command and obedience, which makes “the determined remain other in relation to what determines it² “.

The slave, Levinas explains, at the same time always has the possibility of remembering when his alienation began. He “keeps the memory of the present where the determinant determined him and was his contemporary³.” The heteronomy of slavery is trapped in commandments and beginnings.

¹ E. Levinas, *Liberté et commandement* [1953–1962], Paris, Le Livre de Poche, « Babélio Essais », 1999, p. 37–38.

² E. Levinas, « Humanisme et an-archie », art. cité, p. 76.

³ *Id.*

The figure of the proletarian

The figure of the proletarian is sketched out in *Totality and Infinity*¹. The worker is “free to remember that he was free”. The proletarian has aware of the beginning of his servitude. Blanchot confirms this vision when he declares, in *The Infinite Interview*: “the slave has this chance to have a master; the master is today what he serves, tomorrow he will be what he can rise up against².” The slave, he continues, “is the man who has succeeded — infinite progress — in meeting a master, he therefore has this master for support³.” The fight against the master is essential to the conquest of emancipation, the mediation essential to awareness, the start of the revolutionary struggle.

Tyrannized political subject and worker, though diametrically opposed, are first of all slaves to the situation of politics and of the economy when they assert their independence from ethics. Indeed, “politics left to itself carries with it a tyranny⁴.” As for the exploitation of workers, it is also dependent on the closure of the economic circle. “This anomaly called alienation is explained by the structure of the economy, left to its own determinism.⁵”

The relationship to the master, in both cases – whether we “love” him too much or fight him – marks the absolute dissymmetry between command and obedience, the extreme of the logic of government.

¹ E. Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, *op. cit.*, chapitre « Possession et travail ».

² Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 334–335.

⁵ E. Levinas, « Judaïsme et révolution », in *Du sacré au saint*, Paris, Minuit, 1977, p. 17.

Who is elected?

Let's get back to the election. "There is no more complete subjugation than this seizure by the Good, this election, certainly¹", says Levinas. However, and again, it must be understood that this elective enslavement is anything but slavery.

As holy history teaches, the chosen people of the children of Israel experienced slavery in the land of Egypt, without ever being subservient to that servitude. *The chosen ones knew not to develop a slave soul.* "Slaves of the state," in Egypt, the Jews never "loved" Pharaoh. The "soul" of the children of Israel is an anarchic soul.

By inflicting the ordeal of slavery on the Jews, God has precisely revealed the irreducible difference between bondage and servitude, between God and master. "For to me, says verse 55 of the chapter XXV of Leviticus, the Israelites belong as slaves, as they are my servants who I brought out of the land of Egypt. I, the Lord, your God." As if the human self could mean the possibility of a non-alienating belonging and to exalt oneself to freedom by this very subjection.²

Blanchot agrees, again:

The Hebrews had only been sojourners in Egypt, refusing the temptation of a closed world where they would have had the illusion of being free on by a status of slavery. [...] They did not begin to exist until the desert, set free for having set out on their journey, in a solitude where they were no longer alone [...]. [The desert is] that place without a place where only the covenant can be made, and to which one must always return as to that moment of nudity and tearing away which is at the origin of just existence³.

¹ E. Levinas, « Humanisme et an-archie », art. cité, p. 76–77.

² E. Levinas, *L'au-delà du verset : lectures et discours talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1982, p. 24–25.

³ Maurice Blanchot, « La parole prophétique », in *Le Livre à venir*, Paris, Gallimard, « Folio Essais », 1987, p. 118–119.

Election and revolution

There is another mark of election of the chosen people: the possibility of seeing, better than the slaves themselves, from above, the share of election which exists precisely in slavery and allows its true liberation. The Jew who is “free as freed”¹ can indeed be “in solidarity with all the enslaved”².

The Torah sheds light on political and economic issues in a more intense and frank light than politics and economics themselves. In “Judaism and Revolution,” Levinas argues that the talmudic treatise *Baba Metsia*, for example, is a “syndicalist text before the letter”³ [*i.e.* “*syndicalist text before ‘syndicalist’ was coined*” -translator]. This treaty “extends [the] principle of freedom conditioned by allegiance to the Most High to the problem of the daily rights of the day laborer: “servant of God, he retains from his employer a special independence which his very contract cannot alienate and may, in certain circumstances, leave the master in the middle of the workday”⁴. The Torah thus prescribes the punishment of one who would renounce in a way independence and would remain a slave to his master. Who would deny his freedom. The legislation of the Pentateuch (Exodus XXI, 5–6) requires that “the slave who, for the love of his master, renounces due to him, ‘in the seventh year’, “is brought before the court” and will have “his ear pierced with an awl.” Levinas comments:

It is necessary to mark with infamy for ever an ear that could remain deaf to the good news [...] announcing, at the foot of Sinai, the end of the enslavement of man by man. The man who seeks himself, despite the revelation, a human master is not worthy to serve God, *i.e.* is not worthy of his freedom⁵.

The election, the good news, the revelation, bring “that something extra that disalienates, definitively beyond all political alienation”⁶. Levinas continues: “As if the notion of Israel as a people of the Torah, a people as old as the world and a persecuted humanity, carried in a higher universality than that of an exploited and struggling class; As if the violence of the struggle was already an alienation⁷.” The Torah teaches that “humanity is not defined by its proletariat. As if all alienation were not overcome by the awareness that the working class can take of its condition of its class

¹ E. Levinas, *À L’heure des nations*, Paris, Minuit, 1988, p. 91.

² E. Levinas, *Difficile liberté*, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

³ E. Levinas, *Du sacré au saint*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵ E. Levinas, *L’Au-delà du verset*, *op. cit.* p. 25.

⁶ E. Levinas, *Du sacré au saint*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

condition, and of its struggle; as if revolutionary consciousness was not sufficient for disalienation⁸.”

This is why the election is not, contrary to what is commonly believed, a national affair, but rather a world revolutionary ferment⁹. The Chosen People, the Children of Israel, are those who have known, for longer than the others, that all men are elected, while they do not always know it. “The trauma of the ‘slavery in the land of Egypt’, which marked the Bible and the liturgy of Judaism, would belong to the very humanity of the Jew and of the Jew in any man who, as a freed slave, would be close to the proletarian, foreigner, persecuted¹⁰.” Every man is a Jew, every Jew is a Jew. Every man is a Jew, every Jew is a man.

Echo of the permanent saying of the Bible: the condition — or the Unconditional — of foreigners and slaves in the land of Egypt, brings man closer to his neighbor. Men seek each other in their unconditionedness as strangers. No one is at home. The memory of this certainty brings together humanity. The difference between me and myself, the non-coincidence of identical, is a fundamental non-indifference towards men¹¹.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ J. Derrida, *Adieu à E. Levinas, op. cit.*, p. 128.

¹⁰ E. Levinas, *L’Au-delà du verset, op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹¹ E. Levinas, *Humanisme de l’autre homme, op. cit.*, p. 97.

Appearance of the dark spot

Strangely, however, at a time when the political significance of the election seems to become clearer, we touch the problematic point of Levinasian anarchy: its dissociation from anarchism, which contains two levels of opacity.

First Level of Opacity: State Anarchism

If the heteronomy of election and the heteronomy of slavery end up meeting and potentially cancelling the heterogeneity of the unconditional foreignness of “every man,” if obedience without commandment contains, well beyond the particularity of a chosen people, a universal promise of emancipation, why then can’t ethical anarchy be extended into political anarchism? Why is anarchism not the good news of the good news?

Why, in other words, does Levinas constantly affirm the necessity of the State? How can he declare, for example, that the State represents “the necessary conditions” for “the dignity” not only of “all men” but also of “children of Abraham¹”? The State: isn’t this the return of the master?

It must be noted that the two heteronomies meet instead of the exclusion of anarchism. As if they had been distinguished only to better confirm, in the end, the need to preserve the anarchy through a state structure. It is a matter of freedom and ethics through a state structure. “Freedom consists in instituting an order of reason outside oneself; to entrust the reasonable to the written word, to have recourse to an institution. Freedom, in its fear of tyranny, leads to institution, to a commitment of freedom in the name of freedom, to a state².”

The first thought is that the state protects the community from the obstinacy of the heteronomy of slavery, against the extremes to which it can result when the subject enjoys living in a “world totaling itself in its indifference to regard to values (good equaling evil and vice versa; world which is totalized in the indifference of Dostoyevsky’s ‘Everything is permitted’³).” Against crime in a word. But we understand, and this is the whole problem, that the state also protects ethical heteronomy from itself. Ethical

¹ E. Levinas, *Du sacré au saint*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

² E. Levinas, *Liberté et commandement*, *op. cit.*, p. 38–39.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

heteronomy has indeed also its excess. There is indeed an “ethical madness⁴”, which has its own specific excesses.

Although Levinas constantly asserts the derivative character of the politics (“Politics after⁵!”), he nevertheless declares that without the state policy, ethics remains excessive.

What does this mean? The excessiveness of the ethical relationship is due to a form of particular injustice that arises, so to speak, from justice itself. This is a very common phenomenon: in everyday life, the person close to you is privileged at the expense of the distant. That other who is near me, parent, child, friend... has my full attention and thus usurps the infinite transcendence of the Other. The role of the State of justice is to introduce of the *third party* in this “crazy” relationship that is privilege and thus bring as Abensour explains, “measurement of the immeasurable, the comparison which is reason between incomparables, of reciprocity, of symmetry where there is asymmetry. In short, the entry of the third party *aims to bring order to this disturbance, to this anarchy*⁶.”

The role of the state is to bring *order to anarchy*. Why? Because the state relationship preserves the ethical anarchy from the excess of horizontality that is proximate. It protects it from this horizontality of immanence, “confinement in an unbreathable interior by opening up, through the intervention of a third party, political breathing space⁷. A horizontality of transcendence, so to speak.

What State?

The State, for Levinas, is nonetheless the antithesis of Leviathan. Abensour states that Levinas is “the author of a true ‘Counter Hobbes’⁸.” The lupine image of the state of nature is often strongly criticized and clearly rejected. It illustrates the “odious hypothesis⁹” of the war of all against all, of a “multiplicity of allergic egotisms that are at war with each other¹⁰.” Levinas rejects the exclusive vision of inter-human relations as a balance of power. “Other people do not oppose force to force, but the unpredictability of his reaction, better, the transcendence of his being by in relation to the totality of the force systems¹¹.”

What state, then, for the horizontality of transcendence?

⁴ Voir Miguel Abensour, *Emmanuel Levinas, op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁵ E. Levinas, *L’Au-delà du verset, op. cit.*, p. 221.

⁶ M. Abensour, *Emmanuel Levinas, l’intrigue de l’humain. Entre métapolitique et politique, op. cit.*, p. 82.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30–31.

⁹ Cité par Abensour, in *ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁰ E. Levinas, *Autrement qu’être...*, *op. cit.*, p. 4–5, et M. Abensour, *Emmanuel Levinas...*, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

A new distinction is made, separating the “State of Caesar” from the “State of David”. The first is precisely Leviathan. “Jealous of its sovereignty; in search of hegemony, it shows itself to be ‘conqueror’, ‘imperialist’, ‘totalitarian’, ‘oppressor’¹².” “Unable to be without adoring itself, it is idolatry itself¹³.” The State of Caesar is precisely the one who shapes “slave souls”.

The state of justice, the state of David, places itself under the sign of the for-others, of peace and remains “in the finality of the Deliverance¹⁴.” Indeed, it is not certain that the war was in the beginning. “Before the war were the alters¹⁵” The State of David suspends any possibility of tyranny, oppression, and thus paradoxically recalls the antiquity of the election in relation to the state institution itself, thus keeping its subjects against the master’s love, protecting with one movement all those who risk forgetting their responsibility to cultivate the love of the too close.

David’s state inscribes the non-archic promise into the state itself. It is that “beyond the state within the state” — the title of a famous talmudic lesson¹⁶. There is a state that is “fat with a plus, or a surplus that exceeds¹⁷”. *A state that promises the absence of government.*

The State is necessary to save anarchy, to prevent the fall always possible of the heteronomy of election into a form of heteronomy of slavery, and subservience to the other, into a system of dependence.

Israel in General

In the State of David, we will of course recognize the State of Israel. If the possibility of election is open to every man, there is nevertheless only one kind of state that can live up to it. Only Israel is both a state and a beyond of the state. As Derrida puts it, Israel is “*beyond in*: transcendence in immanence, *beyond* the political, but *in* the political. Inclusion opened onto the transcendence that it bears, incorporation of a door that bears and opens onto the beyond of the walls and partitions framing it¹⁸.” But the problem, in my view, may lie less in this insistence on the specificity of Israel¹⁹,

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 117. Et E. Levinas, *L’Au-delà du verset*, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ E. Levinas, *L’Au-delà du verset*, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

¹⁵ E. Levinas, *En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

¹⁶ E. Levinas, *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, titre du chapitre II, Paris, Minuit, 1996, 2005.

¹⁷ M. Abensour, *Emmanuel Levinas*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

¹⁸ J. Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas*, *op. cit.*, p. 138. [Translation from *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford Un. Press, 1999), p. 76.]

¹⁹ Miguel Abensour voit dans l’État de David tel que Levinas le pense (« État ouvert au mieux, toujours sur le qui-vive, toujours à rénover, toujours en train de retourner aux personnes libres qui la lui délèguent sans s’en séparer leur liberté soumise à la raison ») une instance politique qui va au-delà des limites de la nation d’Israël, au-delà d’un territoire, et incarne la promesse universelle d’une émancipation de toute domination. Il jette une « passerelle vers l’utopie » (*op. cit.*, p. 52).

as I said at the outset, that in the more general idea that a State can be seen, without any contradiction, as a bridge stretched towards anarchy.

Indeed, it is not Israel that Levinas has in mind, when he analyses the May '68 revolution for example, but this more general idea of the state as a guarantee of anarchy. He lived through the events of '68 while he was professor at Nanterre and understood its decisive character. "In the flash of a few privileged moments in 1968," he wrote, youth has "challenged a world long denounced²⁰". He saw in this revolution a "word [...] born of sincerity, that is to say of responsibility for others". The student demands expressed ethical anarchy. "In 1968, he still declares, all values were 'up in the air,' except the value of the 'other man' to whom it was necessary to devote oneself²¹." Further:

Beyond capitalism and exploitation, its conditions were contested: the person understood as an accumulation of being, by merits, titles, professional competence — ontological swelling to the point of crushing others, instituting a hierarchical society now beyond the necessities of consumption, and that no religious breath could any longer make egalitarian. Behind the capital in having weighed a capital in being²².

Against this accumulation of being, anarchy became synonymous with youth. Young: "this adjective indicates the surplus of meaning on the being who wears it and claims to measure and restrict it²³."

However, if May '68 had the merit of challenging the idea of *arkhe*, its fault was to believe that ethical anarchy could find its flourishing in political anarchism. The conclusion is clear: anarchism leads to "renouncing society and, in unlimited responsibility for others, [to] swallow up all possibility of responding in fact. [...] To ignore it is to border on nihilism²⁴." In fact, the "nihilistic" anarchism of 1968 ended up, according to Levinas, deploying a "language as conformist and as talkative as the one it was going to replace²⁵". Why? Because we cannot do without "tradition and institutions²⁶".

Anarchism can therefore only be in the end, once again, state anarchism.

²⁰ Pierre Hayat, « Emmanuel Levinas : une intuition du social », *Le Philosophoire*, 2009/2, no 32, p. 127–137, p. 134.

²¹ Cité in *ibid.*, p. 136.

²² *Id.*

²³ E. Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, note p. 111.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

Second Level of Opacity: the Very Different Heteronomy

The defence of the protective state of ethical anarchy – the first level of dissociation — is based, however, on a more subterranean layer of denial. We can see that the distinction between the two

heteronomies, the heteronomy of election and the heteronomy of slavery, is only possible at the cost of the unthought-out exclusion of *another* unspoken heteronomy that threatens its solidity.

Why? Because the heteronomy that Levinas calls heteronomy of slavery *has nothing to do with the reality of the legal and social system of slavery*. With its historical reality. Man may not have a history, but slavery does.

Neither of the two Levinasian figures of the slave corresponds to this historical reality — that of Greek slavery or that of the slave trade by example. The subject of the tyrant, the masses fanaticized by Hitlerism, are not strictly speaking slaves. Neither are proletarians. To speak of them in these terms borders on the abuse of language. To the heteronomy of slavery do reality other than the testimonial (slavery of the Hebrews in Egypt is attested only by the holy history) or metaphorical (the Marxian characterization of proletarians as slaves). Levinas's "slaves" are therefore outside slavery.

As we have seen, the slave is the shadowy double of the chosen one. But this shadow has itself a shadow, paradoxically invisible, ghostly because it has no face or figure: the shadow of slaves who are never named. The two heteronomies crush, in their paradoxical structural solidarity, a third: that of the chained slaves, transported, separated, sold and bought. These slaves are indeed *other*, other to free men, other to the chosen, other also to the subjects other to the proletarians. Others to those others with whom they have nothing in common. Scrap heteronomy, which falls in a sense, by its excess, outside of heteronomy.

Is it necessary to recall that if the slave is in love with her master, it is not because she is a slave but because she is the property, exploitable and negotiable? Because slavery is synonymous of social death? "A slave is an individual who is deprived of his freedom or of a part of it by the rules in force in the country and time considered. It is an economic instrument, under the control of a master, who can be sold or bought²⁷." The slave is defined by the absence of a legal personality of their own. This is why it is laws, variable in time and space, which determine the conditions by which an individual becomes or ceases to be a slave. The official emancipation of a slave is always the result of a decision of the master or the legal and state authority in place. Never their own.

However, if we relate slavery to its historical definition, we wonder what the notion of a "slave soul" can mean. The term "slave soul" resonates strangely and paradoxically

²⁷ Convention relative à l'esclavage de la Société des Nations (1926).

with the traditional philosophical definition of the slave as being deprived of a soul, or endowed with only the soul of a tool (“animated tool”, says Aristotle). The slave is unable to choose his life and to achieve happiness — which consists in the active practice of virtue²⁸. If the slave nevertheless possesses a certain amount of humanity, it is to the extent which he is considered a separate part of his master’s body, not his soul²⁹.

Later, in 1748, Montesquieu would take up, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, in connection with “On the Slavery of the Negroes,” the argument of the absence of a soul.

It is impossible for us to assume that these people are men, he writes; for if we assumed them to be men, we would begin to believe that we ourselves are not Christians. [...] Those in question are black from the feet to the head; and their noses are so crushed that it is almost impossible to feel sorry for them. You can’t imagine that God, who is a very wise being, has put a soul, especially a good one, in an all-black body³⁰.

Levinas does not sufficiently interrogate his own concept of the “slave soul”. He does not ask to what extent such a concept corroborates this traditional view. Nor does he seem ready to recognize, in order to definitively block the road to this vision, that *No slave has the soul of a slave*. Not because he or she has no soul but because something like a “slave’s soul”, in slaves, does not exist. *Slaves are not servile*. The concept of “slave soul” is a dangerous concept. It is a master concept.

In his article “Phenomenology of Jewish and Black Identities”, the philosopher Abdoulaye Barro recalls the archive of the “dialogue taking shape between the Jew and the Black” about their respective destinies³¹. “The analogy between the condition of the blacks and that of the Jews in the Old Testament is common in the works of black intellectuals such as Du Bois, Senghor, Baldwin, Cone,” he says³². William Du Bois indeed, in *Souls of Black People*, argues that the foundations of Jewish identity serves as a model for the construction of the identity of the Black people³³.

The symbolism of the veil that covers Moses on Mount Sinai to speak to his people is reinterpreted by Du Bois as the veil that separates white America from black America. To guide the black people in their struggle for liberation and unity, is to be inspired by the exemplary figure of of Moses who, as a spiritual leader, was able to translate the passions, the suffering and aspirations of the Jewish people. Du Bois identifies himself to Moses, as a prophet-legislator³⁴.

²⁸ Aristote, *Politique*, *op. cit.*, III, 1280a33-34 et VII, 1328a37-38 et 1331b9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1255b11-12 et 1254b4-5.

³⁰ Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, Paris, GF-Flammarion, 1999, XV, 5.

³¹ Abdoulaye Barro, « Phénoménologie des identités juives et noires », *Pardes*, 2008/1, no 44, p. 57-75, p. 58.

³² *Id.*

³³ William E. B. Du Bois, *Les Âmes du peuple noir*, Paris, postface et trad. Magali Bessone, Paris, La Découverte, 2007.

³⁴ A. Barro, « Phénoménologie des identités juives et noires », art. cité, p. 58.

Despite this, the affirmation of a form of community between people and black people, in Du Bois, does not lead, contrary to what one might think at first, to the interpretation of slavery as a paradigmatic form of election. When asked about this question, Edouard Glissant writes, in *Le Discours antillais*: “the peoples who have frequented the abyss do not boast of being elected³⁵”. For him, the idea of slavery of election is only a “boasting³⁶”.

The problem is not at all for me, with these remarks, to judge the possibility or impossibility of the famous “amalgam” between the Shoah and the slave trade. No. What matters to me is to understand why Levinas excludes the historical martyrdom of slaves from ethical trauma and constructs a concept of servility that ostracizes the true heteronomy of slavery and makes it meaningless. A concept that excludes from slavery the slaves themselves, who have no substitutable I insofar as their I, already dominated, is never their own.

It is clear that the construction of slavery or slaves as *philosophical or ethical categories* is impossible. First of all, because one cannot speak of slavery as if slaves were constituted “a community, a whole uniquely defined by economic exploitation³⁷”. Slavery is always diasporic. The Greek slaves, as we know, came from different countries. Nor do the slaves of the Atlantic slave trade have a homogeneous identity. Glissant “recalls the African deportees came from regions and cultures and that the hold of the slave ship crushed all these identities. The experience of the abyss lies in this destruction of all links and of all reminiscence³⁸ “. This is also the case for migrants sold as slaves in Libya today.

To this historical-geographical reality, which prohibits unification, corresponds a philosophical impasse. It is impossible, once again, to construct a category or concept of slave without immediately perpetuating the act of slavery. The “slave” does not exist, which threatens the validity of the general notion of enslavement heteronomy. And thus necessarily, that of electoral heteronomy, since heteronomy is the assumed counterpart.

“Destruction of all ties”: slaves, contrary to what is stated by Levinas, do not “remember” having been free, inasmuch as any genealogical apprehension of their origin is forbidden to them. They can be resold, dispersed, separated from their families at any time. partners, parents, children, and thus structurally deprived of their ancestry. Their condition is in this sense beyond the beginning. But it is also and by the same token out of command. Slaves are not commanded. Slaves can only be dominated. The master never *governs* his slaves. Slaves are not governable.

³⁵ Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*, p. 20. Cité par François Noudelmann in « La Traite, la Shoah, sur les usages d’une comparaison », *Littératures*, 2014/2, no 174, p. 104–113, p. 106.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³⁸ *Id.*

For Levinas, ethical anarchy could have had a completely different fate than that of a future state if the two extreme limits of nongovernability — ethical responsibility on the one hand and on the other slavery — had been thought of together, *without the deceptive mediation of the concept of servility*. Ethical anarchy could have found, in this thought of the non-governable, the anarchist political orientation that it lacks. Non-governability is not, never is, cannot be soluble in the state.

Without a total, *anarchistic* re-understanding of the problem of slavery, ethics runs the risk of being too well governed.

A critique of his ideas & actions.



Catherine Malabou
Ethical anarchy
Emmanuel Levinas' heteronomies

translated from French, a chapter in *Au Voleur!*

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