“What one asks of oneself, one asks of a saint”

A Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas, 1980–81

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This text is an account of two conversations with Professor Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) in his home in Paris. The first conversation took place July 22, 1980, the second on October 29, 1981. A few questions on paper and an article of mine served as introduction and point of departure for the conversations. Originally it was not my intention to publish the conversations as an “interview.” The idea of making the account of the conversations acceptable for publication only arose later. The original accounts, based on recordings, had to be shortened and worked over considerably to get a coherent text that is interesting for a broader public. Olivier van Wersch-Cat has been very helpful to me through his knowledge of the French language. I am very grateful to Prof. Levinas not only for the friendly way he received me and conversed with me, but also for his consent for the publication of the definitive text.

The title I have chosen is the first half of a statement that in its complete form reads: “All that one demands of oneself, is demanded of a saint, but what one may demand of the Other is always less.” This statement expresses an insight that is probably Levinas’s most original and fundamental one: his insight into the asymmetry of the relation between me and the other. Asymmetry is the abstract expression of the moral awareness that
I can and must demand infinitely more of myself than of others. In the ethical relation there can be no question of equality and reciprocity, but I acknowledge the Other — here justifiably with a capital letter — as being immeasurably above me. “The more just I am, the more harshly I am judged.”\(^2\) The infinitude of my responsibility is developed simultaneously in the breadth (“the self bears creation on its shoulders”) and in the depth or height (“in my responsibility, God makes himself infinite”).

These insights, which put into words an experience recognizable for everyone, form the basis of Levinas’s further thought. They have led him to a subtle and radical criticism of the “Western” or “Greek” way of thinking. First, he criticizes what he calls “imperialism” of the ego, that is, the tendency to think of the subject as a center of activity that reduces everything else to what is known and relates everything back to itself. Only the appearance of the absolutely Other can call a halt to this process. Second, Levinas criticizes the so-called thinking in terms of totality, that is, the disposition to perceive reality as a whole that cannot be disturbed by anything or anyone. Within reality, conceived as totality, no room can be made for the alien and unexpected appearance of the Other. It is already evident from Levinas’s choice of words, that he is not concerned solely with theoretical criticism. “Imperialism” and “totalitarianism” have taken on political form as well in the history of Christian Europe. Not unjustifiably, Levinas’s thought has, as a consequence, been called “non-Marxist ideology critique.”\(^3\)

The following article is divided into four sections according to theme. The first section is about “alternation and theology.” According to Levinas, philosophical discourse is characterized by constant alternation between that which has already been said (le dit) and its retraction (le dedit). What does this mean for the interpretation of his philosophy and for the possibility of a (dogmatic) theology? The second section concerns Levinas’s method of thinking, in particular the elements description, concretization, emphasis, and translation (from Hebrew into Greek). The third section attempts to ascertain the development of his thinking about sexuality, autonomy, and dialogue, while the fourth and final section concerns the relation of ethics and politics.
The questions in this first section take up a point Levinas makes about the “unsayability” of the Other, the Transcendent. Thereby he refers to the impossibility of placing the Other permanently in the sphere of “le dit” (Said). In this sphere, theme definition and conclusive argumentation have priority. The ethical relation, however, is a “dire sans dit,” a saying without the correlating said, which means being radically open to the Other and willing to serve him. Philosophy cannot, of course, permit itself to keep hovering above the sphere of the Said. It has to do not only with the Other, but also with “the third person.” With a view to him and other third persons, it has to limit infinite difference and share its love among many. Prophetic criticism, inevitably one-sided, has to be corrected in the light of wisdom. In this way philosophy places itself between the one and the other; it is “the wisdom of love,” albeit “in the service of love.” It remains the task of philosophy to reduce said to saying “in the service of love,” thereby retaining respect for the unsayability of the Other. How does this unsayability relate to that which is at issue in Wittgenstein’s “metaphysics of silence”? In Wittgenstein’s early work, silence is a consequence of consistent positivism. In his view, the only statements that can be regarded as correct are the strictly formal propositions of the logician and the verifiable assertions of empirical science. We shall see that Levinas criticizes this monopolization of language and thought by theory on ethical grounds. The second main problem to be discussed, concerns the consequences this “prophetic” vision has for dogmatic theology. How “wise” or “theoretical” may theology be?

Alternation

JFG: Do you see similarities between your own statements about “unsayability” and the Unaussprechlichkeit of ethics in Wittgenstein? See for example his Tractatus logico-philosophicus 6.421: “It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental.” And further 6.51: “Skepticism is not irrefutable, but obviously nonsensical,
when it tries to raise doubts where no questions can be asked. For doubt can exist only where a question exists, and an answer only where something can be said."6

EL: I do not see my own views at all in what Wittgenstein postulates: “For doubt can exist only where a question exists, and an answer only where something can be said.” I do not believe that. In situations where nothing can be said, one must be silent, he says. The question of primary concern to me signifies much more and is not theoretical in content. The issue for me is the question: “Is being legitimate? Do we have a right to exist?” In my thought, therefore, asking the question implicates conscience: it asks about the meaning of life, a meaning that always takes the form of a question. I am put in question, it appears. Asking this question, I have no firm ground under my feet but am put in question. And that “being put in question” relates to the most natural of all things, namely the fact that I am. I venture to call into question Spinoza’s conatus essendi.7 For Spinoza, rationality itself, the foundation of all things, the meaning par excellence, lies in the conatus essendi, which is perseverance in being. My own thought takes another direction since Autrement qu’être: in my approach, the ethical asks himself whether he does not, as being himself, kill the other, in other words, whether being as such is just. Wittgenstein is thinking of the theoretical question. In science a question may be posed only if it is basically answerable. Not all questions belong to the theoretical, however.

JFG: Could your philosophy be called “prophetic”? By “prophetic philosophy” I mean a philosophy that prefers critical query and inspired witness to the formulation of definitions and explanations.

EL: We are in agreement, if the term “prophetic” refers to ethics. An ethics is prophetic if it frees itself from speech that has an obvious and solely functional meaning. A second meaning lies under this immediate meaning. When we speak, we always say more than we are saying. I mean that language in itself, that the spoken word itself is prophetic.
Of course, there is a purely functional language, for example, when you buy a ticket for the subway, or when you ask someone where the Rue Michel-Ange is. But even in such a case, the fact that you ask someone is not without significance for what you say. Prophetic language is the language of the Bible par excellence, a language that does not simply point to things and name them, but allows “God’s word” to resonate through my speaking. I call “word of God,” the word that points out my guilt and obligation with respect to the other person.

JFG: But can we, on that assumption, still say that your philosophy provides a new definition of, for instance, subjectivity?

EL: In my view, the subject is a rupture, an interruption of being. Man is something that interrupts being; it is not being but a decentered being (l’etre denucle). And yet, when I say: “Man is something,” I am speaking in terms of being. As I speak, I inevitably make use of the language of ontology. This is precisely the reason why one must unsay and resay (dedire). Unsaying does not counter what one wanted to say; it is always a protest against what one has already-said. When one speaks, it is done in the language of being. My view is that the conditions of saying disallow enunciation of what one wanted to say. In speaking, the true meaning is thrown into disorder. In the article “Façon de parler,” I put the question: Is my way of speaking not inevitably a refutation of what I am saying? Is alternation not an essential characteristic of philosophical speech? At the end of his article “Time and Being,” Heidegger posits that what he wanted to say has been injured and annulled by his own discourse. I am not saying this in imitation of Heidegger, but I have found the same thought in his work.

JFG: Is your stress on alternation not new in comparison with Totality and Infinity, where you expressed yourself more ontologically, that is, in the language of being?

EL: That is indeed correct. Totality and Infinity expresses itself ontologically because it is antipsychologist. I am no psychologist! Ethical signification is no subjective, psychical phenomenon but, on the contrary,
a matter so important that subjectivity is inevitably drawn into it. This is why you see many notions in *Totality and Infinity* which seldom come up in my later work: the face of the Other, messianism. In my article “Enigme et phenomene,” which appeared after *Totality and Infinity*, I have said some things about this. Enigma, that is to say, ambiguity, has always attracted me.

**Theology**

JFG: According to you, the appearance of the third is the fact of consciousness itself, the fact that underlies science and philosophy. Does that same appearing also make theology as a “wisdom discipline” possible?

EL: Dogmatic theology is impossible. The only possible approach to doing theology is that of alternating reflection. Perhaps the dogmatic approach makes the exercise of a “pure theology” possible for the moment, but it would be incorrect to leave it at that.

JFG: Can your own thinking be characterized as “theology” in this sense?

EL: Yes, in this sense exactly. *Autrement qu’être* can be viewed entirely as theology, although not a dogmatic theology, neither a theology that goes into particulars. More important than theology, however, is religious life, which provides the foundation for alternation. Along with theology, along with philosophy, there is a religious life that is acquainted with many more things. With respect to philosophy, we may well ask ourselves whether it actually knows.

JFG: Stephan Strasser writes somewhere that it is amazing that you entirely dismiss the ideal of wisdom, when the Jewish people are — with justification — proud of their wisdom for thousands of years already.

EL: First I must note that I do not represent Jewish theology. As for Strasser’s statement: I definitely regard religious life as a form of wisdom. However, it is questionable whether one should think of it
as wisdom of the dogmatic or Eastern kind, that is, the wisdom of someone who has answers to all questions. Does the contribution of Greek thought not consist precisely in the possibility of criticism, in the possibility to put in question?

JFG: You radically refute every rational and dogmatic theology that is based on natural revelation or on “eternal truths of faith.” May we see in this a refutation of Christian theological effort?

EL: But it has not always been rational and dogmatic, I believe. For that matter, all religions can produce a similar type of theology, perhaps less dogmatic than Christian theology, but nevertheless dogmatic.

JFG: In my view, Christianity has, in general, neglected ethics in favor of dogmatics. Dogmatic interests have nearly always dominated.

EL: In Kierkegaard, morality does indeed occupy an inferior position. In his thinking, religion frees itself of morality. But that morality has a very important role in Christianity as well, is, for example, evident in the philosophical thought of Pope John Paul II! At a recent gathering of Catholic intellectuals, I deliberately drew attention to the fact that religion and morality are closely related in his thinking.

JFG: Does Judaism have dogmas as well? J. J. Petuchowski answers this question affirmatively in a recently published article.

EL: That is correct; Judaism also has its devotion to doctrines. Spinoza was condemned because, among other things, he rejected certain doctrines. However, for the Jew, intellectual affirmation of certain positions is subordinate to practical, ritual confession. In performing the ritual act, the pious Jew bears witness to his affirmation. It can be compared with what you do when you meet a friend: you smile at him, you shake his hand. Thought, and the expression of what you are thinking, are one. In the same sense, doctrine is no theoretical given for the Jew.

JFG: In the article “Dieu et la philosophie,” you criticize philosophies of religion that assimilate religious revelation into philosophical disclosure, “an assimilation that even dialectical theology maintains”
Are you referring here to the dialectical theology of Karl Barth?

EL: I am not thinking of Barth, but of the dialectical theology of Hegel. It is true that Hegel has written no theology, but we can find a philosophical teaching about God in his work. The expression “dialectical theology” can also be used to typify Kierkegaard’s thought. I am not directing myself against Kierkegaard’s thought. On the contrary, I feel much affinity with his “alternating” dialectics. But when I speak of dialectical theology, I am always thinking of the way Hegel spoke about God. Hegel imagined he possessed knowledge concerning God.¹⁵

**Method**

The following section focuses on a few questions concerning Levinas’s method of thinking. Perhaps such questions give a rather “academic” impression, especially for readers who have slight acquaintance with philosophy in general and with that of Levinas in particular. They can feel themselves supported by Levinas himself. “I do not believe that there is a transparency possible in method. Nor that philosophy might be possible as transparency. Those who have worked on methodology all their lives have written many books that replace the more interesting books that they could have written” (GCM 89/DVI 143). It is in the spirit of Levinas to add that excessive attention to method — in all the “clarity” that is thereby achieved — fosters conformism. “Clarity is the last refuge of those who have nothing to say,” Waismann has remarked.¹⁶ The value of every method is relative. He who forgets that eventually becomes insensible to new questions that go beyond the ordinary. It is therefore understandable that a philosopher who focuses on enquiry into the Other and into otherwise-than-being (see above) considers total clarity in method to be unobtainable and regards striving for such clarity to be of only relative value.

And yet, for us, in our position as readers and interpreters, some insight into Levinas’s procedure is indispensable. It is one of the
instruments that serve us in discovering the systematics of his thinking and in testing the tenability of his claims. Besides, insight into his procedure helps us to “localize” his thought to some extent. His affinity with other philosophers is more evident here than is the case in subjects of deeper content. He himself also acknowledges the methodological affinity more generously. It will become evident, however, that a conversation with Levinas about method cannot remain purely formal. This is the case not only because he considers the inquiry into the what more important and more interesting than the one into the how, but also because it appears the second cannot be discussed without the first. The “content” continually penetrates and transforms the “form” and displaces its boundaries.

This is brought forward especially in the first two topics: description and concretization. In this Levinas is closely connected with the thought of his teacher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). The philosophical method he developed makes it possible to describe in detail human consciousness and the objects that appear in it (description), while abandoning the idea that objects might exist on their own, that is, apart from consciousness (reduction), in order to track down the original meaning, the concrete horizon of experience of the objects or “phenomena” that appear to us (concretization). My questions relate primarily to the problem, how Levinas can reconcile his loyalty to Husserl and phenomenology with his ideas about the Other as “absolutum,” as “meaning without horizon,”17 in other words as a “phenomenon” that is no content of consciousness, or, to say it in yet another way: as something that is so overwhelmingly concrete (in the text the term concretissimum is used, concrete in the superlative) that it lies outside the subject’s terrain on principle.

The concept concretissimum leads to the third topic, emphasis. In Greek this word means “emphasis” (a way of speaking) as well as “reflection” (something that reveals itself and can be seen). In the methodological context in which Levinas introduces this concept, the first meaning is of foremost importance, although, as we shall see, the second meaning also has a role. The method of “emphasis” is a way...
to make terms from the sphere of being and self ("ontology") suitable for expressing the ethical dimension. Subjectivity, for example, is not just passive, but more passive than passivity; it does not exist in the manner of things by being a brute fact (se poser), but by exposing itself (s’exposer). In this approach it becomes clear — and thereby the second meaning of the Greek word emphasis is brought forward — that the ethical is not some dimension beyond ontology, but forms the essence and the basis of ontology. It is “more ontological than ontology, an emphasis of ontology” (GCM 90/DVI 143).

The fourth and last topic is that of translation. At this point we are introduced to another aspect of the “alternation” discussed in 3.1. Besides the necessity of unsaying, alternation points to the necessity of constantly speaking anew, a resaying in the line of the tradition of thought originating in Greece. From this Levinas concludes, among other things, the necessity to translate Jewish culture into Greek. Thus he, like Husserl, but in a completely original way, bears witness to his respect for Greek-European rationality.

Description

JFG: I find it difficult to give a systematic interpretation of your thought. You speak about the alternation of “said” (dit) and “unsaying” (dedit). In your writings, the element of argumentation, syllogistic reasoning, is missing. These are some of the reasons why it is practically impossible for me to delineate, for example, your “anthropology” or your “epistemology.”

EL: It is possible that my thought is not systematic. But if you say that syllogistic reasoning is missing in it, then I must point out to you that this is no different in Husserl. Logische Untersuchungen, vol. 1, which refuted psychologism, was the last book in which Husserl reasoned syllogistically. For the rest, his work contains phenomenological descriptions which are based on no other “evidence” than your affirmation of the description. Phenomenological deduction is a particular way of reasoning, completely different from the dialectics of Hegel or the
argumentation of Thomas Aquinas, for instance. Returning from the object, the phenomenologist goes back to subjectivity (or intentionality) and elucidates the horizons of meaning that it includes. In this sense we can speak of “deduction” in phenomenology, a deduction that is neither analytical nor synthetic, nor dialectic either. This does not mean that the phenomenologist never falls back on a premise or a presupposition. The point is that phenomenological description — which is not purely empirical, not just factual ascertainment — endeavors to track down that which is presupposed, namely the horizons of meaning to which intention refers.

Granted, I do not have a syllogistic-argumentative approach. This does not mean, however, that my thinking consists only in intuitions and aphorisms. In spite of everything, it includes all the traditional philosophical themes. We cannot “prophesy” in philosophy and ignore all connection with philosophical themes and existing philosophy. We can define our position, set forth the main subjects of our own thought only in terms of Western tradition.

JFG: I should like to know more about the nature of phenomenological description. Do you lend more weight to continuity with Husserl’s and Heidegger’s phenomenology than to your own criticism of their views?

EL: No, I do not claim that I apply Husserl’s methodology in accordance with all the rules, rules which — in any case in Husserl — require that one carry transcendental reduction through fully in order to begin description. I do not apply this method rigorously, because, in my view, it is not possible to carry reduction through fully. Reduction encounters meanings that cannot be reduced. Merleau-Ponty has explained this excellently in the article “Le philosophe et son ombre.”

Concretization

JFG: The principle of concretization plays an important role in *Totalité et Infini*. “The method practiced here does indeed consist in seeking the condition of empirical situations . . . but it leaves to the
**Concretization** — an ontological role that specifies the meaning of the fundamental possibility, a meaning invisible in that condition” *(TI 173/TeI 148).*

EL: Concretization is indeed very important. And here, too, in my opinion, an aspect of phenomenological procedure comes to the fore. Take for instance the statement: “The human being has an idea of God.” Concretization does not mean that we search for examples of this abstraction, but that we describe the concrete situation in which the abstraction has meaning. “In the encounter with the Other I receive the order not to desert him.” A sentence like this describes the situation where the word of God is concretely understandable. But, again, it is a case of simply applying phenomenological method. My approach is no different from Husserl’s where he answers the question: “What is ‘seeing someone’?” “Seeing someone” assumes that you have feet, he says, because you have to walk around the other person. He who sees something, sees not only with his eyes but is already walking along the back side of that which is seen. Rosenzweig follows the same procedure when he characterizes past, present and future.22 The past means “creation” for him, the present, “revelation,” and the future, “redemption.” He wants to say that the idea of future is rendered possible by the situation of redemption, by everything that is said about redemption. Actually, being faced toward the future is to be anticipating redemption. Whether Rosenzweig is right remains an open question. However, he applies the method of concretization here — and that is the issue for me. This method, as I said, makes the horizons of meaning appear, which we forget if we allow ourselves to be absorbed by the object. Phenomenology aims to return to subjectivity in order to recollect the “forgotten” horizons of meaning.

JFG: Is the face of the Other not the appearance or the “epiphany” of a meaning without horizon?

EL: Seeing the face means that we understand the command “You shall not commit murder.” When I say this, I am describing a horizon. Our language — the language of everyday as well as academic
language — consists to a great extent in abstractions. When Husserl goes from science to the Lebenswelt (lifeworld), he recalls the concrete horizons from which such abstract concepts as “energy” or “space” are derived. In my view, the most important contribution of phenomenology lies in concretization. By concretizing, we connect concepts with each other, not in an analytical, a synthetic or a dialectical way, but by reflection about the phenomenon (i.e., the subjective articulation of appearing).

JFG: But you do not describe the face as phenomenon. For you it is, in a manner of speaking, a concretissimum, an emphasis of phenomenal presence. Through that supreme presence, the face signifies deficient, powerless presence, *less* than a phenomenon (*OB* 90–91/*AE* 115). Does this coincidence of emphasis and deficiency not imply a breach in the method of concretization that you have just sketched?24

EL: To a certain extent the phenomenological method does, indeed, consist in returning to concrete phenomenality, understood as the whole of subjective or transcendental conditions which make the appearance of “abstractions” possible. The signifying of the face being from the outset *otherwise* than that of a plastic presence, being, as it were, a “breach” of this presence, does not mean that the breach should be understood solely in a negative sense; the “disappearance” (*disparition*) of “phenomenality” is here no simple emptiness, but it is precisely the simultaneous meeting of the whole commanding weight of God’s word and the whole weakness — or mortality — of humanity; and that, to be precise, is the concretissimum of the face.

**Emphasis**

JFG: You have characterized presence in the representation as “emphasis of being,” “emphatic positivity of being.”25 On the other hand, there are your statements about ethical emphasis, the *via eminentiae* that goes from positivity to “exposition.”26 How do these two forms of emphasis relate to each other? Do they differ in degree or in quality?
EL: Emphasis is a superlative and a way of connecting one concept concretely with another. You quote two examples. First, the concept of being. Being to the full, being at its highest point, is “appearing” or “showing itself.” Second, positivity. This concerns something that posits itself so strongly, that it no longer hides itself but exposes itself (s’expose). In these two cases a movement of equal eminence, the same climbing up to the ultimate degree is at issue. Emphasis is one of the ways that I allow myself — it is very daring — to go from the idea of being to the idea of showing oneself, of manifestation. Heidegger always posited that being is manifestation. Now I am trying to connect manifestation with being in such a way, that it appears as ultimate being, as if the most complete manner of being consists in not-being-able-to-hide-oneself and in showing oneself. Emphasis is no logical figure, but concrete, a possibility of deduction that is concrete. The Greek word emphasis not only indicates a superlative, but also something that shows itself and is perceived.

JFG: But does emphasis not — the emphasis from presence to representation — in the first instance remain at the ontological level?

EL: The second instance refers to a different aspect. In the second example, the issue is the transition from presence to the ethical relation, as if being is a lower degree of ethics, as if the one who thinks being to the uttermost goes beyond being. But in both instances, the same way of thinking, the same speculative figure is involved.

JFG: If you were to choose between the possibilities of difference in degree, on the one hand, and difference in quality, on the other, then you would prefer the former?

EL: Yes certainly, the two examples are of the same type. That which is of such a degree that it shows itself, is already exposing itself. It is one and the same thing. “Exposing oneself” develops beyond “showing oneself,” to total receptivity, to “delivering oneself up without defense.”
JFG: Are there similarities between emphasis as a method of philosophical thinking and reasoning on the basis of “so much the more” — qalvachomer in talmudic logic, pollooi mallon in Paul’s letters?28

EL: No, the reasoning of qalvachomer is a separate matter. Qalvachomer is a way of reasoning that is also known to Western logicians, reasoning a fortiori; for example: If a poor man can give gifts, so much the more a rich man. It is a logical figure that has nothing to do with emphasis. Through emphasis one passes from the order of presence and representation into another, ethical order. Emphasis is no argumentation.

JFG: I thought of the parallel because of the use Ricoeur makes of this reasoning; he speaks of “the logic of excess.”29

EL: Reasoning a fortiori is indeed argumentation. It moves within an order that it does not transgress. For example: If the bread of the Presence [RSV] may never leave the table in the temple, then the fact that our spirit may never lack the word of God holds with even more reason — because this is even more precious. See, here is an argument a fortiori that is not convincing, because it can be proved that the two matters we have compared do not belong to the same order.

JFG: In the interpretation of other philosophers, in particular Husserl, you sometimes apply emphasis in the sense of an analysis that goes “beyond the letter” (GCM 25/DVI 50). Can such an analysis be applied to every philosophy?

EL: No text whatever can be truly understood if one puts no pressure on it, if one does not strengthen it so much that it comes to life. Thus we must read the fables of La Fontaine with a view to the “moral.” And in exegesis of a Bible text we must look beyond the obvious meaning to the “strong” meaning. Therefore, in the interpretation of philosophical texts as well, we will need to show the unusual meaning of references that seem at first sight to be uninteresting. It is a general hermeneutic rule: Always regard the text that is to be interpreted, as being more intelligent than it seems to be. Heidegger is acting in
accordance with this rule when he interprets pre-Socratic texts like the one in Parmenides ("The same is thinking and being"). It is always possible to ignore such a text. Heidegger, however, puts such pressure on it, that the text acquires its emphatic form. As for me, I cannot always put this way of reading into practice. But, to name an example, I do read the Bible in this manner. In my Talmud commentaries I follow this procedure as well. There is a place in the Talmud where the word of the wise is compared to glowing ash. Why not to fire? Because you have to blow, for the word of the wise to catch fire. It speaks to him who not only has ears but also breath. Here you have an example of the emphatic way of reading; furthermore, this teaches emphatic reading. I can employ another image: To make something shine, you have to polish it.

Translation

JFG: In the introduction of Quatre lectures talmudiques, you wrote that Zionism makes the “Western Jew” possible, the Jew who is at the same time Jewish and Greek.30

EL: Zionism is definitely no nationalism, in my opinion. It has the cultural task to translate Jewish culture — which is entirely coherent and speaks its own language — into Greek inasmuch as that is possible. By “Greek” I mean the Greek of philosophy, the one and only language of philosophy. Zionism is no political movement; it is the simple fact that has brought the Jews out of dispersion and given them a form of existence — though not very peaceful — with an institution like the university. In my view, this university must not set itself the task to do research as is done in Europe, but, on the contrary, to translate Jewish culture into Greek.

JFG: Why do you call Greek the only language of philosophy?

EL: Whether it is the Greek language or the Bible from which we gather primary meaning, the origin of intelligibility, I do not know. As a matter of fact, this uncertainty determines the whole drama of
language. But be that as it may, this meaning must be expressed in Greek. Greek is our academic way of saying and interpreting. Even those who, like me, want to turn their back on certain Western models of thought, must be able to justify this in Greek. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible, is an ongoing effort. The Bible is full of parables that each have multiple meanings. All those meanings have to be put to words in Greek.

JFG: You respect Western tradition as philosophia perennis in this sense?31

EL: Absolutely, although one must be alert to the fact that the meaning itself does not change with our translations. Once again I refer to my article “Façon de parler” on this (GCM 178–80/DVI 266–70).

JFG: What is the relation of non-Western philosophies, for example, those of India and China, to Greek?

EL: In my opinion they, too, should be translated into Greek. Even Eastern thought will have to acquire familiarity in Greek — in the sense I have just explained.

DEVELOPMENTS

In studying the progress of Levinas’s development, one becomes impressed with the unity of thought in his numerous publications — more than 300 books and articles, from 1929 to the present. In an autobiographical article Levinas observes that his biography is dominated by “the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror” (DF 291/DL 374). The development of his philosophical thought demonstrates the accuracy of this observation. It does not do so in the sense that his thought has ever been determined by fear or cynicism: to the contrary. As early as 1935 Levinas wrote about the necessity to escape from being and from thinking in terms of being. Being seems to be irrevocably bound to itself, unable to break the spell
of having-to-be-itself. But “any civilization that accepts Being, the tragic despair that it implies and the crimes that it justifies, deserves the name ‘barbarian.’”32 In his later writings this longing to escape assumes clearer direction. *De l’existence a l’existant*, a book published in 1947, takes as guide Plato’s idea of the Good “beyond Being.”33 The movement toward the Good is concretely demonstrable in the relation with the other. Still later, this relation is more specifically characterized as an ethical one. However, although we observe that Levinas’s thought follows a certain line, some changes and contradictions can be perceived. The unity in his thought is not so much that of a result given once and for all, as that of a motif radicalizing itself. In Levinas’s own words, his thought has “remained true to its own finality, even though there is variation in terminology, formulations, operative concepts, and certain propositions.”34 In this third section, three cases of “variation” will be discussed.

First, *sexuality.*35 In earlier writings (namely *De l’existence a l’existant* and *Le temps et l’autre*, published in 1947), the alterity of the other and one’s relation to it are frequently described in “sexual” terms. In Levinas’s main works of later date, ethical typification predominates: the Other is the Other who orders me in his misery, who calls me to account and makes me responsible. The question is, what consequences this has for Levinas’s appraisal of the erotic. The second case concerns *apology* and *autonomy*. Both these concepts — also to be referred to as “self-justification” and “self-legislation” respectively — describe the independence of the responsible subject with respect to the Other. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), these concepts had a very important role. However, in *Autrement qu’être*, the second of his main works, published in 1974, Levinas is much more critical on this point and employs a more “violent” terminology. My question here is, therefore, what consequences this has for the independence of the subject. The third and last topic will be *dialogue*. The relation between Levinas’s thought and the so-called philosophy of dialogue (Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel)36 is complicated, but important. Is the ethical relation
a variant of Buber’s I-Thou relationship, or is it something totally different and more fundamental? Again, in the earlier work, the boundaries are very fluid, whereas in the later publications they are more clearly delineated on this point.

**Sexuality**

JFG: In *De l’existence a l’existant*, the feminine was called “the other par excellence” (*EE* 85/*EaE* 145). Could we say that *Totality and Infinity* has disclosed a more fundamental dimension of alterity by describing the other as Stranger, that is to say, as someone who breaks into the sphere of intimacy?

EL: My current view is that the face is prior to eros and libido. I was involved with this question in the foreword of the second edition of *Le temps et l’autre*. The other is other man, whether feminine or male, but the subject itself has to be understood as a “pair.” I assign a totally different meaning to the term than the civic one of a form of living in which two partners complete each other. Incidentally, what this ought to mean: “completing each other,” is not clear. The fact of the matter is that the unity of the subject cannot be understood as one in number. The subject is not one, but two. It has a structure that is unique, a structure that holds true only for the human subject. As a result, sexuality has a meaning that goes beyond the solely biological. From Heidegger I have learned that we should not see man as a species of animal, but rather, we must comprehend animality from the perspective of the human. This constitutes a reversal of the analytic custom to infer the complex from the simpler elements. In short, I think quite differently now than I did in *De l’existence a l’existant* with respect to eros and the alterity of the other.

JFG: On the one hand, you say that the meaning of sexuality goes beyond the biological, on the other, that the face is prior to eros.

EL: The latter expresses my dismissive attitude with regard to Freud.
JFG: And would the former explain why you make use of erotic metaphors such as “caress,” “kiss,” and “embrace” in your description of ethical proximity here and in *Autrement qu’être*?

EL: Yes indeed, but now I make use of sexual categories far less frequently than, for example, in *Totality and Infinity.* The insight that the face is prior to eros has become more and more dominant. Besides, in such cases the general idea continues to hold true, that sexuality is not to be understood in the biological sense and that it takes on a quite different meaning in humans. As a consequence, new categories are required for the description. What I wrote in *Totality and Infinity* about the meaning of “the son” (*TI* 287ff./*TeI* 255ff.) has also become less important. The father-son structure is released from the biological relationship and forms an interpersonal relationship, namely that of “fraternity.” The fraternal bond between people is not explained, as I now feel, by the fact that we are children of the same father. The fraternity of “All people are brothers” is prior to purely biological brotherhood. I am taking more and more distance from the terminology related to the erotic that I used before. What was formerly central, has become marginal.

**Autonomy**

JFG: Why do you no longer speak in a positive sense about “apology” in your more recent writings and instead make use of a much more “violent” terminology? For example: “the persecution is a disqualification of the apology”; the notions of substitution and being hostage “shockingly impugn the sacrosanct idea of autonomy.”

EL: It is evident that *Totality and Infinity* described all speaking as apology or justification. However, justification assumes a sense of guilt. Apology is the speech of someone who is put in question. Being put in question is the position of the one who questions. It is true that my style has become more violent, but that changes nothing in the fact that apology is the speech of one who is accused and justifying himself.
JFG: The impression of increased “violence” seems to be confirmed by the positive appraisal of Nietzsche, which shows up in *Autrement qu’être* and in *Humanisme de l’autre homme*. In fact, you name as a supreme moment in the history of philosophy: “the Nietzschean man shaking the world’s being in the passage to overman, ‘reducing’ being not by parenthesizing, but by the violence of an unheard-of word.”

EL: Indeed, this has to do with what I have written about the limits in refuting scepticism. Refuting skepticism is always very “strong” and has a “pure conscience.” It shows an inner contradiction: skepticism enunciates a truth, whereas the content of the truth it enunciates is precisely that there is no truth. I wonder whether this refutation takes adequately into account the possibility that “saying” and “said” occur in different times. There are, I believe, certain ways of saying that are so bound up in their *kerygma*, in that which they say, that there is no time to reflect on the already-said. I can name two examples. In the first place, poetic saying. He who initiates a transcendental investigation into the conditions of what the poet is saying, puts an end to poetry and is doing philosophy instead. As the second example, I refer to Nietzsche’s word. He who says to Nietzsche: “You are contradicting what you said yesterday,” makes himself ridiculous. Nietzsche’s saying has charismatic power and beauty. It is of such great urgency that you have neither time nor audacity left to go ferreting in the conditions of this saying.

JFG: Does what I observed about apology not also hold true for the idea of autonomy? My impression is that your appraisal of the autonomy of the I has become increasingly less positive.

EL: Autonomy is most certainly no supreme value for me. A biblical thought is: It is unworthy to be a slave or a servant, but better than autonomy is serving humanity in the service of God. This willingness to serve is actually freedom, namely, election. In the place of autonomy, I put election based on untransferable responsibility. For the modern
man inspired by Nietzsche, serving God is equivalent to slavery. In my opinion, however, God can be defined by the fact that serving is no slavery. In fact, this is one of the ways in which the idea of God becomes concrete. Sartre opined that man is condemned to be free; I, on the contrary, am of the opinion that man has been liberated in order to serve. This corresponds to what the Bible says: “I have brought you up out of the land of Egypt, that you might serve Me.” I have nothing against heteronomy, as long as the nomos isn’t seen as the product of a political structure. Or, as long as the nomos — the political structure — coincides with my obligation to serve the Other, that is, as long as it is in conformity with the word of God. The philosophy of our time barely tolerates that the little word “God” is used. He who does use it is no longer regarded as a philosopher but is looked upon as a preacher. Someone paid me the compliment — a compliment to which I was very sensitive — that my books alone introduced God to him in a manner that he could bear. For me, heteronomy does not mean alienation of the self. My concern is actually to rehabilitate heteronomy. When I put the focus on the question whether we are not occupying the place of another, I am in my own way elaborating on Pascal’s idea that humanity begins when I no longer take up “my place in the sun.” The thought runs directly counter to our desire for a position of our own. Instead of Dasein, man is utopia. Man as Dasein “is there.” According to this view, humanity itself lies in “being there.” Against this I postulate that man is a utopic being. He is not a utopic being on the basis of an ability to imagine another reality, but because he calls into question the definition of Dasein as being-in-one’s-place.

JFG: Are *Totality and Infinity* and *Autrement qu’être* not very different in this respect? In *Totality and Infinity*, the ideas of autonomy and apology had an essential function to fulfill. It seems to me that this is no longer the case in *Autrement qu’être*.

EL: Indeed, *Totality and Infinity* still had to do with the ego that justifies itself. This has now taken on the opposite meaning “being guilty.”
The same applies to autonomy. In *Totality and Infinity*, the ideas of enjoyment and of autonomy played a role of the first importance. In *Autrement qu’être*, however, the idea of election has central place. The subject constitutes itself on the basis of the responsibility that it cannot shift to someone else. The elected one speaks as if he were the first to perceive a highly urgent appeal, indeed, as if he were the only one to whom it is addressed.

**Dialogue**

JFG: In *De l’existence a l’existant* you contrast the community of comrades with “the collectivity of ‘I and you,’” the intersubjectivity of love. In this Buber’s influence seems unmistakably present.

EL: The big difference between Buber and me lies in my stress on the fact that the relation to the Other is not reciprocal. This absence of reciprocity does not mean deficiency; rather, it denotes the asymmetry of the intersubjective space. “I” and “you” are not interchangeable. I often quote Dostoyevsky’s words: “Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others.” The I that is guiltier than all others is not someone we could point to and of whom could be said: That one there is the guiltiest. It is as *I* that he is guiltiest. For my own benefit I cannot make the demands that I make for the sake of the Other. Neither can I demand of the Other what I demand of myself. A Catholic theologian has criticized these thoughts with the observation that substitution and being hostage are no moral qualities, but qualities of a saint. I am of the opinion that “saintliness” is the foundation of morality. All that one demands of oneself, is demanded of a saint, but what one may demand of the Other is always less.

JFG: To get back to dialogue-philosophy — do you not think that the similarities to this philosophy are greater than the differences after all?

EL: There is a radical difference, because Buber sees the relationship between “I” and “thou” as reciprocal. Reciprocity is, however, a political, not an ethical notion. In point of ethics I always have more
obligations than the Other. As citizens we are equal. That is to say: we are equals after the appearance of the third; we are equals inasmuch as we are part of the community of the many.

JFG: In *Autrement qu’être* and in “Dieu et la philosophie” you place much stress on the fact that the vocative and dialogue are not fundamental, that they are dependent on preoriginal saying.\(^4^9\)

EL: Yes, that is absolutely correct.

JFG: Does this mean that you no longer ascribe ethical qualities to dialogue?

EL: No, Saying *is* ethics. It is my obligation with respect to the Other; it is the fact that, when I see the Other, I cannot desert him. Certainly I can do more than he can. This impossibility to be silent, this responsibility for the Other, is actually the harsh name for love. I call the responsibility harsh because it gives so much less pleasure, because it “coos” so much less than love. It is much more than eros; it is agape.

Ethics means putting in question the *conatus essendi*, which is one of the least disputable and most natural givens in traditional philosophy. What does this ethical interpretation of the *conatus essendi* consist in, exactly? It means that I ask myself: “Am I not occupying someone else’s place? Am I not, as a being, someone’s murderer? Is it not true that I am starving someone by existing?” This is no product of my imagination! It is obvious that we Europeans are letting the world go hungry. Being aware of this determines humanity par excellence. Precisely herein lies the interruption of the *conatus essendi*. My obligation to support the Other in living and in dying is given with the fact that I am posing this question. The face of the Other, exposed to death, calls upon me. The essence of “the face” is that it is turned toward us face-to-face; nothing is more immediate than the face of the Other. It is exposed to death and confronts me continuously with the question: “Must I not help him, be with him when he dies?” To return to your question about dialogue: it is totally alien to me to take away its ethical qualities. In my opinion, the state of the matter is that the
spoken word is morality par excellence from the outset. It expresses the supremacy of the Other.

JFG: The spoken language in itself?

EL: Yes, speaking itself is prophetic in this sense. This is what the prophet says from the outset, namely that the Other is of more account than I am. I have spoken with a Dominican theologian who interpreted the formula “The Word is God” in this way. I am not a Christian, but I accept without question that speaking is the most godly thing in us. The word is breath par excellence, from the beginning formed for, and turned to, the Other, my life for the Other.

ETHICS AND POLITICS

That the relation between ethics and politics is a problem for Levinas, and why, may already have become clear from the preceding. His thought has undergone development in this respect as well. At this point it is not necessary to describe the development in particularities. In any case, the general line of it is that the connection between ethics and politics has become an increasing problem for him. Levinas agrees less and less with the disposition to politicize human existence and to reduce morality to social or political ethics. To be sure, the idea of asymmetry — an idea expressed in the title of this article as well — is characteristic of this analysis of the ethical relation. Contrary to what most ethicists claim, Levinas does not see reciprocity as the fundamental characteristic of moral attitude. But it is indisputably true, that notions of equality, exchange, and reciprocity are indispensable in a just structure of human society! Levinas does not in the least underrate the importance of “macroethical problems.” For him the issue is to put matters forth in the correct order: first the ethical, then only — and built on that — politics and the economy.

In the section that now follows, Levinas establishes clear lines on this matter. “Justice is necessary but is in the final analysis motivated by the face of the Other.” The questions I have asked him relate first to the
nature of the distinction between ethics and politics and to the degree to which this distinction can be pursued. Is it a purely analytical and conceptual distinction, related to nothing in reality as we experience it? Does reality not always include far more than the Other-and-me, so that, in a certain sense, it always requires a “political” approach? Second, I asked Levinas to concretize his political philosophy. Can rules of behavior be derived from this ethic of asymmetry? What is Levinas’s attitude to pacifism, the philosophy of liberation, Marxism, and socialism?

Infinity and Law

JFG: What is the relation between the infinity of goodness (“behind the straight line of the law the land of goodness extends infinite and unexplored”) and Jewish law (“The harmony achieved between so much goodness and so much legalism constitutes the original note of Judaism”)?

EL: I do not at all regard law as essential — otherwise than Levy, who proves himself a Kantian in his apology of the law. Not the law but the face is the essence. For Kant, the first formulation of the categorical imperative is the most important, that is, the formulation which elevates “the universality of the law” to the status of norm. He regards the second formulation (“So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means”) as a deduction of the first, whereas this is for me the starting-point of morality. In my opinion — and I am not sure that Jewish theologians would share it — the ethic of proximity is prior to Jewish law. It is obvious that universal law is the best way to protect the neighbor. Justice is necessary, but in the final analysis it is motivated by the face of the Other.

Justice

JFG: If “already this obsession cries out for justice,” if in reality “from this moment on, the third is represented in the other,” how is
it then still possible to separate proximity from justice and to maintain independence from morality with respect to politics? Is it a matter of purely analytical distinction?

EL: You pose an interesting question. Indeed, we could say that a purely analytical distinction is at issue here, an analysis distinguishing two essential aspects but also showing the connection between both aspects. If there were only two of us on earth, there would be no problem. In that case, I am subordinate to the Other, who is my Master and at the same time weaker than I (namely the poor, the widow, the orphan). The problem of justice arises because there are at least three of us on earth. There is not first a kingdom of love and after that the kingdom of justice. One could speak of unlimited love between Adam and Eve in paradise because they were two alone. Humanity consists in a multiple, however. Perhaps I can suggest the reason for this multiplicity.

JFG: What do you mean by that?

EL: I inquire concerning the meaning of the multiplicity in which humanity exists. The case in all my descriptions of the ethical relation is that I am guilty with respect to the Other and do not concern myself with what I might mean to him. We could say that I do not think generously enough about him. I do not attach the same worthiness to him as to myself, to be someone’s debtor. He can be my debtor only if we analyze the relation between him and me in terms of trade, of exchange. That is not the intention. Therefore, a third person is needed with respect to whom the Other can consider himself disinterestedly guilty. If there were no third, then that would leave the Other with only two possibilities: a reciprocal relationship with me, or else being devoid of all humanity, being condemned to the impossibility of standing in a relation of guilt with respect to someone else.

JFG: In “Dieu et la philosophie” you allude to “a saying without words, but not with empty hands.”58 Returning to the last question, I would like to ask you how proximity can be presented as an “economic
relation.” Does economics not always imply the problem of distribution, that is, the existence of a third person? Is it not from the outset a political matter?

EL: We must distinguish two phases. The analyses of Autrement qu’être are based on the assumption of me being alone with the Other. In that case the only thing which may be said is that I am guilty before him. The necessity of calculation, of comparison, and of politics comes up because, in reality, three people have to live together. Because there are more than two of us, I must find out what the relation is between the Other and the third person, and who is my neighbor. This means that I have to involve myself in problems of justice. Giving becomes political economy. In reality we exist in a society in which forms of state develop and where justice has to be observed. The point is that politics and the economy must not come into conflict with the interpersonal relationship. I agree with you, when you say that the economy is a political matter from the outset. This is indeed the case in a complete society, where there are more than two people. I try to understand how the three of us have to live together, by first asking myself what I owe to the Other.

JFG: My questions do not refer to the article “Le moi et la totalité” or to Totality and Infinity as much as to your more recent writings. It seems to me that in your latest writings you have sharpened the distinction between proximity and justice so much that their connection has become less clear.

EL: In my opinion it is still clear. Proximity and justice go together because of the multiplicity named earlier. For that matter, with respect to politics we have extensive experience available to us. If we leave it to itself, it becomes Stalinism — or capitalism: it does not make much difference; each of the two has its own unethical inevitabilities. The great importance of an analysis of the ethical relation — an analysis that in spite of everything leads to the development of an idea of the state — lies in the fact that the interpersonal relationship is held to be the norm for relationships in a society of many. Hobbes, too, arrives
at a model of society on the basis of his view of the relationship between individual people. He sees society as limitation of animality, of bestiality. “Man to Man is an errant Wolfe,” but he also understands that it is more beneficial to limit his nature to a degree. The starting-point of my political philosophy, however, is the idea that, in origin, our being is entirely being for the Other. But because there are many of us, we have to limit the original goodness and acquire the wisdom of love, that is, the justice of love.

Politics

JFG: Could we say that your political philosophy aims at nonideological politics, politics that makes decisions only about concrete, limited problems, on the basis of strictly objective considerations? In other words, is your political philosophy a plea for a form of political pragmatism?

EL: That depends on what is meant by pragmatism. Pragmatism assumes that there is uncertainty, that in each particular situation one must grope and search for what is practical and suitable. I would rather say that one should pay attention to each individual human. In that sense justice should not be detached from proximity. Abstract justice and objectivist politics are dominated by the idea that a good principle is applicable everywhere. Where proximity is concerned, however, every instance, each particular case prevails. In casuistry this is the method. The importance of casuistry lies in the fact that it constantly takes into account the person who is opposite me, the concrete situation of each “case.” Casuistry has a bad reputation; hypocrisy is ascribed to it. It is said that the Jesuits frequently made use of it in order to accuse or to justify according to their own purposes. He who sketches a concrete situation can, of course, find details to justify his judgment, whatever it may be. But, on the other hand, casuistry strives for perfect adaptation of the relation to the situation. It is above all acknowledgement of the fact that one has a being before him who is completely new — _hapax_ — someone who is there only once. The universality of the rule,
the universality that shows up in the bureaucratic point of view, fails here. Judgment should not be exercised by a neutral mechanism, but by persons, by judges. It is absolutely essential that a judge, a thinking individual, stands between the law and the person to whom it is applied, in other words someone who can have a unique relationship with someone else.

JFG: Can practical rules be derived from the ideas of proximity and of absolute patience?

EL: Not in a strict deductive way. But it is definitely possible to derive certain rules, to formulate propositions which are true, which are morally correct. In morality, inventiveness is essential because each recurring Other is new.

JFG: May I put to you an example of such a derivation? I am thinking of total pacifism, pacifism in the spirit of: “But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” [RSV].

EL: I accept the order to turn the other cheek. The question is, however, whether it can be realized in the sphere of justice. Should we have let Hitler go his way to the very end? Must I, out of consideration for the other who attacks a nation, allow people to perish hopelessly, who are also others, even though they belong to my own nation? It is certainly not an easy question. My thought is an attempt to trace the foundation of the relationship between people. In reality we certainly face problems, but even the saint cannot escape such difficulties. What matters is the conatus essendi of the Other. My conatus essendi is no moral principle; the conatus essendi of the Other definitely is. Once again I refer to casuistry. We must not give this term a pejorative connotation; casuistry is a very important matter. Someone who defends another with violent methods should not be reproached for attacking the Other. For he who defends someone else, acts righteously.

JFG: I think many readers of your work would like to have “the face of the Other” concretized. The “philosopher of liberation” Enrique Dussel even criticizes you for this lack. In his opinion, the Other
must be thought of in concrete terms, as “an Indian, an African, an Asian.” According to him, it is possible to transcend “Europe” only in this way.63

EL: What I call the face radiates through this diversity. It is not something general, not something that can be acquired only by abstraction. To have a relation to the face means that if one sees a Negro one does not pay attention to the color of his skin, nor to the color of his eyes, but that one talks with him and takes responsibility for him through the word. Of course, it can be difficult to see the face in these countenances that all have a different color. But “seeing the face” is nothing other than the possibility to talk to the Negro and to be his brother.

JFG: If I have understood him correctly, Dussel criticizes your way of speaking of the absolute Other. In his opinion this way of speaking minimizes the fact that the Other is always a concrete person, an African or an Indian who is being exploited by “Europe.”

EL: If this means that Dussel thinks the economic aspect is neglected in my analyses, then I must contradict him. The economic aspect is essential in *Autrement qu’être*. I use the expression “to take the bread out of my mouth for the sake of the Other” ("donner le pain de sa bouche") to clarify the full meaning of the relation to the face. I am definitely not thinking of abstract humanism but of concrete humanism. The impression that I am occupying someone else’s place — I said this to you earlier — is concrete reality in the fact that very many die of hunger because we have everything here. The only thing we can be reproached of is that we still stay here in the end. The philosopher is no saint, but he knows where “saintliness” is to be found.

JFG: Some passages in your writings reflect a deep sympathy for the socialism of the kibbutzim and the soviets, for “utopian socialism.”64 Other passages indicate that you reject socialism; you have typified it, for instance, as a form of egoistic idealism.65

EL: Socialism is acknowledgment of an obligation with respect to the Other, an acknowledgement, also, of the responsibility that is of an
economic nature from the outset. It directs itself against a responsibility that is expressed only in the “good word.” But I am against the administrative and bureaucratic socialism that becomes Stalinism. Modern man has had two radical experiences, namely the discovery of the third world and the Stalinistic disappointment, the fact that the generosity of Marxism has become Stalinism.

JFG: In the article “Politique après!” you write: “Stalinism and post-Stalinist anti-Semitism . . . certainly constitute one of the greatest traumatic experiences that has ever struck the modern Jewish consciousness” (BV 188–95/AV 224). Is this an autobiographical statement?

EL: Not in the strict sense, inasmuch as I have never been an adherent of a political party. It is a statement about an environment that is close to me, a statement reflecting current history. Many Jews were involved in the Bolshevik regime, at least in the beginning. Often they came from religious families and thought messianism was being fulfilled at that moment. Now these same persons are completely out of it and no longer understand Stalinism or what is related to it. Neither does Stalinism understand them. They want to leave the Soviet Union. My statement is therefore not autobiographical in the strict sense of the word; it is based on my knowledge of the Jewish environment, however. I have known East European Jewry with its socialistic leanings very well.

JFG: In your view, was the Stalinistic degeneration of Marxism an inevitable development?

EL: No, it is an inevitable danger that always lurks, a degeneration that is always possible. In Isaiah 58, a wonderful chapter, it is said: Good God, we fast, we seek to draw near to you, but you do not answer. And the prophet replies: While you are so delighted to fast, you continue to oppress your neighbor and demand what is owed you. I do not call that fasting. Fasting is to let the slaves go free, to give bread to the hungry and clothing to the naked, to receive the homeless poor in your house. This last item is important! The heart is not readily
opened, the wallet with slightly more difficulty, but the most difficult of all, the front door: when the homeless poor come in, they soil the carpet. Freeing the slaves is not enough, if the personal relationship is lacking. It is not only important to change a regime — we must also bring about genuine relationships between people, feed the hungry; we must not withdraw from our own flesh. The obligation arising from the Other is far more powerful than his face; it is definitely not the favor of his face but all the misery of his “flesh.”

My attitude toward socialism finds its explanation in the danger of Stalinism. The events of 1968 were unhappy events because, up to a certain moment of time, until the crisis of Stalinism, many had thought that socialism would inevitably lead to success. The discovery of Stalinism brought them to despair. That accounts for the rise of splinter groups; it is as though people had lost faith in the Church and dispersed into sectarian groups. It has always saddened me to see how people who went after a goal with high hopes, suddenly had to fend for themselves entirely on their own as well as they could.

JFG: And utopian socialism, the socialism of the kibbutzim?

EL: No, no. I do not reject that. The point is that this socialism has not developed on the national or international level. In the end it had to do with small and partial experiments carried out by enthusiastic groups. Buber has written that this socialism has perhaps not been a success, but it is not a failure either. The only value that is left after so many setbacks in our world, is the value of the Other. No one dares deny the value of the Other. One starts to deny the Other only in order to defend him.