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Levinas's Political Chiasmi: *Otherwise than Being* as a Response to Liberalism and Fascism, Humanism and Antihumanism

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Abstract: In this article, I approach the relationship between the ethical and political in Levinas from the perspective of the hermeneutic strategy he employs when engaging with political thought. I argue that, in two key texts—“Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism” and *Humanism of the Other*—Levinas situates seemingly opposed traditions of political thought in chiasmic relation to one another: liberalism and fascism, and humanism and antihumanism, respectively. Furthermore, I argue that Levinas's views on the relationship between the ethical and political in *Otherwise than Being* can be read as a response to the chiasmi found in the above texts. The relationship between the ontologies of liberalism and fascism is chiasmic, because the latter's fatal embrace of embodied and historical existence relies on the dualism the former establishes between the subject as transcendent and the body as immanent. Humanism and antihumanism are in chiasmic relation in terms of the question of violence. The latter critiques the former for the violence of its Platonist devaluation of historical cultures, and argues instead for the equivalence of cultures; however, in locating intelligibility in structures of which specific cultures are merely configurations, antihumanism repeats the devaluation of specific cultures. In an altered manner, it is, therefore, also a potentially violent view of intercultural relations. Levinas's analysis of sensible proximity to the human other is an attempt to account for the gravity of culturally situated meaning without turning it into an irrevocable fatality. I argue that the ethical does not detract from the situatedness of intelligibility, but demonstrates that we are bound to our cultural situation, not by fate, but by responsibility.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas; politics; ethics; sensibility; embodiment; antihumanism

1. Introduction

Much of Levinas's philosophy consists of demonstrating that seemingly fundamental distinctions—between peace and war, sense and nonsense, being and nothingness—depend on thinking in terms of a modality of relation which excludes alterity. When it comes to the political, I argue that Levinas discloses chiasmic relations between purportedly opposed traditions of political thought by revealing the proximity of their fundamental presuppositions.¹ A chiasmus is a literary device, deriving its name from the Greek letter χ , in which words, grammatical structures, or ideas are repeated in a reverse order. I use it as a figure for seemingly opposed discourses which in fact share a condition of possibility, though they depart from it in different directions and with seemingly divergent conclusions. My aim is not so much to establish *what* Levinas thinks about politics—the form of constitution he endorses and so forth—but to consider *how* Levinas reads and responds to political thought. I show that Levinas situates liberalism and fascism, as well as humanism and

¹ See Critchley (2014), p. 13, for Levinas's use of this figure to characterize the relation between his philosophy and Derrida's.

antihumanism, in chiastic relation to one another based on the inadequacy of their understanding of the conditions of intelligibility which neglects the role of sensibility as a *sui generis* relation. On this basis, I argue that Levinas's views on the relationship between the ethical—as a sensible relation to the other—and the political or ontological in *Otherwise than Being* can be read as a response to the above chiasmi. More specifically, in their attempts to challenge the liberal idealist or humanist subject—as the transcendent condition of intelligibility—both Heideggerian ontology and antihumanist structuralism ultimately invoke the notion of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) to understand the situatedness of intelligibility. However, the arbitrariness of such thrownness, while rendering culturally specific meaning questionable, also invites disorientation and nihilism due to the absence of a shared reference in this condition of ontological plurality. Levinas's account of the undoing of situatedness in proximity, as well as the manner in which ethical intelligibility gives weight to political intelligibility, maintains the questionability of the vernacular, but bases it on responsibility and not arbitrariness, thereby seeking to avoid the nihilistic implications of the latter.

Levinas's philosophy is fundamentally about subjectivity—traditionally regarded as the source of the intelligibility of entities—understood phenomenologically as essentially relational. Therefore, I focus on the political as ontological intelligibility rather than politics in the more usual sense of the word. Levinas understands phenomenology as the “search for the concrete”, for the conditions of intelligibility (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 28). However, what exactly is the concrete? What is at stake is the meaning of the Aristotelian notion of the “political animal”, understood as the relation between pre-political existence and political or ontological intelligibility (Aristotle 2016, 1278b, pp. 17–21). In Levinas's view, “reasonable animal”, and by implication political animal, “cannot mean an animal that reason rides on as if on horseback: the interpenetration of terms delineates an original structure” (Levinas [1991] 2017, pp. 13, 20). Understanding this interpenetration of ontological intelligibility and pre-ontological life requires a rethinking of the pre-political or pre-ontological through a phenomenological account of embodiment which Levinas offers in his analysis of sensibility and the ethical.

This focus on Levinas's practice of reading and on the ethical and political as forms of intelligibility is in keeping with his own claims, in seeming tension with one another, about the political relevance of his thought. On the one hand, as he puts it in the preface to *Entre Nous*, “what motivates these pages is not some urgent need to return to ethics for the purpose of developing *ab ovo* a code in which the structures and rules for good conduct, public policy, and peace between nations would be set forth . . . ” (Levinas [1991] 2017, p. viii). In other words, one should not look to Levinas for a normative political theory.² On the other hand, he repeatedly insists on the political relevance of his thought such as when he writes that “[i]t is then not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State . . . proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all . . . ” (Levinas [1974] 1998a, pp. 159–60). In my view, Levinas's hermeneutic strategy is one of the ways in which we can understand the political relevance of his thought without attempting to derive norms and institutional arrangements from it.

My argument proceeds as follows: firstly, I explain the meaning of Levinas's use of the “ethical” and “political” in contrast to the conventional meaning of ethics and politics. Secondly, I analyze the first instance of his chiastic hermeneutics in his understanding of the relationship between liberalism and fascism, particularly in terms of their conception of temporality and embodiment. In the third section, I present Levinas's more sophisticated use of this chiastic strategy in his analysis of the theoretical antihumanism of the 1960s, which clarifies some of the questions left implicit in his reflections on fascism in the 1930s. Finally, I turn to his analysis of the sensible and the ethical as *sui generis* modalities of relation to show that his alternative understanding of embodiment as sensibility

² Morgan (2016) makes such an attempt, which in my view does not recognize the primacy of the question of political intelligibility, rather than politics, in Levinas's thought.

contributes to political thought by accounting for the weight of the political and of culturally situated meaning without identifying the subject with their cultural, national, or racial identity.

2. Ethical and Political Intelligibility

The terms ethics and politics usually designate two spheres of thought and practice, either independent from one another as in Hobbes and Machiavelli or intertwined as in Aristotle and Hegel. In contrast to this, Levinas uses the adjectives ethical and political to distinguish between two forms of intelligibility and modalities of relation. To understand his use of these terms, it is necessary to appreciate that the ethical relation, considered in the chronology of Levinas's work, is not his point of departure, but the answer to a prior question about relationality as such.³ As he puts it in a note to "God and Philosophy", in a qualification that applies to his work as a whole, "[i]t is the meaning of the beyond, of transcendence, and not ethics, that our study is pursuing" (Levinas 1996, p. 190n22). It is in sensible life as a modality of relation irreducible to intentionality that Levinas first sees an opportunity to rethink transcendence, and this passage through sensibility is crucial for understanding the meaning of the ethical in his later work.

Levinas's concern with transcendence stems from his repeatedly avowed, though not uncritical, adherence to the phenomenological method (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 28). The central premise of phenomenology is that consciousness is intentional—that is, essentially relational—and Levinas's contribution is to question the meaning of this relationality (Levinas [1930] 1995, p. 40). According to him, the phenomenological understanding of intentionality presupposes a specific mode of relation such that "an existent is comprehended in the measure that thought transcends it, measuring it against the horizon whereupon it is profiled" (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 44). The "essential teaching of Husserl", which Heidegger shares but modifies, is that, for the given to be a phenomenon—for it to be intelligible—consciousness or *Dasein* must transcend the given toward a horizon and ultimately toward the world as the horizon of horizons (p. 28).

For Husserl, this transcendence is not explicit in the natural attitude and is only revealed once we undergo the phenomenological reduction and reflect on experience (Levinas [1930] 1995, p. 131). The phenomenological reduction is key to operating in a properly phenomenological domain, free from metaphysical presuppositions, since it focusses attention on *how* phenomena appear in lived experience rather than on *what* appears (Levinas [1930] 1995, pp. 131, 134–35, 148). When the empirical ego reflects on its lived experience in this manner, it discovers the horizon toward which the given is transcended, and which renders experience intelligible, as the already accomplished work of transcendental consciousness (Levinas [1930] 1995, p. 148; Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 123). Levinas's suspicion is that this interpretation of the reduction and of what is discovered in phenomenological reflection misrepresents our sensible exposure to the world by "taking sensations to be contents destined to fill a priori forms of objectivity" (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 188). This interpretation of sensibility, which does not recognize it as a *sui generis* modality of relation, results from understanding *how* phenomena appear in terms of the correlation between noeses and noemata (Levinas [1930] 1995, pp. 132, 139). For Levinas, this is the residue of representationalism in Husserl's phenomenology:

Representation is to be understood as the theoretical, contemplative attitude . . . resting on sensations. Sensation has always been taken to be an atom of representation. The correlative of representation is a solid, fixed being, indifferent to the appearance it presents, endowed with a nature and consequently eternal, even if it changes, for the formula of its change is immutable". (Levinas [1991] 2017, p. 37)

The role of sensibility is diminished, though not denied, in the Husserlian understanding of lived experience, because it is reduced to a scaffolding of the noema and is philosophically relevant

³ See Bergo (2005) and Bernasconi (2005) for detailed analyses of this chronology.

only insofar as it supports objectification (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 187). For Levinas, sensibility thus construed is not exhaustive of its role in intelligibility, since “not every transcendent intention has the noesis-noema structure” (p. 29). Sensibility as a *sui generis* modality of relation resists this structure since it is not a relation between noeses and noemata, but the enjoyment of “qualities without support” independent of their role in objectifying acts (p. 188). This demonstrates that Husserl “may have been wrong in seeing the concrete world as a world of objects that are primarily perceived” (Levinas [1930] 1995, p. 119). Especially in his later works, Levinas acknowledges that there are exceptions to the above scheme in Husserl’s work itself and it is in the latter’s analysis of time consciousness, particularly the primal impression (*Ur-impression*), that Levinas finds sensibility allotted a place which does not reduce it to its role in objectification, but recognizes it as the origin of the flux of inner time-consciousness (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 33). However, Husserl does not fully develop this potential since the primal impression is recuperated in retention and, therefore, does not disrupt time-consciousness as a totality of differentiated moments.⁴

From the very beginning, Levinas’s critical comments on phenomenology are influenced by Heidegger (Levinas [1930] 1995, p. 154). Of particular importance for Levinas is Heidegger’s demonstration that “consciousness, and our mastery of reality through consciousness, do not exhaust our relationship with reality, in which we are present with all the density of our being” (Levinas [1991] 2017, p. 3). However, despite rethinking how the horizon of the world is constituted—for example, by giving mood (*Stimmung*) a central role and conceiving of the world as a practical horizon—Heidegger still privileges the horizon as the primary source of meaning such that “the world which has already been disclosed beforehand permits what is within-the-world to be encountered” (Heidegger [1927] 2008, p. 176). In Heidegger’s tool analysis, for example, we are told that a tool *qua* tool does not exist by itself but in virtue of its place in an ensemble, deriving its meaning from the totality (p. 97). His understanding of intelligibility thereby retains the broadly Husserlian notion of the “lateral signification of things within the same” (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 191).

The transcendence which concerns Levinas is different from that involved in this phenomenological account of intentionality, where consciousness or *Dasein* transcends the given toward a horizon, the constitution of which can ultimately be traced back to the work of the transcendental ego or *Dasein*’s work of disclosure (Levinas [1961] 1969, pp. 27–28, 49). Sensibility as a *sui generis* mode of relation prior to intentional consciousness or *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world involves transcendence that does not refer to an anterior horizontal world. Political or ontological intelligibility is relational and horizontal; Levinas does not question this, but asks whether this is the only source of intelligibility. He, therefore, radicalizes the notion of intentionality and the transcendence it implies in order to question the limits of intelligibility by inquiring into the possibility of “signification without context”, that is, of intelligibility that is not inextricably tied to the notion of a horizon (p. 23). The final section of this paper returns to Levinas’s account of this source of intelligibility.

It is in the context of this phenomenological problematic that Levinas’s use of the terms “ethical” and “political” is best understood. Rather than two spheres of thought or action, the ethical and political are two ways of conceiving of intelligibility and transcendence. The political conception of intelligibility understands the meaningfulness of a phenomenon in terms of the relation between the given and the horizon or other givens. As such, any relation between consciousness (or *Dasein*) and an intelligible entity is mediated by a third term. As we see in detail below, the ethical relation as sensible proximity to the other human being reveals the possibility of absolute alterity: an unmediated relation to otherness. It is this phenomenologically inspired meaning of the ethical and political—as modes of relation and intelligibility—which in my view leads to what Alford (2004) calls the “Levinas Effect”: the fact that Levinas’s thought seems amenable to just about any political reading (pp. 146–47). After the exposition of two chiasmic readings of political thought below, it becomes clear that this is because

⁴ See Drabinski (2001) for a detailed account of the relation between Levinas and Husserl, pp. 1–42.

Levinas is primarily concerned with *why* the *political*—as a form of intelligibility—is experienced as weighty and serious, a question which is prior to asking *what* form of *politics* we ought to embrace.

3. Chiasmus I: Liberalism, Fascism, and Embodiment

Keeping in mind the goal of understanding *how* Levinas approaches the political, we can turn to the early essay “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism” published in 1934 in *Esprit*, shortly after Hitler’s rise to power in Germany.⁵ In this essay, we see the relationship between Levinas’s chiasmic hermeneutics and his phenomenological method.⁶ The distinction between universalism and particularism is often used to explain the opposition between liberalism and fascism, but the phenomenologist demonstrates that “[t]he meaning of a logical contradiction that opposes two forms of ideas only shows up fully if we go back to their source, to intuition, to the original decision that makes them possible” (Levinas [1934] 1990a, p. 64). The difference between the liberal and fascist conception of humanity can be traced back to “elementary feelings” of embodiment, temporality, and historicity which they interpret differently (p. 64). The possibilities of thought and action presented by liberalism and fascism, different as they are, rely on these elementary feelings which “predetermine or prefigure the meaning of the adventure that the soul will face in the world” (p. 64). As I read it, the relation Levinas sees between liberalism and fascism is chiasmic because the respective ontologies they presuppose betray the phenomenology of embodiment and temporality. The former’s idealist ontology does so by treating these as merely accidental limitations which leave the subject—the foundation of intelligibility—untouched. The latter’s implicit and broadly Heideggerian ontology distorts these elementary feelings by understanding intelligibility as bound to bodily and temporal situatedness, denying the possibility of meaningful transcendence. Furthermore, as I argue below, it is liberal idealism’s neglect of the body and time which creates the space for fatalistic and racial interpretations of these attachments. This is not to deny that Levinas sees fascism as a radical departure from the Western conception of humanity; a chiasmic reading does not equate liberalism and fascism, but reveals a shared condition of possibility from which they depart in radically different directions.

For Levinas, liberal thought and the transcendence it presupposes results from the secularization of the Judeo-Christian conception of the soul and its corresponding understanding of temporality and embodiment. According to Levinas, “freedom, which is infinite with regard to any attachment and through which no attachment is ultimately definitive”—which locates subjectivity beyond embodied and temporal existence—“lies at the base of the Christian notion of the soul” (p. 65). In the Judeo-Christian tradition, “time loses its very irreversibility”—characteristic of Attic tragedy, for example—because through redemption the believer *qua* soul is freed from the determination of the past in a present that is not weighed down by their trespasses (p. 65). The soul’s capacity to overcome the determinations of time gives rise not only to the notion of freedom, but also to that of equality (p. 66). If the contingencies of birth and circumstance—race, personal and national history, linguistic and cultural particularity—are not essential to the soul and to intelligibility, then all human beings are equal in freedom and command equal dignity. Nevertheless, this understanding of the soul does not ignore the concrete limitations of earthly existence, though not considering them definitive, and acknowledges that “[t]he soul’s detachment is not an abstract state; it is the concrete and positive power to become detached and abstract” (p. 66).

The liberal conception of the autonomous subject derives from this tradition, but the secularization of the monotheistic soul dispenses with the relation to God, as well as the communal and ritual aspects of repentance, as preconditions of the soul’s freedom. Consequently, the transcendence of the subject undergoes a transformation of meaning until “in the place of liberation through grace there is

⁵ See Van Eeden (2017) for more details on this essay in relation to *On Escape* and the theme of tragedy in Levinas’s (early) philosophy.

⁶ See Caygill (2002) for Durkheim’s influence on Levinas’s methodology in this essay, p. 31.

autonomy" (p. 66). Rather than concrete and reiterated achievements, freedom and equality become a point of departure such that the "mythical drama" of monotheism is replaced by the subject that is autonomous *ex machina* (p. 65). As a consequence of this shift in meaning, the idealist or liberal subject's attachments to the world—its history, identity, and unchosen commitments—are light to the point of being a game, since they are only external limitations of the essence of the human, understood as the "simplicity of the subject [which] lies beyond the struggles that tear it apart" (Levinas [1935] 2003, p. 49). The subject's exposure to being consists of thought, that is, "only logical possibilities that present themselves to a dispassionate reason that makes choices while forever keeping its distance" (Levinas [1934] 1990a, p. 66). Liberalism's weakness in the face of fascism is this abstractness which "replaces the blind world of common sense"—including experiences of the irreparability of time, the inescapability of embodiment, and of commitments prior to choice—"with the world rebuilt by an idealist philosophy, one that is steeped in reason and subject to reason" (p. 66). Such a reasonable world is suspect and ridiculous in times of crisis and suffering, particularly for one persecuted on the basis of an identity that, according to liberal idealism, is merely accidental.

A break with this conception of the human being occurs when embodied and historical existence is understood as essential, rather than accidental, to the intelligibility of the world. Levinas finds such a view nascent in fascism and philosophically articulated in Heideggerian ontology (Levinas [1934] 1990a, p. 63). In contrast to liberalism, the ontology presupposed by fascism affirms temporality, historicity, and embodiment as essential aspects of the human condition which one cannot simply renounce. Levinas recognizes the partial truth of this ontology. It must be acknowledged that embodiment consists of "feeling[s] of identity between our bodies and ourselves", particularly acute when we are at our best—in sport or dance where our "gestures attain an almost abstract perfection . . . [and] all dualism between the self and body must disappear"—and at our worst—when we feel riveted to our bodies in pain like "the sick man [who] experiences the indivisible simplicity of his being when he turns over in his bed of suffering to find a position that gives him peace" (Levinas [1934] 1990a, p. 68). However, he does not see the racial, nationalist, or Nietzschean interpretations based on such intimacy as accidental, as shown below (Levinas [1934] 1990a, pp. 69–71).

Levinas agrees that to exist is to be "riveted" to existence by "that most radical and unalterable binding of chains, the fact that the I [*moi*] is oneself [*soi-même*]" (Levinas [1935] 2003, p. 55). This is where he is closest to Heidegger. In my view, the Heideggerian notions most important to Levinas, especially in his early works, are thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) and facticity (*Faktizität*).⁷ (Heidegger [1927] 2008) claim is that *Dasein's* existence is essentially a "burden", such that "it has been delivered over to the Being which, in existing, it has to be" (p. 173). This facticity is revealed in the moods (*Stimmungen*) in which *Dasein* always already finds itself thrown into a meaningful world "prior to all cognition and volition" (p. 175). It is because of this pre-theoretical attunement to the world that "we can encounter something that matters to us" (p. 177). In other words, it is our thrownness in a context and a mood which gives the beings we encounter their meaning and gravity. This pre-volitional and pre-theoretical engagement with the world has immediate political significance, since, in complex or "real" societies, the consequences of actions outrun the agent's intentions and "the impasse of liberalism resides in [its inability to recognize] this exteriority of my consciousness to myself" (Levinas [1991] 2017, p. 17, 20). Insofar as fascism's implicit ontology can account for these experiences, it is not a mere "anomaly" or "ideological misunderstanding", but warrants philosophical attention (Levinas [1934] 1990a, pp. 63–64). Fascism appears serious and appealing in the face of the abstractions of liberal thought, because it accounts for the fact that the human being "can no longer play with the idea, for coming from his concrete being, anchored in his flesh and blood, the idea remains serious" (p. 70). However, the additional claim that "to be truly oneself" involves "becoming aware of the ineluctable original chain that is unique to our bodies, and above all accepting this chaining", the idea

⁷ See (Heidegger [1927] 2008, pp. 172–79 and pp. 219–24).

of Heideggerian authenticity, is one that Levinas rejects precisely because of the racial and nationalist interpretations it is susceptible to inviting (Levinas [1934] 1990a, p. 69). As early as *On Escape* (Levinas [1935] 2003), Levinas's analyses of embodied phenomena—pleasure, shame, nausea—reveal that to be human is both to be riveted to existence and to experience the need to escape these bonds.

In what sense is the relationship between fascism and liberalism chiasmic? Is Levinas not just critiquing the ontology of situatedness for compromising liberalism's commitment to intelligibility as universal and context-independent? It is important to recognize that Levinas is not nostalgic for liberalism. He makes this abundantly clear in his 1990 prefatory note to the English translation of the essay: "We must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject" (Levinas [1934] 1990a, p. 63). Levinas critiques both liberalism and fascism—the former for ignoring the elementary feelings of situatedness and the latter for fatally embracing them. His treatment of liberalism as a betrayal of the Judeo-Christian tradition suggests his sympathy for the concreteness of the former and his reservations regarding the latter. In my interpretation, the relation between idealism and liberalism, on the one hand, and Heideggerian ontology and fascism, on the other, is properly chiasmic because the latter's fatal embrace of embodied and historical existence relies on the dualism that the former establishes between the spiritual as transcendent and the concrete as immanent. By devaluing embodiment, Western philosophy evacuates this space and leaves it open to materialist, biological, and racial interpretations. It is for this reason that Levinas can claim that idealist philosophy and liberalism are not simply weak in the face of fascism, but complicit in its possibility (Levinas [1934] 1990a, p. 63). The fact that Levinas is critical of both liberalism and fascism is also suggested by his association of Husserl with the former—not in this essay, but elsewhere, he mentions the "liberal inspiration" of Husserlian phenomenology (Levinas 1998b, p. 61)—and Heidegger with the latter. As we saw in the previous section, despite the differences between them, Levinas sees both Heidegger and Husserl as mischaracterizing sensibility and thereby treating intelligibility as essentially horizontal or worldly. Furthermore, Levinas is not critical of taking embodiment and history seriously—he endorses this—but rather of fascism and Heideggerian ontology's distortion of these elementary feelings. Not that these are equivalent: fascism attributes biological and racial—that is, ontic—significance to the irremissibility of being. Heidegger's emphasis on finitude and situatedness, on the other hand, is ontological. However, by understanding situatedness as thrownness in a *horizontal* world, Heidegger nonetheless renders transcendence in the strong sense impossible, thus providing the ontological presuppositions that make the identification of an individual's fate with that of their race, nation, or historical epoch plausible. If liberalism denies the "blind world of common sense", the lived evidence of embodiment and temporality, fascism is equally naïve in interpreting the latter biologically with the "inevitability it entails" (Levinas [1934] 1990a, p. 69). The point is to take seriously the situatedness of human existence and its role in intelligibility, without succumbing to fatality. Thus, Levinas describes his early work as motivated by "the profound need to leave the climate of that [Heideggerian] philosophy, and by the conviction that we cannot leave it for a philosophy that would be pre-Heideggerian" (Levinas [1947] 1978, p. 4). As we see below, this consists of rethinking thrownness, and questioning whether situatedness in a horizontal, already meaningful world is primary.

While it demonstrates the chiasmic hermeneutic strategy I consider central to Levinas's thinking of the political, this essay has at least two shortcomings. Firstly, the relation between universalism and particularism is not sufficiently clarified; is racism simply a particularism usurping the status of universality? Or, is corruption by particularity inherent in the notion of universality? Secondly, Levinas does not sufficiently develop an alternative view here, although this begins to take shape in *On Escape* in 1935. The only form of universalism he mentions in this essay is "the universality of truth", in which intelligibility is independent of situatedness and ideas can be disseminated, such that "[t]o convert or persuade is to create peers" (Levinas [1934] 1990a, p. 70). This is surely just another iteration of the liberal universalism, the ontological presuppositions of which he critiques. Nonetheless, the retrospective insertions of the notions of "responsibility" and "the *face* of the other man" in the 1990 preface suggests that Levinas sees a continuity between this essay and his later work (p. 63). I take up

this intuition of continuity in more detail below when considering Levinas's analyses of the sensible and ethical in his mature work.

4. Chiasmus II: Humanism, Antihumanism, and Violence

The second chiasmic reading of political thought I want to consider is Levinas's engagement with the theoretical antihumanism prevalent, particularly among social scientists, in 1960s France.⁸ Levinas agrees with the likes of Lévi-Strauss that the antihumanism of the social sciences is methodological and not metaphysical (Levinas [1972] 2006, pp. 58–59; Lévi-Strauss [1958] 1963, p. 279). Nevertheless, he insists that the choice of “logical formalism and mathematical structures” in the study of humanity is not purely methodological or exclusively oriented by the desire for a “positivist imitation” of the success of the natural sciences, the possibility of which is demonstrated by structuralist linguistics (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 59).⁹ This choice is made by human beings of flesh and blood affected by their lifeworld, not disembodied and disinterested scientists. Consequently, he sees antihumanism as intimately political in at least two ways. Firstly, the social scientists' epistemological distrust of the subject's self-understanding and attribution of meaning to its actions cannot be separated from “the reversal of reasonable projects”, whether technical or political, which characterizes the twentieth century (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 60). The subject—tragically or comically—no longer meets its intentions actualized in the future, but encounters the perversions and failures of its intentions instead (p. 56). Secondly, theoretical antihumanism opens the door to a new conception of the global order and a rethinking of the status of Western thought in light of the ongoing political process of decolonization.

Antihumanism calls into question the universalist intentions of humanism, revealing that what passes for universalism is in fact the elevation of a particular culturally situated understanding of the human to the status of universal. This critique is underpinned by the ontological pluralism of what Levinas calls the “anti-Platonism of contemporary philosophy”—a specific understanding of intelligibility (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 19). Here, ontological pluralism designates a philosophical position which considers cultural plurality and situatedness inherent to intelligibility, rather than an illusory distortion to be overcome in the search for an essence unaffected by cultural specificity. As Levinas puts it, ontological pluralism means that “there would not be totality but totalities in being” such that “the intelligible is inconceivable outside the becoming that suggests it” and, consequently, “different cultures are no longer obstacles that separate us from the essential and the Intelligible; they are the paths by which we can reach it” (Levinas [1972] 2006, pp. 18, 22). If we understand the intelligible as that shared by all meanings and in virtue of which they are meaningful, then according to the structuralist understanding of language—an important theoretical aspect of antihumanism—intelligibility consists of all the possible combinations of elements in a language system. As such, rather than more or less approximating an idea or essence which pre-exists them, culturally situated meanings reveal the different possible ways in which the elements of a system can be combined and, thus, it is only through a comparative study of these that one can reach the invariable rules stipulating all the possible relations between elements in a linguistic or social structure (Lévi-Strauss [1958] 1963, p. 295). For example, the meaning of motherhood is not an ahistorical essence, but is accessible by studying the various forms that maternal relations take in different societies to reveal the different possible structural combinations of the same invariable elements and relations.

This account of intelligibility allows for multiple expressions of being not oriented toward an ahistorical essence against which they can be measured (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 18). However, implicit

⁸ In this section, I consider Levinas's humanism in relation to structuralism, rather than Heideggerian ontology, since the latter has received significant scholarly attention, for example in Richard Cohen's introduction to *Humanism of the Other*. Levinas's relation to structuralism has been comparatively neglected. Levy (2006) is an exception, but his account is rather brief and formal.

⁹ See (Lévi-Strauss [1958] 1963) for more on structuralist linguistics, p. 70.

privilege is nonetheless granted to “economic structures” broadly understood, which are regarded as universal (p. 21). Despite apparent plurality, culturally specific significations are hereby in fact reduced to economic functions. Lévi-Strauss ([1958] 1963) understood economy in this broad sense as encompassing “the fields of kinship, economics, and linguistics” that are all “forms of communication which are on a different scale” being, respectively, “communication of women, communication of goods and services, [and] communication of messages” (p. 296). Furthermore, while social relations and social structures are not equivalent, and the latter are models based on the former, structures are considered more reliable for the study of social relations than the interpretations and self-descriptions of those participating in these relations. “For conscious models”, the meaning and purpose that individuals attribute to their actions and interactions, “which are usually known as ‘norms’ . . . do not intend to explain the phenomena but to perpetuate them” (p. 281). This general insight from social anthropology receives other interpretations—in Lacanian psychoanalysis and Althusserian Marxism, for example—which also privilege structural over subjective meaning. Antihumanism, therefore, retains the possibility of a form of universalism—that of structures of intelligibility—but its sense is completely different from that of humanist universalism. For Levinas, the difference is that “[h]enceforth, the subject is eliminated from the order of reasons” (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 56).

Lévi-Strauss ([1958] 1963) makes it quite clear that structuralism deals with unconscious structures, the less consciously interpreted the better (p. 281). Thus, there is no more reason to assume that the antihumanist social scientist behaves differently toward others than there is to think that the structuralist linguist, who understands language in terms of an unconscious structure of relations between phonemes, will speak differently to his children. So, what precisely is the danger that Levinas sees in these accounts of social reality? It seems to me that his concern is twofold. Firstly, in their attempt to avoid reducing the other culture’s categories to their own, the structuralist social sciences subordinate both their own and the other’s self-understanding to anonymous structures. Secondly, as a consequence of the above, there is no Archimedean point from which to judge cultural expressions; we can only explain, not judge, on the basis of a structural understanding. Although this renders the relation between cultures symmetrical, rather than asymmetrically privileging the culture of the social scientist, it is not thereby exempt from potential complicity in violence, as I demonstrate below.

Levinas is concerned with what the contemporary structuralist anthropologist Descola (2013) calls the relation between the “vernacular” and “structural” understanding of social practices and normative experience (p. 110). For Levinas, however, it is particularly important to demonstrate how culturally specific meanings, norms, and reasons for action gain the weight which makes us so attached to them and which leads common sense to resist structural explanations. He is, therefore, not concerned with the genesis of the content of the vernacular—the ontic in Heideggerian terms—but with whether our adherence to this ontic content is necessarily ontologically explicable, with notions such as *Geworfenheit*. This question regarding the gravity of cultural situatedness continues the themes of “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism” and Levinas’s intention to take the concreteness of human existence and its role in intelligibility seriously, while avoiding the fatality of an ontology which sees intelligibility as irrevocably tied to its cultural and historical context.

Levinas first engages antihumanism on the question of the relationship between violence and universalism. He recognizes both the critical and constructive moment of antihumanism; its critique of the violence of humanist universalism makes cultural plurality ontologically fundamental and allows for a sense of universality, albeit abstract and mathematical, that does not asymmetrically privilege a particular culture (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 19). Furthermore, it is clear that there is an affinity between how Levinas reads the antihumanist critique of violence and his own argument in the 1930s that racist violence cannot simply be understood in terms of the dominance of particularism over universalism. A critique of humanist universalism does not necessarily result in the rejection of all forms of universalism, but neither does the decision between particularism and universalism make the difference between violence and non-violence.

Levinas is now clearer on the specifics of the problem of universalism than he was in the 1930s. Universalism is not violent because a particular culture happens to usurp the status of the universal, either intentionally or through ignorance, but philosophical universalism is inherently implicated in the devaluation of cultural plurality and is, therefore, potentially complicit in violence. As Levinas puts it, the universalism which emerges with Plato necessarily “consists of depreciating purely historical cultures and in a certain way colonizing the world, beginning with the country where this revolutionary culture, this philosophy surpassing cultures, arises . . . ” (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 19). This account of the close relation between awareness of cultural plurality, on the one hand, and the emergence in Greece of philosophy as the pursuit of universal, ahistorical, and trans-cultural truth, on the other, closely resembles that given by Husserl late in his career.¹⁰

The latter part of the above quote, which characterizes philosophy as the pursuit of universal truth beyond all particular cultures, raises the question at the heart of the antihumanist critique of universality. Is the universal philosophy that emerges in Greece and develops in Europe equally hostile to its own and to foreign cultures? The various forms of antihumanism contest this self-understanding of philosophy. Philosophy, in its pursuit of universality, cannot shake off the particularities of the culture in which it emerges and develops. As soon as it articulates a universal conception of the subject as the source of intelligibility, supposedly disinterested humanism elevates an understanding of the human tied to a particular cultural context to the status of universal. As unintentional as it may be, the dual movement of universalist philosophy which both recognizes and devalues cultural plurality, is not restricted to thought but concretized in European colonization. Philosophy is, therefore, susceptible to complicity in violent European domination of the rest of the world, not because it simply fails to recognize cultural diversity, but because it mistakenly considers its devaluation of cultural plurality to apply equally to all cultures, including the one in which it originates. Thus far, Levinas agrees with the critics of universalism that “politics and an administration guided by the humanist ideal maintain the exploitation of man by man” (pp. 59–60).

The second point on which Levinas engages antihumanism is the question of the relationship between violence and ontological pluralism. If the universalism of traditional humanism amounts to a colonization of the universal by cultural particularities, then the anti-Platonism of antihumanism appears to offer a means of making philosophy less vulnerable to complicity in political violence. For Levinas, however, the equation of universalism with violence is as mistaken as the simple equation of violence and particularism he criticized in the 1930s. This is clear when we consider the political implications of antihumanist philosophy and social science, which Levinas expresses in relation to Lévi-Strauss:

The most recent, most daring and influential anthropology keeps multiple cultures on the same level. Thus, efforts at political decolonization are connected to an ontology, an idea of being interpreted from multiple multivocal cultural significations. And this multivocality of the sense of being, this essential disorientation, may well be the modern expression of atheism. (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 20)¹¹

The ontology based on the antihumanist understanding of intelligibility is tied to decolonization because of the evidence of cultural plurality, on the one hand, and the new global order that a recognition of that plurality hopes to bring about, on the other. While Levinas agrees with the critical aspect of antihumanism described above, he questions whether its positive emphasis on the cultural and historical situatedness of intelligibility is any less susceptible to violence. The idea that ontological pluralism is more secure against complicity in violence than humanist universalism relies on the assumption that “the multiplicity of cultures had always been rooted in the era of decolonization, as if

¹⁰ See the so-called “Vienna Lecture” of 1935 in (Husserl [1954] 1981), pp. 285–86.

¹¹ See Wolff (2009) for why Levinas has Lévi-Strauss, rather than Lévy-Bruhl on whom he wrote an earlier paper, in mind in this quote.

misunderstanding, war, and conquest did not flow just as naturally from the proximity of multiple expressions of being, the numerous assemblages or arrangements it takes in various civilizations" (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 23). In other words, it assumes that violence is univocal and always tied to universalizing tendencies in thought, which deny the significance of cultural plurality. Levinas's claim, on the contrary, is that violence is equivocal such that there is violence distinct from that perpetrated in the name of universalism. The risk for Levinas is a slide from multivocality to political cynicism or nihilism which may lead to either indifference or the ruthless pursuit of political realism without as much as a façade of universalism.

This is not simply a conservative attempt to salvage the universalism of philosophy and the West's ability to judge other cultures in the wake of ontological pluralism. Levinas clearly considers ontological disorientation equally, if not more, detrimental to the recently decolonized. As he puts it, "the world created by this saraband of countless equivalent cultures, each one justifying itself in its own context, is certainly dis-Occidentalized; however, it is also disoriented" (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 37). Dis-Occidentalization and disorientation are not equivalent, and Levinas's play on the words dis-Occidentalized and dis-Oriented suggests the global scope of his concern.¹² The history of decolonization demonstrates that it is all too easy for colonial powers to withdraw from their former colonies with little regard for the plight of the liberated population. In a world where international power relations are already skewed in favor of former colonial powers, the recently decolonized stand to suffer most when relations between peoples become a matter of calculated interest without reference to shared norms.

Violence cannot simply be ascribed to the West, the bourgeoisie, or whoever, blinded by the illusory universalism of their values, riding roughshod over others. Instead, contemporary nihilism and the violence to which it is susceptible results from having too keen eyes for others and the cultural situatedness of intelligibility; nihilism in this instance arises from an awareness of the surplus of values and not the absence of value. "Absurdity" is not nonsense but the "isolation of countless significations" or "multiplicity within pure indifference" (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 24). I find myself bound to certain values confronted with cultural others equally bound to their values, with no common measure between us. Now, one may argue that a common measure is provided by structuralist explanations of two divergent cultures' norms and values of kinship, for example, as two ways of configuring the terms and relations constitutive of the universal structure of kinship. However, the experience of value and the explanation of those values in terms of structures operate at different levels. The former is conscious and consists of the very fact that a person feels bound by these norms and will explain their actions in terms of them. Structures of intelligibility, on the other hand, are unconscious and do not form a part of a person's experience or the terms in which they account for their actions.

I am, therefore, confronted by my own values as both binding and seemingly arbitrary since I am not able to exhaustively justify them in cases of conflict, certainly not to those who have different values, but most likely not even to those who purportedly share my values. Faced with these three conditions—being bound, plurality, and undecidability—we realize, as Visker (2004) puts it, that "it is the values that have us rather than we who have the values" (p. 74). Or, as Levinas phrases a similar point, "[t]he death of God perhaps signifies only the possibility to reduce every value arousing an impulse to an impulse arousing a value" (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 123). In terms of its political consequences, this realization can lead to at least two violent political attitudes: what Simon Critchley calls the "active" and "passive" nihilism of contemporary politics (Critchley 2012, pp. 3–6). Active nihilism, which Critchley associates with terrorism and Levinas would attribute to National Socialism, responds to the plurality of values and the situatedness of intelligibility by forcefully universalizing their own through violence. The passive nihilist, of which the consumer is the archetype, responds to the plurality of values by retreating from the public sphere altogether. Thus, we are left in a situation

¹² This word play was brought to my attention by Wolff (2011, p. 126).

where either interest or indifference rules the day, and both are violent: the former directly perpetrating violence, the latter failing to intervene where violence occurs.

The question, which Levinas does not think antihumanism answers, is as follows: why “prefer words to war”, or to indifference, in a situation of ontological plurality (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 23)? Antihumanism accounts for the possibility but, unlike humanism, not for the normative force of this choice. In order to do so, Levinas argues that we must “distinguish *significations* in their cultural pluralism from the *sense*, orientation, and unity of being, the primordial event where all other procedures of thought and all the historical life of being are placed [my emphasis]” (p. 23). In other words, true recognition of cultural difference, which calls for both disinterestedness and non-indifference, requires “returning to Platonism in a new way” (p. 38). The novelty of this return is that it does not deny the validity of contemporary theories of situated intelligibility, nor does it reiterate the classical depreciation of historical cultures. Despite their anti-Platonism, antihumanist structural understandings of intelligibility risk reiterating the devaluation of cultural specificity as it shows itself in vernacular experience.

The Good beyond being is the Platonic notion Levinas repeatedly invokes. As we see below, this entails a notion of the Good predating consciousness and the will which, while having no positive content in itself, lends normative weight to conscious meanings and volitions. The privilege of proximity with the human other in Levinas’s humanism is connected with this conception of the Good, such that “it is not the concept ‘man’ which is at the basis of humanism; [but] it is the other [hu]man” (Levinas [1968] 1990b, p. 98). The antihumanism of the social sciences is more than a foil in Levinas’s argument. As argued above, he acknowledges the possibilities of cultural recognition that the critique of humanism foreshadows; however, he maintains that they cannot account for the normative weight of culturally specific meanings, nor for the normative force which drives us to respect and engage with other cultures rather than treating them with indifference or hostility (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 23).

To summarize, Levinas’s engagement with antihumanism is chiasmic in three ways. Firstly, on the essential question of violence, Levinas demonstrates an intersection between antihumanism and humanism. Neither universalism, purportedly blind to the particularities of culture, nor ontological pluralism extricate themselves from potential complicity in violence whether that be domination or indifference. Secondly, even though the antihumanist social sciences recognize that all meaning is culturally situated, by accounting for subjective and culturally situated meaning in terms of universal structures, they repeat the Platonist devaluation of particular cultures as they are lived. As such, the cultural situatedness into which we are thrown appears arbitrary and unjustifiable, a position which invites active and passive nihilism as much as it does respect. Thirdly, this reduction of the human being’s meaningful and normative experience of the world to an ideological or delusional dressing, which is nothing but the realization of certain structural possibilities, relies on an understanding of subjectivity as consciousness and volition. These chiasmi are constituted by the fact that antihumanism and the humanism it critiques share an understanding of subjectivity as consciousness—the difference being that the former affirms it as the primary source of intelligibility while the latter views it as derivative and ideological. As we see below, in order to go beyond the two chiasmi dealt with in this section and the previous, Levinas questions the primacy of political intelligibility—outlined in the first section of this paper—in his analysis of ethical subjectivity.

5. Beyond the Chiasmi

Levinas’s critique of intelligibility as conceived of by Heideggerian ontology and antihumanist structuralism seems to suggest that these positions are themselves in chiasmic relation to one another, since both presuppose that intelligibility is exclusively ontological, political, or relational. Furthermore, both Heideggerian ontology and antihumanist structuralism render our attachment to the vernacular arbitrary; we are thrown from nowhere and out of nothing into a meaningful horizontal world which is unjustified and could have been otherwise. While this makes the vernacular questionable, it is also disorienting. Given that there is no shared measure that mediates between culturally specific totalities

of being, the arbitrariness of situated intelligibility remains open to nihilism, fatalism, and violence. Levinas does not simply want to maintain the dignity of the culturally situated vernacular. On the contrary, it must be questionable for intercultural and interpersonal respect to be possible, but this questionability must be based on more than its arbitrariness. It is my view that Levinas's discussion of the relation between the ethical and political, as forms of intelligibility, in *Otherwise than Being* can be read as a way of going beyond these chiasmi by questioning the exclusivity of political, ontological, or relational intelligibility on which both Heideggerian ontology and structuralism rely. Levinas's account of subjectivity as an ethical relation prior to political intelligibility allows him to account for the weight of the vernacular by demonstrating that, prior to arbitrary situatedness in a meaningful world, there is an ethical relation to the other such that we are bound to culturally specific meanings by responsibility for the other beyond culture. As such, situated meaning is questionable, but "[s]uch a placing in question signifies not a fall into nothingness but responsibility for the other" (Levinas 1989, p. 243).

This approach turns the Heideggerian and antihumanist critiques of subjectivity against themselves and toward a "defense of subjectivity" (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 26).¹³ For both, the intelligibility of the world in which the subject finds itself is not its own doing but, as Critchley (1999) puts it, is "dependent upon prior structures (linguistic, ontological, socio-economic, unconscious, or whatever) outside of its conscious control" and, ultimately, on nothing, since our thrownness into these conditions is arbitrary (p. 67). This critique of subjectivity leaves us with a notion of human beings as exposed to "forces that command them unbeknown to themselves" and "defenseless against the illusions of its class and the fantasies of its latent neurosis" (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 21; Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 58). Levinas accepts this as the essence of ontological or political intelligibility but departs from the model which equates subjectivity and consciousness or will, presupposed by both antihumanism and the humanism it critiques (although the former denies, while the latter asserts, it as the source of intelligibility). Instead, Levinas argues that "consciousness, knowing of oneself by oneself, is not all there is to the notion of subjectivity", and that its meaning instead resides "as it were on the underside of the active ego" (Levinas [1974] 1998a, pp. 54, 102). He, therefore, radicalizes the idea of exposure to question whether antihumanism and Heideggerian ontology exhaust the interpretative possibilities opened by locating intelligibility elsewhere than subjectivity understood as consciousness. Even in the antihumanist critique of the subject, there is an opportunity for thinking subjectivity anew:

Modern anti-humanism, which denies the primacy that the human person, free and for itself, would have for the signification of being, is true over and beyond the reasons it gives itself. It clears the place for subjectivity positing itself in abnegation, in sacrifice, in a substitution that precedes the will . . . Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human. (Levinas [1974] 1998a, pp. 127–28)

Levinas's key insight is that the ontological—intelligibility understood as horizontal or worldly—does not exhaust the meaning of phenomenological subjectivity as essentially relational. He instead turns to the affective relation of "life in its very living" understood as "susceptibility" and "vulnerability" to the sensible or elemental (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 14). This turn toward life as it is lived is not an appeal to common sense, or the natural attitude in phenomenological idiom, which is already conditioned by structures of intelligibility operating behind the subject's back. Instead, Levinas understands "the search for the concrete" as calling for a specific form of the phenomenological reduction (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 28; Levinas [1974] 1998a, pp. 43–45). This allows for an analysis of embodied sensibility which does not interpret it as a moment of the *conatus*

¹³ While the "defense of subjectivity" in *Totality and Infinity* predates Levinas's critique of antihumanism and is primarily directed at Heidegger, in my view, there is sufficient continuity between these two critical engagements to warrant this label in both cases. See Gordon (2014) for the similarities between "totality" in Heidegger and "structure" in Lévi-Strauss.

essendi, along biological lines, or as a stepping stone for objectification, in order to demonstrate that the concrete is not situatedness in a horizontal world (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 72).

Sensibility, as explained in the first section of this paper, is a modality of relation prior to intentionality or *Dasein*. It consists of being exposed to or immersed in the “elemental”, the sensible medium that is “content without form” and which is not encountered like an object on a horizon (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 131). Being-in-the-world is primordially world-less or horizon-less immersion in this plenum which does not allow the temporal disjunction required for objectification. In contrast to (Heidegger [1927] 2008) analyses in *Being and Time*, our primordial way of being in the world is not manipulation but nourishment (pp. 95–107). The distinction between the ready-to-hand and present-at-hand overlooks the sensible as a distinct modality of relation where things are not used or contemplated. Rather, they are enjoyed, in sensibility, not as “product[s] of a synthesis” or as material for potential objectification, but as “qualities without support” and ends in themselves (Levinas [1947] 1978, p. 41; Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 188). The disjunction between ontological relationality—whether in Husserlian or Heideggerian guise—and sensibility as a *sui generis* modality of relation is evident when reflecting on descriptive speech; it is much more difficult to tell another not only *that* you spent an afternoon in the sun, but *how* it felt to have your skin basked in the golden warmth of its rays. Levinas’s radicalization of the phenomenological reduction focuses more intently on *how* sensibility is lived, revealing a residual commitment to *what* appears in other phenomenological accounts in which sensibility is related to a horizon (Levinas [1974] 1998a, pp. 43–45). Sensibility, therefore, undermines *Geworfenheit*—which I argued both Heideggerian ontology and antihumanist structuralism presupposes—to show that the situatedness into which we are thrown is not a horizontal and culturally specific world, but the sensible plenum without horizon.

If sensibility as a modality of relation provides a sense of subjectivity irreducible to the horizontality of intelligibility, why does Levinas privilege the ethical relation to the human other? Enjoyment remains carefree play between the same and the otherness of the sensible—the automatism or complacency of the sensible subject, self-sufficient though dependent on nourishment (Levinas [1961] 1969, pp. 163–64). The distinction between exposure as enjoyment of the otherness of the sensible and as proximity to the human other—both relations at the level of sensibility—can be made in terms of complacency and non-complacency with proximity interrupting the complacency of enjoyment (p. 163). This interruption by the human other is evident in the “most common social experience”, the shame for indifference which prompts Levinas to ask, “[w]here does the shock come from, when I pass by, indifferent, under the gaze of the other?” (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 29). If my conscious indifference, my reasonable choice not to engage with the other because we do not know one another and there are no outstanding debts between us, nonetheless makes me feel accused and ashamed when I pass them by in silence, then there must be non-indifference prior to consciousness and will. However, to analyze this antecedent relation to the other, which is always in place and is hinted at by common social experiences like the above, the phenomenological reduction to sensibility prior to horizontal phenomenality must be maintained.

Proximity to the human other is an asymmetrical relation at the level of sensibility, prior to consciousness. In proximity, the subject is stripped of the garments of social identity, singularized in its exposure to the human other who “calls for the irreplaceable singularity that lies in me, by accusing this ego, reducing it, in the accusative, to itself” as “one absolved from every relationship, every game, literally *without a situation*, without a dwelling place, expelled from everywhere and from itself [my emphasis]” (Levinas [1974] 1998a, pp. 146, 153). The primordial sense of subjectivity is responsibility to and for the other in proximity, since it is in this situation that the subject is singularized, a condition which is necessary for responsibility to be more than a function of one’s social role or identity (p. 114). If the sense of responsibility, and not only the particular content of responsibilities, was dependent on one’s social role or identity, then anyone capable of occupying the same role could replace me in my responsibility. This rethinking of subjectivity as relationality in terms of exposure involving “the suspension of all *reference*”—which, as we saw above, is central to relational models of

intelligibility—has immediate political implications as “a violent tearing loose from the determining order of nature and social structure . . . ” (Levinas [1987] 1993, p. 117). Proximity, the impossibility of indifference, reveals responsibility for the other *qua* absolute other with “no cultural ornament”, thus recuperating humanism’s conception of the dignity of the human being *qua* human, without reference to their context, while avoiding the liberal idealist move of positing a subject transcending embodiment and temporality (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 32). Proximity is essentially embodied—and temporal as we see below—and is not perception, axiological intentionality, nor disclosure on the basis of mood, but an incarnate “shuddering of the human quite different from cognition” which is “like a cellular irritability . . . the impossibility of being silent” (Levinas [1974] 1998a, pp. 87, 143). Thus, in proximity as sensible relation to the other, “supreme abstractness and the supreme concreteness” coincide (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 59).

Does Levinas’s account of the ethical not also devalue culturally situated meaning or the vernacular? As I argued above, he criticizes antihumanism for doing just this and I maintain that this criticism equally applies to Heideggerian ontology because both of these views consider cultural situatedness arbitrary. If the ethical understood as sensible proximity to the other is prior to the ontological—to social roles, political identities, and power—the essential question for a Levinasian account of the political order of meaning is how to bring these ontological elements back into play and show how their sense is altered by the ethical. As explained above, this is not important because of some inherent dignity of the vernacular, but because the arbitrariness of situatedness leaves open the possibility of nihilism and fatalism, both of which are susceptible to violence. Levinas must, thus, show both that culturally specific meaning is questionable, and that this questionability does not lead to either active or passive nihilism.

In my view, the solution lies in Levinas’s account of the temporality of the ethical which allows us to make sense of his claim that the third party—which accounts for the passage from the asymmetry and immediacy of the ethical to the symmetry and mediation of the political—is already at work in proximity itself. Levinas rightly speaks of proximity as scandalous since his descriptions of this sensible responsiveness to the other are indeed outrageous to thought which does not recognize the reversal of interestedness in sensibility: answer without prior question, debt preceding a loan, obedience preceding an order, accusation without fault (Levinas [1974] 1998a, pp. 87, 110, 113, 150). These formulations point to the strange temporality of proximity as a “sensitivity of the subject to a provocation that has never presented itself, but has struck traumatically” from an “unrepresentable past” (p. 144). In sensible proximity, the subject is affected by something that is not anticipated in protention or captured by retention, an affect that passes absolutely, is not objectified or identified, and is irrecoverable in memory (pp. 50, 102).

The traumatic temporality of proximity means that the subject as active and knowing consciousness is never contemporary with proximity. The other *qua* other has always already passed, and the present, where the phenomenal other is encountered on a horizon, is, therefore, always already disturbed by the “trace” of this passing in relation to which consciousness is passive—not in the sense opposed to active, but radically passive in the sense of being unable not to react (p. 100). Proximity is antecedent to consciousness or *Dasein*, but, in the wake of the other’s passing the reduced ethical subject as “a non-quiddity, no one”, is nonetheless “clothed with purely borrowed being, which masks its nameless singularity by conferring on it a role” (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 106). We are not thrown into existence and the borrowed robes of being—into consciousness or *Dasein* as situated intelligibility—out of nothingness, but as if created with a prior non-indifference to the other.¹⁴ Thrownness is sufficient to account for the contingency of cultural situatedness, but does not prevent me from blindly defending situated identity or refusing to answer for the crimes committed in its name or against it. Because consciousness is in the wake of proximity, Levinas can claim that the “third party” is already involved

¹⁴ See (Levinas [1961] 1969) for creation, pp. 293–94.

in the ethical relation (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 158; Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 213). In everyday life, without the reduction to sensibility that makes Levinas's analyses possible, I always encounter the other in a certain context, that is, in a world rendered meaningful by structures of political intelligibility (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 158). Yet, this mundane encounter with the other bears a trace of my prior non-indifference to the other; such consciousness never encounters the other as another object, not even a special kind of object. Ethical intelligibility, which in proximity precedes consciousness and political intelligibility, avoids both positing a subject beyond all situatedness as the basis of *political* or *ontological* intelligibility (liberal idealism) and the reduction of intelligibility to an arbitrary expression of structural possibilities or the equally arbitrary "there" of *Dasein*:

In the face to face, the *I* has *neither* the privileged position of the subject *nor* the position of the thing defined by its place in the system; it is apology, discourse *pro domo*, but discourse of justification before the Other. (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 293)

With the "third party", there is a "problem" and a "question" since I have to navigate between my role, according to my political position, and my responsibility, as exposed to the other (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 157). Thus, the third party is not an empirical third person but "the very fact of consciousness", the fact that I am always in the wake of proximity with the other, and both the other and I play a social role and claim a political identity (p. 158). Although not replacing political intelligibility, ethical intelligibility accounts for its gravity—which antihumanism fails to do—without that gravity being explained in terms of the fatality of thrownness as Heideggerian ontology does. Proximity, as ethical intelligibility, delivers on the goal of Levinas's return to Platonism; it allows a distinction between signification, as situated ontological intelligibility, and sense, as orientation or weight (Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 23). As the above quote suggests, I speak for my own house (*pro domo*); I must justify and critique, if necessary, denounce, my cultural situatedness and social role, since these are not themselves the source of my responsibility. The vernacular is questionable. However, because this questionability is not based on the arbitrariness of *Geworfenheit*, I can neither blindly confirm my political identity nor refuse to answer for it; neither passive nor active nihilism is justifiable. Similarly, I must consider the third party precisely because of "the extra-ordinary *commitment of the Other to the third party* [my emphasis]" (p. 161). I interpret this to mean that the other is committed to their role and social identity, the only things in the other capable of suggesting others beside the other. This means that the third party is involved only when we are no longer operating under the reduction to sensibility.¹⁵ Therefore, my responsibility for the other *qua* other is responsibility for, but not in virtue of, their political, cultural, linguistic, and other identities. As such, the ethical does not turn me away from the structures and roles that characterize everyday political existence, but toward them in an altered modality which gives them weight:

The will is free to assume this responsibility in whatever sense it likes; it is not free to refuse this responsibility itself; it is not free to ignore the meaningful world into which the face of the other has introduced it. (Levinas [1961] 1969, pp. 218–19)

Living in the wake of proximity, I am weighed down by my political identity not as by bonds of fate, but by the commitment of responsibility. The difference between the alterity of the other in proximity and the alterity at work in sensibility or enjoyment is precisely the fact that proximity knots together the sensible and the political in this manner. The face, unlike the elements enjoyed, "abide[s] both in representation and in proximity", is "both comparable and incomparable", "between transcendence and visibility/invisibility", "phenomenon", and "face" (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 154; p. 158; Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 31). My reading of the third, not as the third other for whom the other

¹⁵ My interpretation of the third party departs from the orthodox position in Levinas scholarship. For an example of that interpretation, see Bernasconi (1999). The closest reading to my own is that of Horowitz (2008).

and I are also responsible, but as the third person perspective which is always involved in my mundane encounter with the other, has the advantage of generating a sense of political responsibility which accounts for political and cultural identity in an altered manner rather than discounting them. In my view, this reading provides a reasonable explanation for how the third is present in proximity, because the reduction to sensibility has been lifted and the phenomenal appearance of the other suggests others beside them. If we understand the third party as the subject's infinite obligation to all others beside the other in their ethical nudity, then it is difficult to see how the third party is present in proximity or how one can explain the other's commitment to the third party, since there is no *reference* prior to consciousness.

It is significant to note that Levinas himself must go beyond the reduction to the sensible in order to explain how the scandalous descriptions of proximity can furnish the sense of dignified terms like "ethics" and "responsibility". For Levinas, proximity is properly called ethical not despite these scandalous formulations, but because of them. The traumatic temporality of proximity, whereby something has already entered consciousness before it was prepared for it, warrants the application of ethical language. At this point, where Levinas's argument seems most scandalous to philosophy, he appeals to the tradition, specifically to a modified understanding of the Platonic conception of the Good:

If ethical terms arise in our discourse, before the terms of freedom and non-freedom, it is because before the bipolarity of good and evil presented to choice, the subject finds himself committed to the Good in the very passivity of supporting . . . The Good is before being. (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 122)

For Levinas, Plato's claim that human existence is oriented by the Good is concretized by the genesis of the weight of the ontological in the scandalous exposure of the ethical. This distances his understanding of the ethical from modern philosophy's attempt to ground ethics in freedom, while hearkening back to the classical conception of the Good that is not chosen, but to which the will is always already oriented.¹⁶ It is worth a wager that, without this Platonic inheritance, the phenomenology of proximity would not sustain the ethical meaning Levinas gives it. A similar point applies to Levinas's use of the word God, such as when he refers to God's indirect revelation in him who "hath no form nor comeliness", such that "when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" (Isaiah 53:2 KJV; Levinas [1972] 2006, p. 33). His account of the ethical, therefore, combines features of both the Good beyond being—commitment prior to will—and the revelation of God in the other human being—commitment to what is undesirable because not yet phenomenal. It is necessary to acknowledge this reliance on the tradition and the tension between the purely phenomenological and the hermeneutical aspects of his account of ethical subjectivity. As Ernst Wolff (2011) puts it, perhaps the most we can claim, while strictly maintaining the reduction to the sensible and thereby excluding the above considerations of philosophical and religious tradition, is that the alterity of the other is a "hieroglyph", that is "something of which one could be quite sure that it carries a significance, but of which it is impossible to say what that meaning is" (p. 168).¹⁷

To hesitate at such a thought, given Levinas's appeal to the traditional ethical language of philosophy and religion, is not to deny the critical significance of Levinas's analyses of sensibility. Instead it shows that the ethical is not as opposed to the political—which includes traditional ways of thinking about and justifying one's actions—as it seems. Rather than denying culturally specific forms of meaning, the ethical gives weight to the vernacular and traditional which, while leaving them questionable, ties the subject to the task of such questioning. As we saw above, it was the arbitrariness of our situatedness, which, in different ways in both antihumanism and Heideggerian ontology, leads to potential violence. In Levinas's alternative view, although these culturally specific conditions of

¹⁶ For a discussion of the ethical in relation to modern and ancient moral thought, see Bernasconi (1990).

¹⁷ Badiou (2001), who is critical of Levinasian ethics, makes a similar point, p. 21.

intelligibility are unchosen and arbitrary, our prior sensible exposure to the other means that neither passive nor active nihilism is thereby justified; we are responsible for our unchosen situation because of the unchosen undoing of all situatedness in proximity. We are, therefore, answerable for our political identity, though not in virtue of that identity or that of the other, but in virtue of our responsibility as subject prior to identity. Levinas, thus, finds a way of integrating the cultural on the basis of absolute alterity which accounts for “difference that is also non-indifference” (Levinas [1974] 1998a, p. 145).

6. Conclusions

I identified two chiasmi—shared presuppositions developed in different directions—between liberalism and fascism, and between humanism and antihumanism, based on Levinas’s reading of these seemingly opposed political traditions. The relation between liberalism and fascism is chiasmic because the latter’s fatal embrace of embodied and historical situatedness as essential to intelligibility—philosophically articulated in Heideggerian ontology—relies on the dualism the former establishes between the disembodied and ahistorical freedom of the subject at the basis of intelligibility and the blind immanence of embodiment. Humanism and antihumanism are in chiasmic relation when it comes to their treatment of the Platonic devaluation of historical cultures. Although the latter purportedly affirms the equal dignity of all cultures, it conceives of vernacular experience as an arbitrary configuration of the possibilities of anonymous structures where intelligibility ultimately resides, thus repeating such a devaluation.

In addition to these two chiasmi, I identified a third chiasmus between Heideggerian ontology and antihumanist structuralism themselves. Both of these ultimately rely on some notion akin to thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) in order to explain the situatedness of human beings. In so doing, they render culturally specific meaning questionable on the basis of its arbitrariness; yet, this does not preclude—but in fact invites—nihilism and fatalism. Levinas sees the need to step beyond this third chiasmus in order to account for the questionability of culturally specific meaning while reducing the risk of nihilism. His discussion of the relation between ethical and political intelligibility, particularly in *Otherwise than Being*, can, therefore, be read as a response to the above chiasmi. Because of the way that proximity ties together ethical and political (or ontological) intelligibility, he can account for the weight of culturally specific meaning in terms other than the arbitrariness of *Geworfenheit*. Situated meaning cannot be abdicated, not because I am tragically thrown in a situation, but because, in the wake of proximity, I am answerable for it. Even if, with the lifting of the reduction and the presence of the third, there are others who share an identity with me, the trace of proximity means that I cannot rest content in leaving my responsibility to them.

Whether this is a successful response to these chiasmi is a question which exceeds the bounds of this paper. It is possible that, despite showing that the weight of cultural situatedness is based on responsibility—its questionability, therefore, not being arbitrariness which invites nihilism—Levinas does not completely overcome a similar risk. The political subject finds itself in the wake of proximity amidst institutions and traditions for dealing with the demands of others. And while the trace of proximity means that it cannot blindly follow the injunctions of these institutions, the only criterion for departing from them seems to be the choice of the individual. The individual can follow the norms prescribed by these institutions or critique them as inadequate to respond to the other, but there are no criteria for this choice. This is problematic since the threat raised by Heideggerian ontology and structuralist antihumanism was precisely that the individual’s culturally specific situation is arbitrary in a manner that invites active and passive nihilism. The most we can say, it seems to me, is that the questionability of this situatedness no longer allows us to be complacent or dogmatic; it invites bad conscience and vigilance because of the priority of the ethical. Whether this is satisfactory remains an open question.

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