Article

"I'm a Pacifist": Peace in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas

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Abstract: This paper develops and examines the idea and importance of peace in the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, starting from an anecdote regarding his parody of Ernst Cassirer during a student performance in Davos. It examines Levinas's stated views on peace from across his career, arguing Levinas should be viewed as a pacifist, albeit a highly original one, who shows that political structures are characterized by violence but reveal their origins in the radical peace of the face-to-face encounter.

Keywords: Levinas; peace; politics; face; Other; Davos; state

At the 2018 Levinas Philosophy Summer Seminar, the most heated discussion was elicited by Levinas's response, in a 1992 interview with Roger Pol-Droit, to a question about whether he had ever told Martin Heidegger his conviction that the latter's "absence of concern for the other" and commitment to Nazism were related. Rather than answering directly, Levinas recalled a student skit at the end of the 1929 seminar at Davos in which he had satirized Ernst Cassirer, Heidegger's interlocutor, repeatedly declaring in Cassirer's voice, "I'm a pacifist." Levinas claimed that he did so "to express Cassirer's non-combative and rather desolate attitude" (Levinas 2001b, pp. 186–87). We know that the memory of his performance later embarrassed Levinas, and he even expressed regret that he had failed to contact and apologize to Cassirer's widow during a trip to the United States (Malka 2006, p. 52). Did his younger self dismiss pacifism as a part of "the thinking inspired by Kant and the Enlightenment heritage which Cassirer principally represented" (Levinas 2001b, p. 187)? Did he wish, in retrospect, to have made a forceful argument in favor of pacifism to Heidegger's face? Did he regret not only his mocking of the master, but also his failure to defend Cassirer's humanism against Heidegger's existentialism and incipient Nazism? The meaning of the event changed with time for Levinas himself. Though the mature Levinas spoke of his youthful performance with shame, he also admitted that he "did not even pity Cassirer" at the time of the performance (Levinas 2001a, p. 189). The printing of this anecdote appears calculated to make it even more ambiguous. The reminiscence and the interview terminate simultaneously in an ellipsis, as though Levinas's voice faded away without concluding.[1] The story raises and fails to answer central questions regarding both Levinas's commitments and his philosophy: Should we consider Levinas a pacifist? What would it mean to be pacifist, according to the philosophy of Levinas?

In what follows, I shall argue that Levinas should indeed be considered a pacifist, albeit of an original and, in the literal sense, radical kind, because he returns beyond the struggle and contestation which much of the western philosophical tradition takes to be fundamental, to its basis in a

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[1] The English text I am using (Levinas 2001b) was first presented as an "Interview with Roger-Pol Droit" (Levinas 1994c). This is a translation of "Entretiens avec Roger-Pol Droit" (Levinas 1994b). I have been unable to obtain a facsimile of the original printing in *Le Monde*.

fundamentally peaceful ethics. Responding to the rise of the Nazi party in Germany prior to the second world war, Levinas remarks that "It is not a particular dogma concerning democracy, parliamentary government, dictatorial regime, or religious politics that is in question. It is the very humanity of man" (Levinas 1990b, p. 71). His rejection of Nazism is not simply a response to its anti-semitism, though he was destined to experience this anti-semitism first-hand as a prisoner of war and then, upon his release, to mourn his family, victims of the Shoah in Lithuania (Malka 2006, p. 80). The young Levinas recognized the error of Nazism in the priority which it gives to struggle and contestation, before Nazism expressed itself in mass-murder. Against this tendency of western thought, Levinas champions not the neo-Kantianism of Cassirer, but a renewed emphasis on peaceful sociality, identified towards the end of *Totality and Infinity* with the relation to the face of the Other. "Like a shunt," he declares, "every social relation leads back to the presentation of the other to the same without the intermediary of any image or sign, solely by the expression of the face" (Levinas 1969, p. 213). One will note that this implies a very different definition of society than that of an impersonal set of norms, expectations and prejudices, which we generally draw upon to, say, blame society for some sort of social evil. In any case, Levinas's peaceful sociality may very well call for political engagement, which he never rejects but refuses to raise to a position superior to its own ethical premise. Despite its radicality, or perhaps because of it, Levinas's pacifism implies neither passivity nor a short-circuiting of the process of political struggle and debate. In the course of rejecting Simone Weil's philosophy and the Christian pacifism which informs it, he remarks that "the doctrine of non-violence has not stemmed the natural course towards violence displayed by a whole world over the last two thousand years" (Levinas 1990c, p. 138). Unlike many of those who call themselves pacifists, Levinas never denies the importance of self-defense and the state which allows it, but only because of the need to adjudicate between multiple others, each with her own claims on my powers and resources. This may even extend to having to attack one in order to defend another. Peter Atterton goes so far as to place Levinas within the just war tradition (Atterton 2002). I shall conclude with Levinas's rather ambivalent views towards both communism and liberalism. Levinas is not a pacifist in the popular sense, of one who rejects all warfare categorically. Rather than drawing on the Kantian heritage to make such a categorical claim, as Cassirer might, Levinas insists upon the importance of respect for the face of the Other.

Certainly, those who would enlist Levinas in the cause of pacifism can boast of little support from his biography. He expressed no regret for his service as a translator in French military intelligence in the second world war.[2] Unlike many of his intellectual contemporaries, he signally failed to become a spokesperson for nuclear disarmament, withdrawal from Algeria, the end of conscription, or any of the other causes usually associated with pacifism. He taught in Nanterre in May 1968, when the campus was the centre of a student uprising in which his friends and colleagues entangled themselves. Maurice Blanchot emerged from isolation to write in support of the student protesters, whereas Paul Ricoeur retreated into exile after trying to negotiate with them and suffering physical assault for his efforts. Levinas, on the other hand, seems to have studiously avoided taking part on either side (Lescourret 1994, p. 240). If pacifism is understood as a synecdoche for progressive politics, then Levinas appears to have displayed no interest in it.

Indeed, Levinas refused to develop a clear politics in general, in the sense of a committed polemical position regarding contemporary affairs. In another interview, he was asked pointedly "How do you tie your moral philosophy to the consideration of political questions?" and he responded with apparent exasperation: "Listen, I am a democrat. What more would you like me to say?" (Levinas 2001a, p. 195). Given the fascination of twentieth-century French thought with being *engagé*, Levinas's refusal of

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2　A letter from Raïssa Levinas to the French civil authorities when Levinas was a prisoner refers to him working in "the 2nd bureau of the headquarters of the 10th Reserve Army" (Malka 2006, p. 66). In French, "*dieuxième bureau*" indicates army intelligence, usually installed in a separate room of a unit headquarters from command or operations (*Collins Robert French Dictionary*, 7th ed., s.v. "deuxième").

what we normally consider political engagement constitutes a boldly counter-cultural gesture, but his gesture was more than counter-cultural. On the contrary, his unwillingness to become too closely engaged with specific political issues reflects a determination to maintain that "Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy" (Levinas 1969, p. 304). Ethics can in no way become subservient to the needs of a politics.

Nevertheless, Levinas is sometimes accused of using his philosophy to justify a political position. In a 1993 interview, he was asked by Shlomo Malka "isn't politics the very site of the encounter with the 'other,' and for the Israeli, isn't the 'other' above all the Palestinian?" To this he responded,

> My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbour, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you're for the other, you're for the neighbour. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong. (Levinas 1999, p. 294)

Rather than revealing a political position or, as Eisenstadt and Katz argue many critics assume, "an ethnic or national parochialism that violates the terms of his ethics" (Eisenstadt and Katz 2016, p. 9), this statement illustrates in tight detail Levinas's efforts to avoid making too close a connection between his philosophy and politics. The Other is not, he insists, simply or even principally a political opponent. The term "neighbor" might suggest the opposite, that the Other is a member of a sociological in-group. One thinks of how neighborhoods map unto sectarian divisions in divided cities, such as Belfast or Beirut. The word which Seán Hand translates as "neighbor," however, is not "voisin," which can imply spatial proximity or resemblance, but "prochain," which translates more literally as "next" as in "the next person" (Levinas and Finkielkraut 1983, p. 5). French Bible translations generally use "prochain" where an English translation would use "neighbor." It therefore carries Biblical overtones of ethical imperative. *Le Petit Robert* offers a rather ironic example from the Marquis de Sade, who borrows Biblical language to denounce it: "Le système de l'amour du prochain est une chimère que nous devons au christianisme et non pas à la Nature" ("The system of the love of the neighbour is a chimera that we owe to Christianity and not to nature.") Similarly, the word translated as "kin" is "proche" which can mean "Parents, membres de la proche famille" or "voisin."[3] By saying that "L'autre, c'est le prochain, pas nécessairement le proche, mais le proche aussi" (Levinas and Finkielkraut 1983, p. 5), Levinas argues that the neighbor need neither be near to me, nor need be a family member, nor have any pre-existing relationship whatsoever, but can. Indeed, Levinas must declare in the same interview that a Jew being a neighbor to another Jew is even possible: "Mon peuple et mes proches, ce sont encore mes prochains," and thus fighting on behalf of the Jewish state is not necessarily a contradiction of his philosophy (Levinas and Finkielkraut 1983, p. 4). One might translate this as "My people and those near me are still my neighbours" though Hand understandably prefers a less paradoxical-sounding formulation.[4] Levinas struggles in this interview to clarify what many of us have had to explain to students or colleagues (especially those schooled in post-colonialism): the ethical Other is not necessarily a member of a different group, to be identified in national or ethnic terms. The Other is phenomenological, not categorical. Levinas denies Malka's assertion that politics would constitute "the very site of the encounter with the 'other'," as much as he denies that the Other is identifiable with Palestinian, Israeli or any other ethnic or national category. Rather than political struggle defining the Other, politics arises out of the need to choose between two Others. This can lead to paradox, as Levinas freely admits. One may have to choose between two neighbors, and "in alterity we can find an enemy" (Levinas 1989a, p. 294). Nevertheless, the relation with the Other (tantamount to peace) comes first, before being placed within the context of belligerence, or requiring justice and

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[3]　I am citing definitions from *Le Petit Robert*, throughout this paragraph.
[4]　"My people and my kin are still my neighbours" (Levinas 1989a, p. 292).

the state. Indeed, the state should be delimited: "there is also an ethical limit to this ethically necessary political existence" (ibid., p. 293). One may—perhaps one should—blame Levinas for failing to make a straightforward condemnation of the massacres of Palestinians which prompted this interview, though at the time of the interview, the criminality of the Israel Defense Forces was not yet clear (Eisenstadt and Katz 2016, p. 13). One might also blame him for taking the occasion to promulgate his broad philosophy of responsibility, independent of guilt. One cannot, however, blame him either for ignoring the political, or for producing a philosophy which would justify political oppression. One suspects that those who condemn his statement are operating under an *idée fixe*, according to which the concerns of power drive all thought. In other words, Levinas's critics have rejected his philosophy in advance.

Indeed, Levinas condemns the notion that political concerns dictate thought in the first sentences of *Totality and Infinity*, where he distinguishes his own philosophy from the extravagant respect accorded to war and violent contestation:

> Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality.
>
> Does not lucidity, the mind's openness upon the true, consist in catching sight of the permanent possibility of war? (Levinas 1969, p. 21)

Levinas recognizes a challenge in the philosophical praise of war, which scorns the pacifism of Cassirer, associated with earlier, Kantian, morality.[5] Within a few sentences, Levinas renders the reference to Heidegger all but explicit: "We do not need obscure fragments of Heraclitus to prove that being reveals itself as war to philosophical thought, that war does not only affect it as the most patent fact, but as the very patency, or the truth, of the real." The first page of *Totality and Infinity* reproduces the debates at Davos, with Levinas taking the Heideggerian position seriously, but keeping it at a critical distance. On the other hand, Levinas goes far beyond a condemnation of Heidegger's National Socialism when he identifies the veneration of war as a dominant strand of contemporary philosophy. As Levinas points out, "The art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means—politics—is henceforth enjoined as the very exercise of reason. Politics is opposed to morality, as philosophy to naïveté" (ibid.). On the whole, continental philosophy of the twentieth century has not welcomed the claims of peace. Indeed, both Carl Schmitt and Michel Foucault base their theories of politics on the ubiquity of war, reversing Carl von Clausewitz's dictum that war is the pursuit of politics by other means and instead making politics into war continued by other means. Moreover, each appears to do so independently of the other (Schmitt 1976, pp. 33–34; Foucault 1980, p. 65; Von Clausewitz 1993, p. 99). From a very different perspective, René Girard cites scripture to insist on the ubiquity of violence: "Christ revealed the truth that the prophets announced, namely, that of the violent foundation of all cultures" (Girard 2010, p. 105). To this unlikely alliance of two Nazi Catholic apostates, an atheist gay activist and a Roman Catholic convert, one must add a Jewish Algerian atheist. Critiquing Levinas's work in "Violence and Metaphysics," Jacques Derrida claims that the attempt of Levinas to describe the relation with the Other as peaceful cannot escape the ubiquity of language, which is itself violent:

> Peace, like silence, is the strange vocation of a language called outside itself by itself. But since *finite* silence is also a medium of violence, language can only indefinitely tend toward justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it. Violence against violence. *Economy* of violence. (Derrida 1978, pp. 145–46; his emphasis)

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5 Levinas seems to use the term morality in more than one way. When he says, at the conclusion of *Totality and Infinity,* that "Morality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy" (Levinas 1969, p. 304), he clearly means to indicate his own, radical ethics, though he creates a slight paradox by naming it in the same way as the rather limited moral systems which would be a mere branch of philosophy. At this point, however, near the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, he seems to mean specifically the nineteenth-century morality embraced by philosophers such as Cassirer and attacked by Heidegger.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of each philosopher's influence on the other, it suffices to notice that Derrida argues for the ubiquity of struggle and violent contestation, which he ascribes to language. To many of the twentieth century's foremost continental thinkers, even those who read Levinas and even while actively engaged in reading his philosophy, claims for the priority of peace appear as dangerous delusions, distractions or obfuscations of a world whose reality is war.

Levinas rejects such philosophies of power, as he calls them. He claims that ontology reduces the other, rather than responding to her. It does so through "Thematization and conceptualization," which "are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other." As a result, "Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. It issues in the State and in the non-violence of the totality, without securing itself against the violence from which this non-violence lives, and which appears in the tyranny of the State" (Levinas 1969, p. 46). Insofar as peace would represent a totalizing statism, Levinas opposes it. He proceeds to show how Heidegger's praise of agriculture and return to the pre-Socratics fails to break with such a philosophy of power, but Levinas also finds the philosophy of power earlier, in Edmund Husserl's phenomenology, when he declares that "To know amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity" (ibid., p. 44). To Levinas, even knowing an object can already be violent, if such knowledge amounts to an "action in which one acts as if one were alone to act" (Levinas 1990a, p. 6; Sohn 2014, pp. 27–28). Levinas finds a rejection of alterity at the very roots of western thought: "This primacy of the same was Socrates's teaching" (Levinas 1969, p. 43). Gilles Hanus, on the other hand, identifies the opponent of Levinas's pacifism as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: "Cherchant à penser la totalité étatique, Hegel formule exactement ce à quoi Levinas cherche à échapper. L'État est le Tout" ("Attempting to think the totality of the state, Hegel formulates exactly what Levinas attempts to escape. The State is Everything") (Hanus 2015, p. 52). Atterton remarks even more broadly that "The theory that war is original has long been upheld in one form or another in the Western tradition of philosophy, from Heraclitus and Callicles to Machiavelli and Hobbes, to Hegel and nineteenth century liberalism (not to forget Nietzsche)" (Atterton 1992, p. 59). Refusing the priority of war, struggle and power, Levinas places himself in opposition not only to Heidegger's Nazism, but also to Heidegger's and Husserl's phenomenology, the earlier Hegelian phenomenology, both Socrates and the pre-Socratics, and much of the western philosophical tradition in general. Levinas's pacifism is radical, not in the sense that it supports some sort of counter-cultural social agenda or activist cause, but in the more literal sense that it goes to the roots of western thought.

As Levinas's references to how ontology achieves "the non-violence of the totality" would indicate, the tradition against which he opposes himself also entertains ideas of peace. "Philosophers," Levinas notes, "deduce a final peace from the reason that plays out its stakes in ancient and present-day wars; they found morality on politics" (Levinas 1969, p. 22). Levinas himself, on the other hand, looks forward to a time "when the eschatology of messianic peace will have come to superpose itself upon the ontology of war" (Levinas 1969, p. 22). This is not to say that Levinas procrastinates peace to some sort of *parousia*, which, in any case, would be a Christian concept. On the contrary, the peace he does champion, as I shall show, has the immediacy of the face-to-face. He expands upon the opposition between "The peace of empires" which "rests on war" and this "messianic peace" (ibid.) in the 1984 essay "Peace and Proximity". Here, however, Levinas draws his major distinction between European peace, derived from Greek ideas, and Jewish peace, derived from Biblical teaching. The former Levinas characterizes as "Peace on the basis of the Truth—on the basis of the truth of a knowledge where, instead of opposing itself, the diverse agrees with itself and unites; where the stranger is assimilated; where the other is reconciled with the identity of the identical in everyone" (Levinas 1996, p. 162). This peace, Levinas argues, falls into contradiction when its universalism becomes imperialism—indeed, rival imperialisms threatening in the Cold War to destroy the Earth itself. He notes in a Talmudic exegesis that "a Europe seeking itself, a universe established between men and nations and heavens and earth" is also "a Europe forever anxious without peace, frightened by its dreams and its weapons" (Levinas 1999, p. 97). The culture founded in this peace cannot

recognize itself in its expressions, becoming increasingly contradictory "up to the supreme paradox where the defense of the human and its rights is perverted into Stalinism" (Levinas 1996, p. 163). Levinas not only places himself in opposition to a western philosophical tradition that privileges war, nor merely shows that such a philosophical tradition entertains notions of peace, but also declares that such an idea of peace is fundamentally flawed. Though he had not yet officially converted to Nazism, Heidegger was already, at the time of Davos, proclaiming violence as a principle of hermeneutics: "In order to wring from what the words say, what it is they want to say, every interpretation must necessarily use violence" (Gordon 2010, p. 131). On the other hand, Cassirer's pacifism was not nearly pacifist enough. It is not merely that Cassirer lost the debate to Heidegger at Davos, or that Heidegger's ontological phenomenology came to displace Cassirer's Neo-Kantianism, but that even the pacifism of the western tradition, which Cassirer represented in his thought and person, perverts itself into militarism.

Against both the militarist and the pacifist traditions which Levinas identifies in western thought, he proposes, especially towards the conclusion of *Totality and Infinity*, a positive peace. The face, he argues, "is preeminently nonviolence, for instead of offending my freedom it calls it to responsibility and founds it. As non-violence it nonetheless maintains the plurality of the same and the other. It is peace" (Levinas 1969, p. 203). Identifying peace with the face, it need hardly be said, identifies it with the phenomenon central to Levinas's mature philosophy. "The opposition of the face," he says elsewhere, "is a pacific opposition, but one where peace is not a suspended war or a violence simply contained" (Levinas 1987b, p. 19). The relationship is explained in a longer passage on the penultimate page of *Totality and Infinity*, which we may take to provide a conclusion to Levinas's first *magnus opus*:

> The unity of plurality is peace, and not the coherence of the elements that constitute plurality. Peace therefore cannot be identified with the end of combats that cease for want of combatants, by the defeat of some and the victory of the others, that is, with cemeteries or future universal empires. Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism. (Levinas 1969, p. 306)

Levinas defines peace as the relationship of desire and goodness, and distinguishes it from the Kantian pacifism which would reduce both self and other to elements of the same. Levinas's peace is not the graveyard about which Immanuel Kant jokes at the beginning of *On Perpetual Peace*, nor is it the rational and universal program which Kant sketches in the articles which follow (Kant 2015, p. 53). Levinas refers to Cassirer only twice (Cohen 2006, p. xv), but here he distinguishes his own praise of peace from the Neo-Kantianism which as a young man he mocked in his parody of Cassirer. Even if some program of political rationality were to be realized universally—for instance, in Kant's "Federation of Free States" (Kant 2015, p. 66)—it would not satisfy Levinas's understanding of peace, which finds its origin and expression in "non-indifference, the original sociality—goodness" (Levinas 1993b, p. 124). This relationship, Levinas specifies, contrasts with the struggle for power which we so often take to characterize all relations between people:

> The true essence of man is presented in his face, in which he is infinitely other than a violence like unto mine, opposed to mine and hostile, already at grips with mine in a historical world where we participate in the same system. He arrests and paralyzes my violence by his call, which does not do violence, and comes from on high. (Levinas 1969, pp. 290–91)

Where we usually think of social organization as a balancing of forces, or as an organization and direction of violence towards unity, Levinas proposes that sociality and hence peace should be understood as the opposite of violence. For the "Harsh reality" at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity* which, Levinas exclaims, "sounds like a pleonasm!" (Levinas 1969, p. 21), we may substitute the peaceful sociality with which it ends, and which also might be understood as a pleonasm.

So radical is Levinas's break with the tradition which prioritizes war that it tends to confuse his critics. Derrida's response may be understood as a conservative effort on behalf of the philosophical

tradition, to return violence to priority. Even more so might Jason Caro's admittedly polemical criticism, which sets out to reveal "the unsaid politics underlying [Levinas's] ethics" (Caro 2018, p. 1). The critics may draw support, however, from the fact that Levinas allows room for struggle, up to and including war. In his 1982 interview cited above, Levinas recognized that "in alterity we can find an enemy" (Levinas 1999, p. 294). Some faces may actually have to be opposed, may be adjudged to be enemies. This is not a departure, however, from his early philosophy. In "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," first published in 1957, Levinas first establishes the possibility of the Other being an opponent in a power struggle, before establishing his ethical claim:

> To be sure, the other is exposed to all my powers, succumbs to all my ruses, all my crimes. Or he resists me with all his force and all the unpredictable resources of his own freedom. I measure myself against him. But he can also—and here is where he presents me his face—oppose himself to me beyond all measure, with the total uncoveredness and nakedness of his defenseless eyes, the straightforwardness, the absolute frankness of his gaze. (Levinas 1987c, p. 55)

By the time of writing *Otherwise than Being*, however, Levinas appears to have gone further than this, talking of how the self suffers "an interruption of essence, a disinterestedness imposed with a good violence" (Levinas 1998b, p. 43). He mentions earlier that the Good, which defeats representation, "being Good, . . . redeems the violence of its alterity, even if the subject has to suffer through the augmentation of this ever more demanding violence" (Levinas 1998b, p. 15). The use of the term "violence" appears to have changed. Does this vitiate the relationship between the Other and peace, established at the conclusion of *Totality and Infinity*?

I think not. To return to "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," Levinas specifies that the resistance of the face is not "real":

> If the resistance to murder, inscribed on a face, were not ethical, but real, we would have access to a reality that is very weak or very strong. It perhaps would block our will. The will would be judged unreasonable and arbitrary. But we would not have access to an exterior being, to what one absolutely can neither take in nor possess, where our freedom renounces its imperialism proper to the ego, where it is found to be not only arbitrary, but unjust. (Levinas 1987c, p. 55)

Murder is not physically impossible in Levinas's philosophy, but it is ethically impossible. Rather than describing the approach of the Other as violent because it is a physical force, Levinas describes it as violent because it is unbidden. It violates the self's apparent self-mastery. Throughout his career, Levinas uses the term "violence" in two different ways. At the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes of "the violence which, for a mind, consists in welcoming a being to which it is inadequate" (Levinas 1969, p. 25). This violence of the Other therefore shows itself to be quite different from the violence of war which, Levinas writes four pages earlier in *Totality and Infinity*, "does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same" (ibid., p. 21). Levinas acknowledges that the face can lead to conflict, even that it holds an inevitable tendency towards conflict, but insists that this is not its primary meaning. He admits that

> The face threatens the eventuality of a struggle, but this threat does not exhaust the epiphany of infinity, does not formulate its first word. War presupposes peace, the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other; it does not represent the first event of the encounter. (Levinas 1969, p. 199)

At least once, Levinas claims that the other encountered violently in war has no face, for "I do not see the freedom with which I struggle, but throw myself against it blindly" (Levinas 1987b, p. 19). The violence of the Other, by contrast to that of the opponent in combat, is an undermining of one's own claims, for which one would fight. It imposes a passivity, in the sense that it cannot be a matter

of intention or agency, but not in the sense that it cripples us from action in the world, as certain types of pacifism might. The violence of the Other is, in many ways, the inverse of the violence which Levinas finds in the western tradition, in all of its various philosophies of power. The latter implies the centrality of war, whereas the former offers the possibility of peace.

Instead of asking how we move from war to peace, Levinas asks how radical, messianic peace can nevertheless produce war. Insofar as politics can be defined as "The art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means" (Levinas 1969, p. 21), any practical, political peace would have to be at least potentially belligerent, simply to qualify as political. In "The State of Caesar and the State of David," he quotes Maimonides to the effect that "the Messianic City is not beyond politics" (Levinas 1994a, p. 183). Ethics itself calls for politics, when it calls for justice. Justice must have recourse "to politics, to its strategies and clever dealings" (Levinas 1993b, p. 123). Hence, Levinas by no means ignores the problem of politics, as Caro accuses him of doing (Caro 2018, p. 4). Levinas certainly believes in peace, a peace which would violate a world governed by war, but he does not make it otherworldly.

There is a practical reason to move towards the state, politics and even violence, in the need to judge between the claims of multiple others, as Levinas noted in the discussion following his presentation of "Ideology and Idealism" in Israel:

> When others enter, each of them external to myself, problems arise. Who is closest to me? Who is the Other? Perhaps something has already occurred between them. We must investigate carefully. Legal justice is required. There is need for a state. (Levinas 1989b, p. 247)

He makes a similar point in "Diachrony and Representation," presented in Ottawa: "Who, in this plurality, comes first? This is the time and place of the birth of the question: of the demand for justice!" (Levinas 1998a, p. 166). Justice enters with the third party: "it is the third man with which justice begins" (Levinas 1998b, p. 150). What remains to be seen is what relationship this justice has to the peace which Levinas finds in the relation to the Other. In "The Ego and the Totality," Levinas insists that justice "cannot resemble the intimate society, and it is not the emotion of love that constitutes it. The law has priority over charity" (Levinas 1987a, p. 33). He attempts to move from the enclosure of the couple to the third party, and hence from the immediacy of the face to the broader social relation, or also from love to justice. Similarly, in *Totality and Infinity*, he declares that "the personal relation is in the rigor of justice which judges me and not in love that excuses me" (Levinas 1969, p. 304). Elsewhere, he says that the word "love" is debased (Levinas 1998d, p. 103), but nevertheless uses it seriously in "Diachrony and Representation" (Levinas 1998a, p. 174). He thanked Jean-Luc Marion for inspiring him to return to the term, "peut-être sous votre influence, ou grâce à votre courage" (Levinas 1986, p. 75). It suffices here to note that Levinas for a time avoids talking of "love," because justice requires a relation with a third party, and the relation with the lover is exclusive. Justice, the state, and so forth are not direct expressions of the peace found in the face, at least not if we take the face to be an intimate relation, half of a couple. On the other hand, "The others concern me from the first" (Levinas 1998b, p. 159). We should not take too literally the image of a third party as entering afterwards. On the contrary, "My relationship with the other as neighbour gives meaning to my relations with all the others" (Levinas 1998b, p. 159). The relationship with the third party is already oriented by my relationship with the Other. In any case, "justice itself is born of charity" (Levinas 1998c, p. 107). Reading this sentence, we should note that charity translates "love" (*caritas* in Latin). The radical peace of the face-to-face relation with an Other is not the justice which requires state structures, but it founds justice; without the peaceful sociality of the face-to-face, justice would, indeed, be no more than some sort of superstructure, ideology, or balance of violent forces. The approach of a third party demands justice, but it also demands theory: "I must judge, where before I was able to assume responsibilities. Here is the birth of the theoretical; here the concern for justice is born, which is the basis of the theoretical" (Levinas 1998c, p. 104). Earlier, in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas identifies theory with "a way of approaching the known being such that its alterity with regard to the knowing being vanishes" (Levinas 1969, p. 42). In his earlier work, Levinas presents theory as obfuscating the peaceful relation with the Other, whereas in his later works, he shows that it grows out of this

relationship. In "Philosophy, Justice and Love," while maintaining the claims of the face and the Other, Levinas points out how this acknowledgement leads to the state, its institutions, theoretical knowledge, and also, at least implicitly, struggles of power. It also leads to the totality. "Inasmuch as the totality implies multiplicity," he writes, "it is not instituted between reasons, but between substantial beings, capable of maintaining relationships" (Levinas 1987a, p. 37). Even totality can be redeemed, placed on the more secure foundation of sociality rather than of violence. It is not, as both Levinas's detractors and supporters tend to assume, a matter of finding a path from messianic peace to practical politics, but of seeing that such practical politics—up to and including war—already derives from the peaceful relation with the Other. Levinas calls peace eschatological, but one might also call it etiological, coming at the origin.

If war derives from the radical peace which Levinas proposes, then so does the rational peace—the peace of empires, or European peace, or the peace of reason—which he considers insufficient and insecure. The contrast which Levinas draws between "messianic peace" and "the peace of empires" should not lead us to believe that Levinas does not value practical peace, achieved by reason, state organization or international diplomacy. On the contrary, even while recognizing that "the peace" which a rights-based discourse "inaugurates among men remain[s] uncertain and even precarious" Levinas adds an interjection: "A bad peace. Better, indeed, than a good war!" (Levinas 1993b, p. 122). The peace of compromise has value, which it derives from the prior peace. At the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas declares that "The peace of empires issued from war rests on war. It does not restore to the alienated beings their lost identity" (Levinas 1969, p. 22). Such a peace would not only prove weak and even paradoxical, but also, in an important sense, be incoherent. If the Other were nothing but a threat to my freedom or my independence, then it would make most sense to kill her or drive her away; peaceful sociality would be a contradiction in terms. There would be no limit to war and war would, indeed, be identifiable with the real. At best, the work of peace would be reduced to a maintenance of the unreal and inauthentic. Insofar as they do not manifest pure cynicism, international order and civil justice find their reality in the primordial sociality, the radical peace of the confrontation with the face of the Other. If there were no confrontation with the face of the Other, there would be no justice, state or laws. In one sense, there would be nothing but war, and hence nothing but politics. In another sense, however, there could be no war, because there would be no state to fight against any other state. Peace realizes itself in law, justice and the state, but it also betrays itself into structures characterized by violence.

A peace growing from war always risks returning to war; moreover, such a return would be in keeping with its origin and manifest its reality. Derrida claims that one can only fight violence with violence, that "If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse" (Derrida 1978, p. 146). But why would one wish to avoid "the worst violence," which Derrida seems here to identify with Levinas's night of Being (Levinas 1978, pp. 51–52)? To what obligation would one respond in minimizing violence? In the totality, which threatens always to become inhuman and mechanical, "someone has to call me to account" (Levinas 1987a, p. 40), but without such a call, there would be no reason to avoid "the worst violence," rather than simply indulging it. In a just state, one which derives from the radical peace of the face, it is always possible to return to first principles, to question the entire system. "The human world is a world in which one can judge history" (Levinas 1987a, p. 40). One can, that is to say, judge the system as a whole, not nihilistically, in a return to the principle of violence from which the peace of empires arises and to which it always threatens to return, but ethically, in a concern for the Other and for other others. Peace is not for Levinas a false consciousness or naivety or disguise, to be denounced or unveiled or deconstructed. On the contrary, it is the motive for which politics must be judged from without (Levinas 1993b, p. 123). Moreover, it is the reason that we would construct a politics, as an effort to create an order of justice, to adjudicate between different claims.

Politics threatens war, but also threatens to become free-standing, ceasing to be judged from without, and forgetting its origin in the ethical. In one of his Talmudic readings, Levinas remarks that "Political intelligence cannot go beyond certain limits. Beyond, it is bad for that intelligence, and dangerous for politics" (Levinas 1999, p. 88). There is a danger of tyranny, of a total state, but also a more subtle danger, which Levinas touches on briefly near the beginning of "The Ego and the Totality." In this situation, we would extend our suspicion of the self to our interlocutors, treating everyone as products of anonymous social forces:

> To a person-to-person discourse, taken now to be impossible because it would always be determined by what conditions the interlocutors, there is then opposed a discourse that takes account of its conditions, is absolutely coherent, and supplies the condition for the conditions. It is a discourse without interlocutors, for the interlocutors themselves figure in it as 'moments.' (Levinas 1987a, p. 35)

Levinas uses this observation about his own historical situation to begin his explanation of how the totality depends upon the priority of the face and of the third party. As importantly, he notes how the system, the totality, or even theory as abstract thought, can become impersonal. This seems the danger in our increasing postmodern tendency to say that there is no outside the text or the system or that, as we are repeatedly reminded, "everything is political." Politics betrays its origin in violence and threatens always to return to it but, in a more everyday threat, it threatens always to become impersonal and alien. In "Diachrony and Representation," Levinas defines politics as "an eventually inhuman and characteristic determinism" (Levinas 1998a, p. 165). Not only war, but also its diminutive in politics can become an all-encompassing totality. As impersonal, politics may or may not visit physical injury on people, but it would always deny the radical, personal claim of the face.

This forgetting of ethics constitutes a permanent threat, residing in any political system. Levinas declares in the notorious interview where he failed to condemn the killing of Palestinians, that "Unfortunately for ethics, politics has its own justification. In mankind, there is a justification for politics" (Levinas 1989a, p. 292). Hence the reluctance of Levinas to embrace any particular political system, though his work can indeed be used to endorse a range of political systems. His response to Marxism provides an example. I noted, above, how he treats Stalinism as "the supreme paradox" of European peace. In "Principles and Faces," a response to the visit of Nikita Krushchev to the west,[6] Levinas argues that Krushchev identified the communist party with reason itself: "For a state without conflicts," Krushchev claimed to represent "a party without division: the party of Reason" (Levinas 2004, p. 104). This, Levinas notes, ought to have appealed to western intellectuals who "encounter socialism not as the expression of a revolt against human suffering but as the pure accomplishment of the idea of universality." Krushchev's universalism, Levinas suggests, marks the "reduction to absurdity" of western thought (ibid., p. 105). On the other hand, he also claims in an interview that "in Marxism there is not just conquest; there is recognition of the other" (Levinas 1998c, p. 119). There is an obvious ambiguity in Levinas's response to communism. This ambiguity is not, however, simply an indecision. On the contrary, it grows from the ambiguity of politics itself, born in concern for the Other, but threatening always to become a free-standing, even inhuman system of violence and control, identified with reason itself.

Levinas shows a similar ambiguity towards liberalism. Atterton lists "nineteenth century liberalism" as among the movements upholding "The theory that war is original" (Atterton 1992, p. 59). Levinas would of course reject this theory, though ironically many of those who reject liberalism (including Marxists or fascists) would accept it. Moreover, he finds "the impasse of liberalism" in our current situation, where the self has become an object of suspicion, and therefore "no-one can find the law for his action in the depth of his heart" (Levinas 1987a, p. 34). At another point,

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[6] At least it appears to be a reference to the visit of Krushchev, though Levinas refers to the Soviet First Secretary with Kafkaesque concision as "Mister K," for reasons of his own.

he refers casually to "becoming bourgeois" as a "self-complacency," betraying a contempt for the bourgeoisie common among continental philosopher, and usually associated with a rejection of liberalism (Levinas 1998c, p. 88). In the interview which led Levinas to reminisce about Davos, he was asked about the threats which xenophobia and nationalism pose to liberal democracy. He responded that "I believe in the force of liberalism in Europe. But I also have too many memories to be certain in my answer" (Levinas 2001b, p. 186). Levinas favored liberalism as an outlook and set of values, but refused to assume it as a destiny. His insistence that history be judged forbade him the naive comfort of thinking that everything would inevitably turn out well. He explains his defense of the liberal state when he argues that the defense of rights "corresponds to a vocation *outside* the state, disposing, in a political society, of a kind of extra-territoriality". Moreover, "The capacity to guarantee that extra-territoriality and that independence defines the liberal state" (Levinas 1993b, p. 123; emphasis in original). The liberal state, in other words, allows a questioning from outside itself. It avoids becoming total, in the sense of totalitarian or totalizing. Levinas's unwillingness to identify history with the triumph of liberalism and indeed his determination that history as a whole can be questioned places him on the side of Karl Popper against historicism; his attack on totality would place him on the side of Isaiah Berlin against monism and utopian politics. My point is not to defend Levinas's liberal credentials any more than to trace common ideas in the thought of three eastern European Jews of the same generation but completely different intellectual *milieux*, though that might be interesting. Rather, it is to show that Levinas views liberalism with a fundamental ambivalence. This ambivalence, like his ambivalence towards Marxism, derives from an ambivalence towards politics, at once the expression and betrayal of ethical concern. Whereas Marxism carries only a trace of its original ethical concern, liberalism opens itself to interruption, and hence to a return to its original ethical motive.

To return to his relation with Cassirer once again, Levinas would reject liberalism, if liberalism is understood as the inevitable product of reason playing itself out in history. He would nevertheless insist on the openness of a liberal society. Indeed, one of his definitions of democracy is "a State open to what is better" (Levinas 1999, p. 96). Elsewhere, he says that "the very foundation of democracy" is that "One can debate decisions; there is no human decree that cannot be revised" (Levinas 2001b, p. 183). Democracy, in other words, refuses finality. A democracy produces a totality like any other state, but this totality is never entirely closed. "Politics, left to itself", may have "its own determinism", but "Love must always watch over justice" (Levinas 1998c, p. 108). The attraction of democracy for Levinas—quite apart from his loyalty to the French Republic which adopted him, and which he served in war and peace—is the promise it offers of controlling politics, to bring it "back to its motivation in justice and a foundational interhumanity" (Levinas 1998a, p. 165). "[P]olitics left to itself bears a tyranny within itself" (Levinas 1969, p. 300), but this tyranny can be interrupted. Levinas is certainly a democrat, as he himself declares, but his vision of democracy is not a perfectly balanced constitution, which would express the triumph of reason, nor is it a careful balancing of forces of hostility, such as in theories of the social contract. On the contrary, it is not a system at all so much as the possibility of challenging a system.

Chastened by his experience in Davos and by what he rather coyly refers to as Heidegger's "personal political adventure" (Levinas 2001b, p. 186), Levinas rejects both the hypertrophy of violence in Heidegger and the pacifism of Cassirer, though he can respect the latter's Neo-Kantianism as an effort to respond to the need for justice by constructing a political system. Unlike Kant, however, he would understand that no utopic set of articles, even in the unlikely case of their implementation, can guarantee against a return to war. Indeed, the European peace of reason has a paradoxical tendency towards belligerence. For that matter, he would recognize a basic contradiction and doom in all efforts to found a "peace of empires" on war. We can, however, return to the primordial peace inspiring all such efforts in the face of the Other. One might say that Levinas is a pacifist in a new way, except that he finds antecedents for his ideas in the Talmudic and Biblical traditions. To answer the question with which I began, Levinas should be understood as a pacifist, notwithstanding the irony of his claim in the student skit. His pacifism should be understood neither as the proposal of an ideal regime nor the

championing of a particular politics. On the contrary, to be pacifist in a Levinasian sense is to be open to the face of the Other, challenging the tyranny of the state while recalling its ethical origin.

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