

## Lévinas, Disinterest and Enthusiasm

*ma responsabilité – malgré moi*<sup>1</sup>

### I. Dis-interest, Goodness and Substitution

Emmanuel Lévinas is one of the few philosophers to revive the idea of disinterest in the twentieth century. Disinterest has been associated with the Stoic ideal of *apatheia*, with Christian ideas of detachment, love and benevolence and with the “autonomy” of the aesthetic appreciation of beautiful objects. Modern, secular ideas of disinterest flourished in the eighteenth century and can be defined broadly as the recognition of a public interest above and beyond private interests and the ability to judge impartially between self-interest and the interests of others. Traditional or classical ideas of disinterest – ideas of disinterest after Descartes and before Nietzsche – can be characterised as an ongoing attempt to find a framework to mediate between the public and the private. Hobbes, for example, tried to establish a disinterest based on an external sovereign public authority. Others sought it in the internal authority of reason, sentiment or the imagination. In each case, the question was how to limit or curtail the interests of the subject and to account for natural or socially constructed expressions of disinterestedness. Most ideas of disinterest are founded on some kind of involuntary external or internal mechanism that exceeds the will of the subject (such

as a rush of disinterested sympathy for another that cannot be willed or manufactured). Nietzsche signalled the loss of faith in traditional ideas of disinterest when he insisted in *Beyond Good and Evil* that any “‘disinterested’ action is an exceedingly interesting and interested action.”<sup>2</sup> How does Lévinas revive and redefine disinterest? And how far can his notion of *dis-interestedness* be said to transcend traditional ideas of disinterest?

Lévinas makes passing reference in the late 1940s to a “notion of disinterestedness” which he associates with a “freedom” and an exclusion of “bondage,” but it is not until *Totality and Infinity* (1961) that he singles out disinterest a significant concept in his philosophy.<sup>3</sup> In *Totality and Infinity* he redefines disinterest as an “ethical” discourse. For Lévinas, ethics is a “calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other.”<sup>4</sup> It is a responsibility *for* the other that precedes (and provides a foundation for) the relation to self. “Responsibility,” he remarks elsewhere, “is anterior to deliberation and is that to which I have thus been exposed and dedicated before being dedicated to myself.”<sup>5</sup> Lévinas’s theory of disinterest is founded on his characterisation of the relation between the self and the other as that of “a separated being in relation with an other absolutely other” [*un être séparé en relation avec un autre absolument autre*].<sup>6</sup> This “non-allergic relation” signifies neither an opposition, a colonisation, nor a synthesis: it is a relation that overturns “formal logic,” a relation in which “the terms remain absolute despite the relation in which they find themselves.”<sup>7</sup> Totality cannot conceive of “an irreducible singularity,” and it is the very *singularity* of the subject that defines its responsibility for the other. “To utter ‘ I ’,” Lévinas writes, “means to possess a privileged place with regard to the responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me.” Far from limiting *my* freedom, the other “calls it to responsibility and founds it.”<sup>8</sup>

The relationship with the other as “absolutely other” inaugurates what can be called a *dis-*interest of the subject. The gap between the prefix *dis-* and interest emphasises a reversal or removal of interest that does not *originate* in the subject, in the interests *of* the self, even in

the interests of the self in being disinterested. In ‘The Trace of the Other’ (1963), Lévinas suggests that any radical idea of dis-interest must be based on “*a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.*”<sup>9</sup> Hegel’s philosophy, he argues, represents “the logical outcome” of “an underlying allergy” in Western philosophy, in which “everything that is an *attitude* of consciousness ... is in the last analysis self-consciousness, that is, identity and autonomy.” The movement of the self towards the other is in effect always an act of *self-interest*, a momentary negation, an ersatz disinterest, which ultimately propels self-consciousness towards absolute knowledge. Any movement of the self towards the other is already guaranteed a *return* journey “in which the other is transmuted into the same.”<sup>10</sup> In a “departure without return,” on the other hand, “the I loses its sovereign coincidence with itself, its identification, in which consciousness returned triumphantly to itself and rested on itself.”

Dis-interest interrupts the great project of self-consciousness as the colonisation of the other. The “putting into question of the self is precisely the welcome of the absolutely other.” In welcoming the other, the self exposes itself to a pre-existing, unavoidable and *infinite* responsibility for the other, announcing “a surplus for which intentionality is inadequate.”<sup>11</sup> Lévinas insists in *Totality and Infinity* that when describing the relation between “a separated being” and “an other absolutely other” “as disinterested [*désintéressée*],” one should *not* “recognize” any “intentionality” in this disinterested relation.<sup>12</sup> Disinterest is a waking “*sans intentionnalité.*”<sup>13</sup> The relationship with the *infinitely* other – especially a so-called “disinterested” relation of the self to the other as an act of *good conscience* – exceeds intentionality. Dis-interest is *malgré moi*, despite myself.

Lévinas’s redefinition of disinterest as a *dis-interest* links disinterestedness to *goodness*. He writes:

the infinite in the finite, the more in the less, which is accomplished by the idea of Infinity, is produced as Desire – not a Desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies. A Desire perfectly disinterested – goodness [*Désir parfaitement désintéressé – bonté*].<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to *need*, which is predicated on the subject's lack or nostalgia and the attempt to possess and absorb the other, *desire* is that which “cannot be satisfied,” which looks “beyond everything that can simply complete it.” Desire reflects “a relationship whose positivity comes from remoteness, from separation”: desire “is like goodness.” Goodness, the Good, is *beyond* being. “The Good [*le Bien*],” Lévinas suggests, “is Good *in itself* and not by relation to the need to which it is wanting; it is a luxury with respect to needs. It is precisely in this that it is beyond being.”<sup>15</sup> The good is “better than being.”<sup>16</sup> *Dis-interest* is a form of goodness because it is an interest – *malgré moi* – in the infinite, an interest that exceeds the need of the same and expresses the always unfulfilled desire *for* the absolutely other.

In his later works Lévinas develops the idea of dis-interest, extending it from “the exclusively moral sense of the term” to “an even more radical sense,” namely, “a disinterestedness opposed to the *essence* of a being.”<sup>17</sup> In *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), he argues that the “*event of being*” is “the *esse*, the *essence*.” Working “as an invincible persistence,” essence “is interest,” “being’s interestedness” and “interestedness” is “persisting in being.”<sup>18</sup> In contrast, *disinterestedness* describes “an order more grave than being and antecedent to being”: a fundamental and “pre-original” *disengagement* of “subjectivity from its essence.”<sup>19</sup>

In the dense, rich repetitions and circling eddies of *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas suggests that “subjectivity is the other in the same.” In other words, the subjectivity of the subject is *only* apparent, *only* expresses itself, when the other is “in the same.” Dis-interestedness [*dés-intéressement*] signifies a “subjectivity that ... breaks with essence.”<sup>20</sup> Essence “is not only

conveyed, it is temporalized in a predicative statement” and therefore, *time* (“a diachrony refractory to all synchronization”) and *language* (a “saying” that proceeds and is betrayed by a “said” which, nonetheless, retains a *trace* of the saying) indicate a subjectivity that is irreducible both to self-consciousness and to intentionality.<sup>21</sup> *In time and through language*, subjectivity *signifies* “prior to essence” and “to the other.”<sup>22</sup>

For Lévinas, signification is a *substitution* and substitution is a radical dis-interest. “In its *being*,” Lévinas writes, “subjectivity undoes *essence* by substituting itself for another.” The “extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or misfortune of others” rests on a fundamental “vulnerability,” a passive exposure, a giving *despite* oneself, a “risk of suffering without reason.”<sup>23</sup> Dis-interest is “the-one-for-the other to the point of substitution.” “A subject,” Lévinas insists, “is a hostage.” The other is “the persecuted one for whom I am responsible to the point of being a hostage for him.”<sup>24</sup> As Jacques Derrida suggests in *Adieu* (1997), Lévinas evokes a hospitality that precedes ownership of one's self (*l'hospitalité précède la propriété*). *Dés-intéressement* is an original welcoming of the other in which the subject is both the “host” *and* the “hostage” of the other. A hostage, Derrida notes, is “someone whose uniqueness endures the possibility of a *substitution*.”<sup>25</sup>

In *Otherwise than Being* Lévinas reworks the notion of “a separated being in relation with an other absolutely other” into the idea of an *irreplaceable* singularity that *substitutes* itself for the other: “the non-interchangeable par excellence, the I, the unique one, substitutes itself for others.” To “be dis-interested,” is to submit to an “undeclinable” and original obligation to reverse interest, to interrupt essence and to divest being through a passive substitution of self for the other that conditions *my* subjectivity.<sup>26</sup> For Lévinas, “subjectivity is described as a substituting for the other, as disinterestedness.”<sup>27</sup>

## II. Secrecy, Reason and Enthusiasm

Lévinas's idea of dis-interest signals a profound break with traditional projects of disinterest in that it is not concerned with establishing a disinterested *subject* as much as insisting on a radical dis-interest *of* the subject. Dis-interest should not be taken as a triumph of morality, as a victory of ethics that confirms a comforting plenitude of disinterest as good conscience. A radical dis-interestedness, Lévinas insists, "could never mean altruistic will, instinct of 'natural benevolence,' or love."<sup>28</sup> At the same time, it is apparent that Lévinas repeats or at least relies on certain gestures of the classical ideas of disinterest. He redefines *and* reinhabits disinterest.

Despite his departure from a traditional faith in the disinterested subject, Lévinas shares with the classical thinkers of disinterest the conviction a framework can be found to mediate between the public and the private. For Lévinas, dis-interest is founded on the assumption that the private can be *independent* of the public. In *Totality and Infinity* he argues, "the individual and the personal count and act independently of the universal, which would mould them."<sup>29</sup> Without *separation*, that is, "a relationship within independence," the individual would be subsumed in "an impersonal relation within a universal order."<sup>30</sup> The "separated being in relation with an other absolutely other" is "the private individual" who *resists* the tyranny of the state and *founds* the pluralist society.<sup>31</sup>

By maintaining its "*secrecy*," a separated being provides the foundation for a pluralism or multiplicity that, "over and beyond the totality," "inaugurates a society."<sup>32</sup> The relationship with the other "relates us with the third party," "the whole of humanity," and establishes a pluralist social order through "fraternity and discourse." Keeping in mind that "justice can be established only if I ... always destituted and divested of being ... can become an other like the others," the recognition of the *third party* inaugurates justice in society.<sup>33</sup> As a separated being, the private individual in society retains a secret "inner life" that cannot be brought to

light, made visible, in the “universal order” of the state.<sup>34</sup> Lévinas gives the *secret* an exemplary role in *mediating* between the private individual, society and the state.<sup>35</sup>

When he speaks of a private that is independent of the public as the foundation for a civil society, Lévinas evokes an idea of disinterest that emerged in the late eighteenth century. At the same time, he breaks with traditional ideas of disinterest when he insists that the private has always *already* suffered a fundamental *privation* of its autonomy. Separation remains “a relationship within independence,” “a separated being in relation with an other absolutely other.”<sup>36</sup> Lévinas may share with classical ideas of disinterest the belief that one can draw a *clear* distinction between the public and the private – a belief which distinguishes him from Derrida – but *dés-intéressement* signals a radical break with the common assumptions about the origin and grounds of the private.<sup>37</sup>

Lévinas also differs from the customary ideas of disinterest in his refusal to rely on either sentiment or sovereign reason to provide an internal authority for the disinterest of the private. The relationship with the other cannot be reduced to “a movement of sympathy merging us with him.”<sup>38</sup> Sympathy is seen by Lévinas as a mode of synthesis that attempts to domesticate, subjugate and deny the infinite alterity of the other. While he makes a point of rejecting the sympathetic imagination – perhaps the most popular grounds for disinterest in the eighteenth and nineteenth century (I involuntarily sympathise with the other by imagining myself in his or her situation) – Lévinas’s attitude towards reason is more complex. He redefines *and* retains much of the traditional associations of disinterest with reason and rationality.

Socrates taught, Lévinas notes in *Totality and Infinity*, that I “receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside.” This apparent “primacy” and “permanence” of the same is the foundation of the role played by “reason” in Western philosophy. Lévinas comments: “That reason in the last analysis would be the manifestation of a freedom, neutralizing the other and encompassing

him, can come as no surprise once it was laid down that sovereign reason knows only itself, that nothing other limits it.”<sup>39</sup> Western philosophy has characterised reason as a “universal thought.” The “very being” of reason “consists in renouncing singularity” and, consequently, any kind of relation between a separated being and the infinitely other.<sup>40</sup> Lévinas goes on to write:

Reason makes human society possible, but a society whose members would be only reasons would vanish as a society. What could a being entirely rational speak of with another entirely rational being? Reason has no plural; how could numerous reasons be distinguished?<sup>41</sup>

Rational discourse is a “monologue” always “becoming universal.”<sup>42</sup> Autonomous and sovereign, reason “opens upon” the “universal order” of an impersonal state.<sup>43</sup>

In spite of his condemnation of the sovereignty of reason, Lévinas gives rationality a significant place in his theory of dis-interest. He redefines reason by rejecting the dominant notion of rationality as a “suspension of action” in which reason alone guides and affirms the *freedom* of an autonomous subject to be disinterested.<sup>44</sup> He substitutes for this classical idea of reason the notion of rational *critique* that begins by putting its *own* origin in question. Rationality, he argues, has an ethical place within “the critique of spontaneity engendered by failure.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, reason is a critique already haunted at the outset by its failure in relation to the other. It is a critique “which calls into question the central place the I occupies in the world” and which poses the “problem of the foundation.”<sup>46</sup> In this context, Lévinas states: “the essence of reason consists not in securing for man a foundation and powers, but in calling him in question and in inviting him to justice.”<sup>47</sup>

Lévinas is closest to the conventional ideas of disinterest when he repeats the traditional opposition between rational disinterest and enthusiasm. As Derrida observes in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ (1964), Lévinas is firmly against the ecstatic ravishing of enthusiasm.<sup>48</sup>

Enthusiasm for Lévinas is, in the gravest sense, irresponsibility.<sup>49</sup> In *Totality and Infinity* he argues, “the ethical relation ... cuts across every relation one could call mystical” and defines “the rational character of the ethical relation.”<sup>50</sup> In the earlier essay, ‘A Religion for Adults’ (1957), he suggests as “man’s possession by God,” enthusiasm is the *antithesis* of disinterestedness. Enthusiasm is the source of an idolatry that denies “human freedom,” responsibility and any ethical relationship with the other.<sup>51</sup> However, as well shall see, Lévinas *also* appears to associate a certain kind of enthusiasm *with* dis-interest.

The dangerous effects of enthusiasm are found also in a violence arising from the modern valorisation of myth. As Derrida notes in a significant passage from ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’ Lévinas associates this modern “enthusiasm” with the thought of Heidegger:

Despite all the misunderstandings which may be embedded in this treatment of Heideggerean thought ... Lévinas’s intention, in any event, seems clear. The neutral thought of Being neutralizes the Other as a being ... The Heideggerean ‘possibilities’ remains powers. Although they are pretechnical and preobjective, they are nonetheless oppressive and possessive. By another paradox, the philosophy of the neutral communicates with a philosophy of the site, of rootedness, of pagan violence, of ravishment, of enthusiasm, a philosophy offered up to the sacred, that is, to the anonymous divinity, the divinity without the Deity.<sup>52</sup>

According to Lévinas, Heidegger’s thought is overshadowed by a misguided confidence in myth and an admiration for “pagan violence.” “Myth,” Lévinas warns, “albeit sublime, introduces into the soul that troubled element, that impure element of magic and sorcery and that drunkenness of the sacred and of war that prolong the animal within the civilized.”<sup>53</sup> Heidegger has perpetuated the violence of the mythic by seeking some kind of transcendent authenticity in the primitive and pagan. In the extraordinary essay “Heidegger, Gagarin and

Us” (1961), Lévinas depicts Heidegger as an enthusiast *par excellence*, as an advocate of the mythic and idolatrous pagan cults of nature opposed to technology and modernity.<sup>54</sup> He reiterates this charge in *Totality and Infinity*, remarking “possession is preeminently the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine. In denouncing the sovereignty of the technological powers of man Heidegger exalts the pre-technological powers of possession.”<sup>55</sup> Lévinas counters this thought – and enthusiasm *as* possession – by redefining humanism as “a system of principles and disciplines that free human life from the prestige of myths, the discord they introduce into ideas and the cruelty they perpetuate in social customs.”<sup>56</sup>

### III. The Dispossession of Possession

Lévinas’s view of enthusiasm and its opposition to dis-interest is more complex than it first appears. As a form of possession, enthusiasm is linked in *Totality and Infinity* to a number of different forms of possession and non-possession, including the possession *of* self, *of* home, *of* things, the dispossession *by* the other *and* the possession *by* a god. For Lévinas, possession appears to be a *necessary* moment of egoism in the evolution of the separated being and its relation to world and to the infinitely other. As he says in ‘Ethics and Spirit’ (1952), “every experience of the world is at the same time an experience of self, possession and enjoyment of self: it forms and nourishes me.”<sup>57</sup> However, *before* possession as dwelling in a home (before the “enjoyment of self”), the subject encounters the *elements*. The elements are “essentially non-possessable, “ ‘nobody’s’: earth, sea, light, city.” “Every relation or possession,” Lévinas writes, “is situated within the non-possessable which envelops or contains without being able to be contained or enveloped.”<sup>58</sup> Formless, anonymous, the element presents “the strangeness of the earth,” the *there is*, “the nothingness which separates.”<sup>59</sup> Any form of possession is founded on an original dispossession.

After encountering the elemental “the non-possessable,” possession as habitation, as *chez soi* (being at home with oneself, interiority), is the essential phase of “the recollection of the I in its dwelling.” The possession of a home in turn makes the possession of things possible. Through my labour, I seize, grasp and attempt to master things, substances, in the world: possession becomes a “taking-possession.”<sup>60</sup> It is through possessing things that the subject must encounter the *other* that resists possession: “A thing does not resist acquisition; the other possessors – those whom one cannot possess – contest and therefore can sanction possession itself. Thus the possession of things issues in a discourse.” It is the other “who calls in question possession itself.”<sup>61</sup> “The other – the absolutely other – paralyzes possession,” dispossesses possession itself.<sup>62</sup>

The elemental non-possessive origin of the subject’s possession of itself and the world is indicative of “the radical character of the uprootedness of him who is recollected in a home.”<sup>63</sup> Hospitality, the giving or offering of what is possessed, underwrites any notion of home, of *chez soi*. “The possibility for the home to open to the Other,” Lévinas writes, “is as essential to the essence of the home as closed doors and windows.” It is language – discourse – that “puts in common a world hitherto mine.” Language “is a primordial dispossession, a first donation.”<sup>64</sup> Lévinas suggests that there is a necessary possession *by* the subject of itself which in turn must lead to a dispossession *of* the subject’s self-possession *by* the other. Self-possession (founded on an original non-possession) is dispossessed by the other. Possession is always already a dispossession: a (dis)possession.

Without overlooking the different forms of possession and non-possession that Lévinas traces, there is a significant relation between enthusiasm and (dis)possession in his work. The link between enthusiasm and dis-interest gestures towards the *most traditional* idea of disinterest: *God as original (dis)possession*. Lévinas implies that there are at least two forms of enthusiasm: enthusiasm as *violence* and enthusiasm as *inspiration*. In ‘Ethics and Spirit,’ he argues, “violence is to be found in any action in which one acts as if one were alone to

act.” He notes, “nearly every causality is in this sense violent: the fabrication of a thing, the satisfaction of a need, the desire and even the knowledge of an object.”<sup>65</sup> “But,” he adds, “violence can also lie, in large part, in the poetic delirium and enthusiasm displayed when we merely offer our mouths to the muse who speaks through us; in our fear and trembling when the Sacred wrenches us out of ourselves.” Enthusiasm is the violence both of possessing *and* of being possessed. The “violent man,” Lévinas goes on to say, “does not move out of himself. He takes, he possesses. Possession denies independent existence. To have is to refuse to be. Violence is a sovereignty, but also a solitude. To endure violence in enthusiasm and ecstasy and delirium is to be possessed.”<sup>66</sup> The violent man denies the dispossession of possession.

In *Totality and Infinity* Lévinas implies that possession *by* a god, *enthusiasm* – which he has previously characterised as a loss of freedom and denial of responsibility – can *also* lead to a dispossession of the solitude of self-possession and to a relationship with the other as infinitely other. This enthusiasm as dispossession is also aligned to a certain *rationality*. In the midst of discussing the “the idea of Infinity,” Lévinas quotes from Plato’s *Phaedrus*:

We find that this presence in thought of an idea whose *ideatum* overflows the capacity of thought is given expression not only in Aristotle’s theory of the agent intellect, but also, very often, in Plato. Against a thought that proceeds from him who “has his own head to himself,” he affirms the value of the delirium that comes from God, “winged thought.” Delirium here does not have an irrationalist significance; it is only a “divine release of the soul from the yoke of custom and convention.” The fourth type of delirium is reason itself, rising to the ideas, thought in the highest sense.<sup>67</sup>

He goes on to say: “possession by a god, enthusiasm, is not the irrational, but the end of the solitary ... or inward thought, the beginning of a true experience of the *new*.” Lévinas

suggests that there is a non-irrational enthusiasm that *dispossesses* the self-possession of the subject: a *rational* enthusiasm that *disinterests* the interests of being. “The end of the solitary,” he writes, – enthusiasm – is “already Desire.” On the same page, he speaks of “the Desire for the Infinite. ... A Desire perfectly disinterested – goodness.”<sup>68</sup>

After *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas is more explicit about this relation between enthusiasm and dis-interest. In *Otherwise than Being*, he describes inspiration as “the claiming of the same by the other.”<sup>69</sup> In “God and Philosophy” (1975), he associates *dés-intéressement* with a certain “*inspiration*” and “prophetic testimony.”<sup>70</sup> The proximity, the (im)possible suggestion of a similarity in function or ends of dis-interestedness and enthusiasm raises the most difficult questions about a dis-possession or dis-interest *of* the subject. Whom or what can counter “the ecstasy of intentionality”?<sup>71</sup> What is the difference between the possession *of* and being dispossessed *by* the self, by the other – and the most difficult question of all – by God?<sup>72</sup> Whom or what sanctions or can sanction this difference?

#### IV. Dis-interest, God and Judaism

If you have a sapling in your hand and are told, “Look the Messiah is here,” you should first plant the sapling and then go out to welcome the Messiah.

Johanan ben Zakkai<sup>73</sup>

Lévinas associates dis-interest with carefully redefined ideas of freedom, responsibility, subjectivity, reason, and inspiration. It is this link between disinterest and inspiration that distinguishes him most profoundly from Derrida. If Derrida can be said to have a theory of disinterest, it is unambiguously secular. For Derrida, “disinterest” arises from the unavoidable and agonising *interest* that must be taken *from* “the experience of the impossible.” As I *take* an interest (in the impossible), I am *taken away* from myself by the other and for the other.<sup>74</sup> Lévinas argues that a radical idea of dis-interest cannot be founded

on either *external* public structures or on the *interiority* of an autonomous subject. However, he *echoes* the classical gestures of disinterest when he grounds dis-interest *outside* of the subject. If he redefines and “removes” disinterest from its traditional external guarantees in public structures, is it possible that *dés-intéressement* cannot entirely extricate itself from religion, that it remains a dis-interest that is *inspired* by “God”? For Lévinas, “God is outside and is God for that very reason.”<sup>75</sup>

One could argue that for Lévinas the *possibility* of a radical dis-interest *relies* on both the idea of God and an ethical and rational Judaism. He would perhaps say that *in relation* to the question of dis-interestedness, “the idea of God” and “an ethical and rational Judaism” are *mediated* by philosophy.<sup>76</sup> However, one could *also* say, as Catherine Chalié has persuasively argued in *La trace de l’infini* (2002), that Lévinas’s philosophy is *permeated* by “an ethical and rational Judaism” and by “the idea of God.”<sup>77</sup> The boundaries or borders between “God,” “Judaism” and “philosophy” in Lévinas’s thought are evidently and importantly distinct *and* they are also unavoidably porous.

In the essays collected in *Difficult Freedom* (1963; 1976), Lévinas implies that it is the “horizontal” ethical relation between humans that indicates, announces the *trace* of a “vertical” relation to God. God *only* “appears” in the ethical, in the just actions of men and women. As Lévinas says: “ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision.”<sup>78</sup> Ethics is “an optics of the Divine” and “no relation with God is direct or immediate. The Divine can be manifested only through my neighbour.”<sup>79</sup> It is this “vertical”/ “horizontal” relation that provides the guarantee for a rational, *inspired* dis-interest that resists the violence and myths of enthusiasm.

For Lévinas, Judaism is uniquely predisposed to an ethical, rational and inspired dis-interest. “*The ethical relation*,” he writes, “will appear to Judaism as an exceptional relation” because it experiences “the presence of God through one’s relation to man.”<sup>80</sup> Judaism is less concerned with “preparing man ... for a private meeting with God” than with “bringing

the divine presence to just and human effort.” It is because the Torah and the Talmud are preoccupied not with “the mystery of God,” but “the human tasks of man,” that Judaism embraces a distinctive rationalism.<sup>81</sup> Rationalism, he insists, “does not menace the Jewish faith.”<sup>82</sup> Rational and ethical, Judaism is defined by its rejection of enthusiasm:

For Judaism, the goal of education consists in instituting a link between man and the saintliness of God and in maintaining man in this relationship. But all this effort ... consists in understanding this saintliness of God that stands in sharp contrast to the numinous meaning of this term, as it appears in the primitive religions wherein the moderns have often wished to see the source of all religion. For these thinkers, man’s possession by God, enthusiasm, would be consequent on the saintliness or the sacred character of God, the alpha and omega of spiritual life. Judaism has decharmed the world, contesting the notion that religions apparently evolved out of enthusiasm and the Sacred. Judaism remains foreign to any offensive return of these forms of human elevation. It denounces them as the essence of idolatry.<sup>83</sup>

The rejection of enthusiasm in Judaism is the affirmation of “human freedom.” The transports and ecstasy of enthusiasm deny both the freedom to be responsible and institutes a divine order that transcends the ethical relations between men. This freedom is hardly assured and always menaced by violence and myth: it remains a “difficult freedom.”<sup>84</sup> “Enthusiasm is, after all, possession by a god,” Lévinas remarks, and “Jews wish not to be possessed, but to be responsible. Their God is the master of justice; He judges in the open light of reason and discourse.”<sup>85</sup> It is worth recalling that Lévinas’s earliest references to disinterest associate it with a certain freedom and, like this “difficult freedom,” dis-interest is rational, ethical, opposed to the injustices of enthusiasm *and* inspired by a God that “is outside.”

In “God and Philosophy,” Lévinas asks, “if God may be expressed in a reasonable discourse that will be neither ontology nor faith.”<sup>86</sup> While he is concerned not with a God that “is outside” as much as “the idea of God ... or God in us” as the “idea of the Infinite, [the] *Infinite in me*,” he raises the question of the dis-interest of the subject by God.<sup>87</sup> The Cartesian notion of the idea of the Infinite *in me* is indicative of an inaugural trauma: “the putting in us [*la mise en nous*] of an unencompassable idea.”<sup>88</sup> How, Lévinas asks, is one to respond to “the monstrosity of the Infinite *put in me*” [*mis en moi*]? How is one to respond to the ordeal of the Infinite *transcending* the subject?<sup>89</sup> Lévinas responds to these questions by returning to his original account of disinterest as desire in *Totality and Infinity*. The Infinite “*put in me*” announces “a passivity more passive than all passivity” and the recognition of a “Desire beyond satisfaction,” a “Desire without end, beyond Being: dés-intéressement, transcendence – desire for the Good.”<sup>90</sup> It is *through* “the idea of God” or the Infinite *in me* that the subject acknowledges – and endures – dis-interest. Lévinas goes on to say that the possibility of *disinterestedness* “in the Desire of the Infinite” rests on the separation of “the Desirable or God ... in the Desire.” For dis-interest to be *possible*, the “Desirable or God” must remain *separate*: “Holy” [*Saint*].<sup>91</sup> As he suggests in his remarkable final lectures at the Sorbonne, *God, Death and Time* (1975-1976), “dis-interestedness” provides “the basis” for seeking “a mode of access to a non-ontological notion of God.” *Dés-intér-essement* becomes “the passage to being’s beyond,” “the ascension toward God.”<sup>92</sup>

For Lévinas, the dis-interest of the subject by “the idea of God” describes the *trauma* of “transcendence,” of “the ‘more’ that devastates and awakens the ‘less’.”<sup>93</sup> Transcendence is dis-interest as desire: it leaves us hungry, unsatisfied – hungry *for* the other, starving *on behalf of* the other. Lévinas’s theory of disinterest may reinhabit the older discourses that sought an “outside,” an “infinite” as the unassailable guarantee for disinterest, but he does not evoke the comforts and satisfactions of a disinterest founded on theology. As Derrida has

suggested, Lévinas's work perhaps repeats "without religion, the possibility of religion."<sup>94</sup> At the same time, Lévinas *implies* that an ethical, rational, inspired and non-enthusiastic disinterest is most "at home" in Judaism. Is, according to Lévinas, a Christian (or Muslim) dis-interestedness possible? Derrida has touched on this difficult and complex question in *Adieu*.<sup>95</sup> In a number of works, Lévinas clearly associates Christianity not with dis-interest, but with a *lack* of interest, with indifference. In an essay from 1950 he refers to the political and social "failure" of Christianity to prevent the *Shoah*.<sup>96</sup> In "The State of Caesar and the State of David" (1971), he identifies a "political spirit of indifference" in Christianity arising from the separation of the "kingdom of God and the earthly kingdom" that implicitly distinguishes Christianity from the terrestrial concerns of Judaism for justice and the *universal* ethical imperatives that it recognises.<sup>97</sup>

## V. An Extreme Gravity

Lévinas's revival of an idea of disinterest remains weighed down by "an extreme gravity." In *Otherwise than Being*, he asks, "Does not disinterestedness, without compensation, without eternal life, without the pleasingness of happiness, complete gratuity, indicate an extreme gravity?"<sup>98</sup> Dis-interest inspires a "desire for the Good," but it is also a matter of an inescapable, *infinite* responsibility, a harsh substitution. One can never lightly or blithely celebrate such a dis-interest. As much of his work, Lévinas's theory of disinterest is marked by "the acute experience of the human in the twentieth century." At the beginning of *Totality and Infinity* he writes:

Freedom consists in knowing that freedom is in peril. But to know or to be conscious is to have time to avoid and forestall the instant of inhumanity. It is this perpetual postponing of the hour of treason – infinitesimal difference

between man and non-man – that implies the disinterestedness of goodness [*le désintéressement de la bonté*], the desire of the absolutely other or nobility.<sup>99</sup>

---

 Notes

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Dieu et la philosophie', in *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée* (Paris: Vrin, 1998), p. 118; tr. Bettina Bergo, 'God and Philosophy', in *Of God who comes to Mind* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Beyond Good and Evil', in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, tr. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), pp.338-39.

<sup>3</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Reality and its shadow', in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 132. Lévinas makes a point of distinguishing the freedom implied in disinterestedness from the "well-known disinterestedness of artistic vision."

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1996), p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Diachrony and Representation', in *Time and the Other*, tr. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 111.

<sup>6</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 218; *Totalité et infini* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2001), p. 241

<sup>7</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 47, 180.

<sup>8</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 300, 203.

<sup>9</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'The Trace of the Other' in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor, tr. A. Lingis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 348.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Trace of the Other', pp. 346-47, 348.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Trace of the Other', pp. 349, 353.

<sup>12</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 109; *Totalité et infini*, p. 111.

<sup>13</sup> 'Dieu et la philosophie', p. 99.

---

<sup>14</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 50; *Totalité et infini*, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 34, 102-3; *Totalité et infini*, pp. 105-06.

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *From the Sacred to the Holy*, in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, tr. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 3, 5-6, 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 25, 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 39, 9, 46-47.

<sup>22</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>23</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 13, 49-51.

<sup>24</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 54, 59, 112.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Adieu: à Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris: Galilée, 1997), pp. 85, 200, 103; tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass, *Adieu - To Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). My translation.

<sup>26</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 117, 138-39, 119.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140. See also, 'The Old and the New' in *Time and the Other*, tr. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p.135.

<sup>28</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 218.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 104, 88.

<sup>31</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 197, 104.

<sup>32</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 120, 218, 104.

<sup>33</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, pp. 157-160.

<sup>34</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 58.

<sup>35</sup> On Lévinas's use of the secret to mediate between the public and the private, see my 'Derrida and the Ruins of Disinterest', *Angelaki* 7.3 (2002), 105-118.

<sup>36</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 104, 218.

<sup>37</sup> This distinguishes Lévinas from Derrida. For Derrida, "whenever" the border or frontier between the public and private is "threatened, fragile, porous, disputable" [*menacée, fragile, poreuse, contestable*], a discourse reliant on a good, regular, ordered distinction collapses, falls in ruins [*tomber en ruine*], *Politiques de l'amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p. 107; tr. George Collins, *Politics of Friendship* (London: Routledge, 1997). My translation. See "Derrida and the Ruins of Disinterest."

<sup>38</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 89.

<sup>39</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 72.

<sup>41</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 119.

<sup>42</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 72.

<sup>43</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 208.

<sup>44</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 82.

---

<sup>45</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 83, 85.

<sup>47</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 88.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: an essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Lévinas', in *Writing and Difference*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 97.

<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999), p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 202-3.

<sup>51</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'A Religion for Adults', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> 'Violence and Metaphysics', p. 97.

<sup>53</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Being a Westener', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 48.

<sup>54</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Heidegger, Gargarin and Us' in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 231-234. See also Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', n. 79, p. 318.

<sup>55</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 46.

<sup>56</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'For a Jewish Humanism', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 273.

<sup>57</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Ethics and Spirit', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 131.

<sup>59</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 142.

---

<sup>60</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 157; 159.

<sup>61</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 162-163.

<sup>62</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 171.

<sup>63</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 169.

<sup>64</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 173-174.

<sup>65</sup> 'Ethics and Spirit', p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> 'Ethics and Spirit', pp. 7; 9.

<sup>67</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>68</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 50.

<sup>69</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, p. 141.

<sup>70</sup> 'Dieu et la philosophie', pp. 123-124. My translation. See also, *Otherwise than Being*, pp.140-52.

<sup>71</sup> 'Dieu et la philosophie', p. 113. My trans.

<sup>72</sup> See Derrida's comments in *Donner la mort*, pp. 101-3, 117.

<sup>73</sup> *The Book of Legends - Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, ed. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, tr. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken, 1992), p. 361 (no. 24).

<sup>74</sup> See "Derrida and the Ruins of Disinterest."

<sup>75</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'The Pharisee is Absent', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 29.

- 
- <sup>76</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Is it Righteous To Be: Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 61-64.
- <sup>77</sup> Catherine Chalié, *La trace de l'infini; Emmanuel Lévinas et la source hébraïque* (Paris: Cerf, 2002).
- <sup>78</sup> 'A Religion for Adults', p. 17.
- <sup>79</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Jewish Thought Today', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. p. 159.
- <sup>80</sup> 'A Religion for Adults', p. 16.
- <sup>81</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'For a Jewish Humanism', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 274.
- <sup>82</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'The Spinoza Case', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 107.
- <sup>83</sup> 'A Religion for Adults', p.14.
- <sup>84</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'Education and Prayer', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 272.
- <sup>85</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, 'The Ark and the Mummy', in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 54.
- <sup>86</sup> 'Dieu et la philosophie', p. 96. My trans.
- <sup>87</sup> 'Dieu et la philosophie' pp. 105-6.
- <sup>88</sup> 'Dieu et la philosophie', pp. 106-7.
- <sup>89</sup> 'Dieu et la philosophie', p. 110. Bettina Bergo translates these phrases as "placing in us," "placed in me." I have chosen the stronger and perhaps more inelegant "putting in us," "put

---

in me” to emphasise the ambivalence of the “trauma” of the dis-interest *of* the subject *by* God.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Dieu et la philosophie’, p. 111.

<sup>91</sup> ‘Dieu et la philosophie’, p. 113.

<sup>92</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *God, Death and Time*, tr. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 200), pp. 180, 203.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Dieu et la philosophie’, pp. 112-13. My translation.

<sup>94</sup> *Donner la mort*, p. 75. My translation.

<sup>95</sup> *Adieu*, pp. 136-148.

<sup>96</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, “Place and Utopia,” in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 99.

<sup>97</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, ‘The State of Caesar and the State of David’, in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, tr. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 177. On the recognition of universal imperatives, see *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 90, 96 and Derrida’s comments in *Adieu*, pp. 25, 119-120. See also, Emmanuel Lévinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, tr. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 5, 15.

<sup>98</sup> *Otherwise than Being*, p. 6.

<sup>99</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, p. 35; *Totalité et infini*, p. 24. I would like to thank Rachel Koren, Jolanta Nowak and David Odell.