

Levinas's political judgement

The *Esprit* articles 1934–1983

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The critical neglect of the political dimension of Levinas's thought is surprising given its centrality to his life and work. Of all the twentieth-century philosophers Levinas was the most directly touched by the violent events of the century's political history. He witnessed as an adolescent the October Revolution in Lithuania, studied in Strasbourg in the 1920s when Alsace was one of the foci of interwar Franco-German tension, worked in Paris during the travails of the Popular Front government in the 1930s and was a member of the French army defeated in 1940. He survived the war in a special POW camp but lost close members of his family in the Shoah. In the 1950s he taught students from North Africa and the Middle East during the decolonization struggles and the establishment of the State of Israel, and at the height of the student movement in 1968 was teaching at Nanterre. Such proximity to the convulsions of twentieth-century political history made reflection on politics and the exercise of political judgement a predicament rather than a choice for Levinas, and had an enormous, if unappreciated, impact on his formulation of an ethics of alterity.

The underestimation of the role of politics and political judgement in Levinas's thought distorts not only his ethics but equally the relationship he proposed between ethics and politics. Typically the latter is reduced to a numerical formalism that moves from the dyadic ethical to the triadic political relation, from an ethical relation to the 'other' to a legal-political relation to the 'third'. Yet this formalism is conspicuously absent in Levinas's specific exercises of political judgement, most evidently in his radio discussion with Schlomo Malka and Alain Finkielkraut on 28 September 1982. In this conversation following the murders a week before of Palestinian refugees in the Chatilla and Sabra camps by Phalangist militias within Israeli-occupied

Lebanon, Levinas revealed a capacity for political judgement that at first glance seems remote from the prevailing picture of Levinasian ethics. While refusing the synthesis of realpolitik and mysticism that to some extent characterized the Likud era in Israeli politics, Levinas was nevertheless forthright in making a link between his ethical theory and the political struggle between the State of Israel and Palestinian nationalists, claiming that 'in alterity we can find an enemy'.¹ The other is not only the stranger, partner in a dyadic relation, but also 'the unhated enemy' with whom the relation has to be one of war.

The link between political judgement and ethical reflection evident in the case of the Chatilla and Sabra murders is not a lapse in the consistency of Levinas's thought, but is fully characteristic and, perhaps uncomfortably, comprises one of its unacknowledged strengths. The tension between ethics and politics motivates Levinas's exercise of political judgement and allows it to yield far richer results than the abstract considerations regarding the triadic form of political institutions would seem to promise. However, the precise contours of Levinas's political judgement are difficult to trace, especially in the light of the inconspicuous ubiquity of the political in his writings. Hence the heuristic value of his articles in the journal *Esprit* that show him developing his thoughts on ethics and politics in the course of responding to specific demands for political judgement. These essays are invaluable not only for understanding the development of Levinas's view of the relation between ethics and politics but also for showing the range and flexibility of his political judgement. The writings for *Esprit* form a corpus that extends over almost half a century – from 1934 to 1983 – paralleling the development of Levinas's authorship from early writings such as *Existents and Existence* (1947) and *Time and the*

Other (1948) to the mature critique of ontology in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961) and the formulation of an ethics of alterity in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). Some of the writings for *Esprit* are familiar apart from their context, others almost completely and unjustly forgotten; but they are rarely if ever considered as a discrete body of work. This is unfortunate since together they add up to a fascinating and contained corpus that moves audaciously from the consideration of concrete political issues to ethical and political reflection. In this respect, Levinas's articles faithfully respect the journal's brief of combining politics and philosophy in a movement from a specific occasion for political judgement to a reflection on its broader philosophical significance.

Personalism into politics

Levinas's series of contributions to *Esprit* began in 1934 with an essay whose importance for the development of his thought is increasingly acknowledged. His 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'² was written in direct response to the political crisis that followed the National Socialist 'seizure of power' in Germany. His next contribution, the essay 'On the Spirit of Geneva', responded to the 1955 Geneva Summit on reducing East-West tension and negotiating limitations on the development and use of nuclear arms. This was followed in 1960 by two contributions, 'Principles and Faces', on the significance of Khrushchev and the post-Stalin epoch in the Soviet Union and 'The Russo-Chinese Debate and the Dialectic', ostensibly on the deteriorating relations between the two socialist superpowers. Perhaps Levinas's finest essay for *Esprit* – 'Space is Not One-Dimensional'³ – was published in 1968 in response to the Six Day War between Israel and the Arab states, and contains some of his most sustained reflections on the political significance of the State of Israel. The series of articles published in *Esprit* closes with two reprinted pieces, one on Franz Rosenzweig in 1982 and, the final contribution, an interview on the theme of 'Philosophy, Justice and Love'.

Before looking more closely at these articles it is important to consider their occasion – the journal *Esprit* and the 'personalist' movement in Catholic thought that it represented. Levinas described the journal in his 1990 introduction to the translation of 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' as representing 'progressive, avant-garde Catholicism' which, while not inaccurate, underplays the significance of the personalist movement. Founded by Emmanuel Mounier

following the Wall Street crash in 1929, personalism through its journal *Esprit* constituted an important current in postwar political culture, one that guided the radical wing of European Christian Democracy. Among politicians it counted supporters such as Aldo Moro and to a certain extent the current Pope, Karol Wojtyla. The latter's main philosophical work *Person and Act* (1969) may be read as an attempt to use Max Scheler's phenomenology to divert personalism from its radical political orientation to a more subjective/moral one, thus defusing the radical philosophical and political agenda central to Mounier's vision of personalism.⁴

Perhaps because of its Christian commitments, personalism is a body of thought barely noted in contemporary continental philosophy, which remains almost Jacobin in its secular prejudices.⁵ Although the roots of personalist theory are to be found in Kant and neo-Kantians, its development as a social and political movement was initially the almost single-handed work of Mounier. In his short texts *What is Personalism?* (1947) and *Personalism* (1949) Mounier located the beginnings of the movement in the Wall Street crash and a sense of the imminent collapse of capitalism. He responded to this crisis with a political, religious and philosophical analysis that, in his words, aspired to combine the insights of Marx and Kierkegaard. At the core of this analysis was a concept of personality as both a moral and a social fact, a balance that Wojtyla's theory and practice would later decisively tip towards the moral. Mounier, by insisting on the moral and social basis of personality, was able to sustain both a moral and a political anti-capitalism without retreating to the conservative moral anti-capitalism later sustained by Wojtyla.

Mounier was convinced from the outset that personalism should not be simply another philosophical position available within the French university but should address a far broader social base. Consequently, the journal *Esprit*, first published in 1932, was intended to take debates in philosophy, politics and theology out of the university and into civil society and wherever possible to relate these debates to current economic and political crises. From the beginning *Esprit* was politically committed, taking up positions and debating their significance in its pages. In its early years it took a principled position against anti-Semitism and 'Hitlerism' and supported the Republic in the Spanish Civil War. After an initial hesitation with respect to Vichy – one that was by no means uncommon in 1940⁶ – Mounier opted for resistance and *Esprit* was silenced for the duration of the war. In the postwar

years *Esprit* was conspicuous for its opposition to the French presence in Algeria and support for the Hungarian revolution in 1956. Even after Mounier's early death in 1950, *Esprit* continued to be both a philosophical journal offering a space for debates on, for example, Marxism and existentialism and a political journal committed to making principled judgements on contemporary political issues.

The significance of the journal for the development of Levinas's thought lies less in his adoption of specific personalist theses than in the demand to combine ethical and political judgement in response to concrete political issues.⁷ This is already evident in the 1934 article on Hitlerism, which is both a response to the first year of National Socialist rule in Germany and a reckoning with the contribution of philosophy to its victory. Written only three years after Levinas's 'Freiburg, Husserl and Phenomenology' in which Heidegger is described in almost messianic terms – 'At the seminar ... all nations were represented'⁸ – and less than a year after Heidegger's entry into the National Socialist Party, the essay attempts to come to terms with the Heideggerian philosophical heritage while framing a political judgement of National Socialist racism. 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' attempted to reorient the political and philosophical judgement of Nazism, showing not only that racism was essential to its definition but also that its racism was not parochial or particularistic, but universal and couched within a universal philosophy of history. The prescience of Levinas's article is impressive, especially given the widespread belief throughout the 1930s and in some cases into the 1940s (and even after!) that Nazi racism was not essential to its conception of the political. The political and philosophical misjudgement of the character of Nazi racism would lead in many cases to tragic personal, political and strategic errors of judgement.

The centrality of racism to the Nazi conception of the political was already clear to Levinas in 1934. His reflections begin by claiming not only that Hitlerism is a philosophy but also that its racism should not be understood in terms of a particularist response to Enlightenment universalism. Levinas perceptively shows that Nazi racism was not a particularist anti-Enlightenment position but part of a universal history according to which the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of racial struggle. Levinas locates racism within a neo-pagan and anti-monotheist current of thought that dissolved any notion of freedom into fate and any notion of identity into destiny. For National Socialists the 'facts' of universal racial war

and unnegotiable racial identity are ineluctable, and Levinas correctly judged that these considerations would overwhelmingly determine Nazi political action. What is more, Levinas predicted that since Nazi racial ideology was part of a concept of universal history it would also prove expansive and be used to justify ruthless colonial military expansion.⁹

Levinas pits against the universalism of Nazi racism a universal philosophy of freedom with its roots in monotheism and with fragile secular variants in liberalism and Marxism. In this universalism a religiously founded freedom is paramount, for grace and forgiveness have the ability to cancel the past and make present and future identity negotiable. Levinas implies that, by severing their links with the monotheist heritage, secular theories such as liberalism and Marxism are forced to rely on fragile analogies with theological concepts, replacing grace with autonomy for example, making these theories abstract and vulnerable before the pagan religious pathos of Nazism. The implication that a liberal or Marxist anti-Nazism will not prove sufficient without a return to its religious origins was explicitly developed into a call for a monotheistic 'popular front' of Jews and Christians. While this was consistent with the position of *Esprit*, Levinas chose to explore the implications of this position in a series of articles in the journal *Pain et Droit*, culminating in the 1939 essay on the death of Pope Pius XI with its still provocative juxtaposition of the cross and the swastika.

Cosmo-politics and the inhuman

In the postwar period before the publication of *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, Levinas published three essays in *Esprit* that show continuities with the themes of 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'. Together they exemplify what Levinas meant by his repeated observation that his life was 'dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror'.¹⁰ The presentiment had been all too accurate, and the hope for protection under the shadow of the cross, with noteworthy individual exceptions, had been disappointed by the politics of Pius XII. The outcome was a suspicion of all universal histories and the consequent rejection of his appeal during the 1930s to an anti-Nazi universal history of freedom. The critique of universal history, fortified by the experience of imprisonment and the study of Hegel when a POW, as well as the subsequent reading of Rosenzweig's critique of Hegel, led Levinas to criticize any claim to progress, whether framed in political, technological or cultural terms. The crisis provoked by this extreme suspicion

became particularly marked in his judgements of the actions and the significance of the new State of Israel. The occasional attribution of a universal historical significance to the foundation of the State of Israel in terms of the 'passion' of the Shoah is constantly qualified by a suspicion guided by the practice of what Levinas described as 'A special patience – Judaism – for all premature messianic claims.'¹¹ The difficulty of sustaining an otherwise than universal history was particularly exposed in the case of the State of Israel where the debate around the messianic role of the state was particularly intense.

The title of the essay of 1956 is an ironic reference to the then much-applauded 'spirit of Geneva' or the summit conference that seemed initially to promise an end to the Cold War. Levinas takes the occasion of the Geneva negotiations on nuclear arms control to reflect on the Cold War, and once again his political judgement proved to be more acute than that of many of his contemporaries. The essay continues the critique of paganism opened in 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism' but now makes an explicit link between paganism and technology, and in particular the technology of nuclear warfare. In the 'Hitlerism' essay Levinas described paganism in terms of the subjection to expansionary natural forces, defining these forces in 1934 in terms of the biological definition of race. The link between paganism and expansive force is sustained in 1956, but now the forces are nuclear and defined in terms of the nuclear arsenals of

the superpowers. The essay begins a proposition that exemplifies Levinas's suspicion of universal history: 'Human conflict has lost all meaning without struggle having come to an end.'¹² The universal historical struggle in this case, between socialism and capitalism or between liberty and tyranny, has been revealed as hollow rhetoric by the inhuman forces released by nuclear fission which now exceed human control. For Levinas this fact signifies the end of any universal history: 'The release of atomic energy has taken the control of the real away from human will. This is precisely what is meant by the arrest of history.'¹³ Not only does struggle no longer possess any meaning or direction (*sens*) but this lack of orientation signifies a fundamental transformation of the political, if not of politics.

Levinas explains the link between the arrest of history and the transformation of the political by means of one of the first appearances in his work of the 'third'. Fascinatingly, the third appears here in an unusual context; normally it signifies the impersonal institution of legal and political judgement, but here the impersonality of the third signifies the end of the epoch of the human political. Levinas writes of the summit negotiations that 'The third partner here is not the third man. It is not a human, they are forces without faces. Strange return of the natural powers...'¹⁴ The forces without faces will return in the 1960 essay 'Principles and Faces'; here they signify a development of the same forces of fatality proposed



in the 'Hitlerism' essay. In the earlier essay human struggle was conducted in terms of the forces of race, with biological forces serving as 'the third'; here the significance of human struggle is finally evacuated by the inhuman scale of the destructive forces released by nuclear energy.

The location of the moment of the political or 'third' in nuclear forces leads Levinas to a redefinition of the political. He proposes a contrast between the human political and a 'cosmo-political', regarding the Cold War as a technologically advanced return to prehistory. Under the reign of the human political,

The inhuman, which in those centuries was prodigious, came to us still through the human. The human relations that made up the social order and the forces that guided that order exceeded in power, efficacy and in being those of the forces of nature. The elements give themselves to us by means of society and the state, which imprint meaning upon them.

In this negotiation of the human and the inhuman, the encounter of the human and the elements is governed by the third of the human social order. This humanized 'world' is the condition for meaningful human action, even conflict; it still contains, however occluded, the sentiment of responsibility for the other human. In principle such a predominance of the political over the physical serves as 'an invitation to work for a better world, to believe the world transformable and human'.¹⁵

In the 'Spirit of Geneva' essay Levinas comes close to acknowledging that the moment of such politics has now passed. He writes that,

For the first time social problems and the struggles between humans do not reveal the ultimate meaning of the real. This end of the world will lack the last judgement. The elements exceed the states that until now contained them. Reason no longer appears in political wisdom, but in the historically unconditioned truths announcing cosmic dangers. For politics is substituted a cosmo-politics that is a physics.¹⁶

The reduction of politics to physics is met by an abdication 'on both sides of the iron curtain' of responsibility in favour of the balance of uncontrollable forces. The parallel between pre- and postwar conditions hardly needs to be spelt out: Nazi bio-politics and Cold War cosmo-politics share the surrender of a political situated within a human horizon for a calculus of implacable inhuman forces that deprives humans of their wisdom, their agency and ultimately their responsibility.

Particularities

In the 1960 article 'Principles and Faces' Levinas develops the themes of 'On the Spirit of Geneva' but introduces a further element prominent in the Hitlerism essay. His judgement of the Cold War political is now explicitly linked to an argument for the complicity with it of 'Western Philosophy'. The exposure of the ontological commitments of 'Western Philosophy' and the argument for 'ethics as first philosophy' in the philosophical writings of the 1950s culminating in *Totality and Infinity* are here linked with the theme of the abdication of political responsibility in the Cold War. Levinas takes the occasion of a speech by the then general secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Khrushchev, denounced by many journalists as 'propaganda', to show that the speech may be located within 'the implicit or explicit metaphysics on which the political thought of the West depends'.¹⁷ Consistent with his political position in 1956 and his philosophical position developed during the 1940s, Levinas argues that 'the fate of the West' 'depends on the perpetual postponement of the consequences flowing from its own principles'.¹⁸ The apocalyptic tone of 'On the Spirit of Geneva' is succeeded by the admission that a political may still be possible, but one organized around postponement of the consequences of its founding ontological principles. With this Levinas begins the articulation of his notion of prophetic politics, or a politics in which the totality of the political and institutional structures of the West are interrupted and diverted by a prophetic voice sounding from the ethical responsibility for the other.

The title of 'Principles and Faces' promises a confrontation between ontological principles and the ethical face-to-face, and both are indeed given voice in the essay. The political 'consequences' of the ontological principles of the West were already anticipated in 'Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism'. One significant consequence is the ontological reduction of being to the play of forces; another is the link between reason and universality. Already in the 1934 essay Levinas had shown that the combination of force and universality was potentially explosive; now in 1960 he underlines the necessity of postponing their fusion with the example of Khrushchev's speech. Fascism is cited as an example of an imperfect fusion of the principles of force and universality, with the force of the nation remaining particular; National Socialism by contrast combined force and universality in the concept of race. Levinas now argues that Soviet socialism marks another possible fusion of force and universality. In Khrushchev's speech, the worker is both

the source of ultimate force – productivity – and of universality; their combination in the universal history of class struggle marks another political realization of the desire for totality that informs the principles of Western philosophy.

In his reflections on the notion of postponement, Levinas returns to the choice between particularism and universalism that he posed at the outset of ‘Some Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism’. He refuses to prefer ‘the particularities of tradition, family, country, corporate group’ to the ‘millennial quest for universality’ and is no longer inclined, as in 1934, to contest one claim to universality with another. In order to rethink the political it is necessary to reconsider the entire opposition of universality and particularity and to ask ‘*Is there not a universality other than that of the state and a freedom other than objective?*’ Difficult reflections, for they must go further than one thinks. Well beyond Marx and Hegel. They lead perhaps to putting into question the deepest foundations of Western Metaphysics.¹⁹ This would be Levinas’s project in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*; what this passage clearly shows is that the motivation for putting into question ontology and the formulation of an ethics of alterity is first and foremost *political*. The ethical face-to-face in ‘Principles and Faces’ is acknowledged in the significance Levinas lends to Khrushchev’s visits to the West, which satisfied the ethical ‘necessity for humans to see behind the anonymous principle the face of the other human’.²⁰

The programmatic statement of the possibility for sustaining a concept of the political beyond and otherwise than Hegel’s and Marx’s equation of universality and freedom is strangely disappointed by the essay in *Esprit* from the same year, ‘The Russo-Chinese Debate and the Dialectic’. Given his suspicion of the principles at the foundations of Western metaphysics, Levinas might have been expected when speaking of Asia to step out of the particularist construction of Europe and look for new sources of universality and freedom. That he does not make this step is but one of the many mysteries of this tormented essay, whose precise political object only becomes clear towards the end. The immediate occasion of the article was the growing Sino-Soviet tension, to which Levinas responded with some strange sentences on the geopolitics of the Soviet Union, Europe and Asia. To be precise, Levinas never speaks of the Soviet Union, but always of ‘Russia’, and this lapse is important for the alliance he evokes between ‘Russia’ and Europe against Asia. In an extraordinary reprise of the worst universal history, Levinas writes:

The exclusive community with the Asiatic world, strangers to European history to which Russia, in spite of all its strategic and tactical denials, has belonged for almost a thousand years, would this not be disturbing even to a society without classes. ... In abandoning the West, does Russia not fear to drown itself in an Asiatic civilization...²¹

This evocation of an essential national and cultural identity which must be protected against a culture that is a stranger to its history would seem to be everything that Levinas ever argued against.

The continuation of the argument is hardly more encouraging, with a shocking passage that begins:

The yellow peril! It is not racial, it is spiritual. It does not involve inferior values; it involves a radical strangeness, a stranger to the weight of its past, from which there does not filter any familiar voice or inflection, a lunar or Martian past.²²

Even when explicitly qualified it is difficult to believe that a phrase such as ‘the yellow peril’ can ever not be racist, but equally disturbing is the phantasm of the Asiatic past as part of the history of another planet. It is almost as if Levinas was undertaking the experiment of mounting a particularist argument against the universal claims of Hegelian-Marxist philosophy. This is certainly supported by his provisional conclusion, which claims that ‘progress towards a universal society will pass by paths where the diverse human groups do not have to overcome their histories. There exist particularisms dialectically indispensable.’²³ This move towards particularism was surely not the post-Hegelian or Marxist thought of the universal and freedom that Levinas intimated in ‘Principles and Faces’.

In the light of references to an alleged spiritual ‘yellow peril’, the spirit of universal freedom that Levinas opposed to Nazi racism in 1934 begins itself to seem uncomfortably parochial. With its references to the ‘Graeco, Judaic, Christian West’, the 1960 essay seems to have converted the monotheist popular front against Nazism of the 1930s into a Cold War spiritual and geopolitical bloc, uncannily similar in its simplifications to Heidegger’s geopolitical ‘analysis’ of the position of Germany between the USA and the Soviet Union.

The uncharacteristic distortion and even inversion of Levinas’s positions in this essay are partially clarified in the final paragraph, which seems to suggest that its object is other than a debate between the Soviet Union and China. The essay ends with the sentence ‘It will be necessary to be a little Chinese, to again call a cat a cat and to recognize in the anticapitalist nationalisms the shadow of National Socialism.’²⁴ Far

from rediscovering an openness to the Asian other, the conclusion of the essay masks a discrete political judgement. In the final paragraph Levinas describes one of the main points of tension between 'Russia' and China as the former's support for radical nationalist movements: the Chinese criticized the Soviet Union for its support of nationalist movements regardless of their commitment to socialist or communist principles. Levinas criticizes the Soviet faith in the dialectic that allowed it to appear reasonable 'to support anti-communists if they represented a stage towards socialism and to show sympathy to those who torture communists in their prisons. It would appear reasonable to take seriously socialist pretensions and anti-imperialist slogans made by avid nationalists.'²⁵

This probably should not be read as a Maoist turn in Levinas's politics, nor as a straightforward ethical expression of sympathy for communists imprisoned by radical nationalist regimes. It is more likely that Levinas has a particular nationalism in mind at this point – Arab nationalism – and specifically the Nasserite regime in Egypt and the nascent Ba'athist regimes in Syria and Iraq, all of which were supported diplomatically, economically and militarily by the Soviet Union and all of which were united in their 'anti-imperialist' hostility towards the existence of the State of Israel. This reading is confirmed by the claim regarding the 'shadow of National Socialism' falling on these regimes: this is consistent with a political and cultural discourse widespread at that time that emphasized the alleged historical links and similarities between Arab nationalism and German National Socialism. Whatever the historical judgement on the veracity of this claim, it is indisputable that the discourse existed and extremely likely that Levinas is subscribing to it at this point.²⁶ If this is true, then the 'Asia' against which Levinas warns Russia is not only China but also the Arab nationalism that was preparing for war with the State of Israel. The tensions evident in the essay around universal history and particularity are characteristic of Levinas's writings on the State of Israel, notably the next essay in *Esprit*. Whatever the explanation of its distortions, 'The Russo-Chinese

Debate and the Dialectic' is an extremely tormented and uncharacteristic essay that must be reckoned with in any responsible interpretation of Levinas.

Non-Euclidean politics

The next contribution made by Levinas to *Esprit* was the magnificent reflection on Jewish identity, the diaspora and the State of Israel provoked by the Six Day War, 'Space is not One-Dimensional'. The war marked the high point of solidarity between the diaspora and the State of Israel, so much as to provoke a resurgence of anti-Semitism in France. It is to this renewed anti-Semitism that Levinas responds in his essay, written in the conviction that 'a sense of spirit still inhabits the journal *Esprit*'.²⁷ The essay begins by evoking the French Revolution and the tension between citizenship and nationality bequeathed by it (a tension also discussed at length by Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*). Levinas had been interested in this tension from early in the 1920s in connection with the anti-Semitism revealed in the Dreyfus Affair, and now



returned to it as the condition for the revival of the anti-Semitic discourse of the 'double-allegiance', this time with respect to France and Israel.

The significance of the French Revolution in Levinas's thought is reaffirmed in this essay, notably in the statement that 'Adherence to France is a metaphysical act, of course; it had to be France, a country that expresses its political allegiance with a trinitarian emblem which is moral and philosophical, and inscribed on the front of its public buildings.'²⁸ But liberty, equality and fraternity, like the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, remains an equivocal formula susceptible to a host of interpretations. The revolutionary trinity, like the Christian Trinity before it, invites a choice as to which person of the trinity is to be given the most importance. Marxist theory long ago demonstrated the contradiction that arose in bourgeois societies between liberty and equality – economic liberty producing inequality – and pitted against it the 'fraternity' of the international working class. But there were also other possible versions of fraternity that would trump liberty and equality in much the way that 'the Son' trumps the Father and the Holy Spirit in the Arian heresy – one is the fraternal nation of brothers-in-arms (the Jacobin version), another the fraternal confession (the Gallo-Catholic version) and a third the fraternal 'race'. Jewish citizens by definition would always be excluded from the second and third versions of the revolutionary trinity, and their claims to free and equal citizenship would always be under threat from the trump card of confessional or racial fraternity.

Levinas's response to the resurgence of this threat in 1967 is to argue that the three dimensions of liberty, equality and fraternity cannot be reduced to the single dimension of fraternity – 'Does being French, short of Euclidian space, mean moving only in one dimension?'²⁹ The question is particularly telling given 'what happened in Europe between 1933 and 1945', which no longer leaves even the comfort of Euclidian three-dimensional space. Levinas describes the Shoah in terms of a topological analogy: 'there are human events which tear open their own envelope' – in this case the three-dimensional envelope of the modern political trinity. The transgression of political dimensionality following the Shoah puts in question liberty, equality and fraternity, not to speak of any attempt to reduce even these three to a single dimension. What is more, the non-Euclidian politics to which Levinas alludes is summed up in the extra, religious dimension of politics deliberately unthematized in the revolutionary trinity. It was precisely this lack of thematization

of the religious that provoked the set of issues collected under the chilling title 'the Jewish question'.

The rethinking of the relationship of a Jewish French citizen to France and to Israel must then take account of the fourth, religious dimension of the political. In this the focus lies in the nature of Israel, and by this Levinas intends the question of the religious-political of Israel rather than the politics of the State of Israel. There is a relationship between the two, but one which cannot be reduced to simple identity. There is, in short, a tension between Israel as an event in 'sacred history' and the State of Israel as an event in 'universal history'. This tension is ubiquitous in Levinas's analyses of Israel and the State of Israel, as when he writes 'The Nazi persecution and, following the exterminations, the extra-ordinary fulfilment of the Zionist dream, are religious events outside of any revelation, church, clergy, miracle, dogma or belief.'³⁰ Here the historical events of the Shoah and establishment of the State of Israel are placed in a class of religious events beyond the established categories of the religious, in short as part of a sacred history.

The reference to a sacred history of Israel informs Levinas's messianic concept of Israel, which is not the same as the State of Israel. The concept of sacred history – developed out of Rosenzweig's work – is contrary to the Hegelian universal history that locates all historical events within the progressive actualization of the idea of freedom in the state. An account of the foundation of the State of Israel according to universal history would locate this moment as the historical outcome of a sacrifice. Levinas seems on occasion to come to close to this position, but always to tip it in the direction of sacred history. In the following passage, the State of Israel is not *founded upon* sacrifice, but *produces* the sacrifice that is consistent with the prophetic vocation of Israel:

It is not because the Holy Land takes the form of a state that it brings the reign of the Messiah any closer, but because the men who inhabit it try to resist the temptation of politics; because the state proclaimed in the aftermath of Auschwitz embraces the teaching of the prophets; because it produces abnegation and self-sacrifice.³¹

The teachings of the prophets do not fuse with the politics of the state to produce a messianic *Sittlichkeit*, but rather unsettle the state by awakening a 'demand for the absolute' that cannot be satisfied by a state. The 'messianic institutions' of Israel of which Levinas here speaks are not the real existing institutions of the State of Israel, but nor are they forms of the ideal state

in the manner of Plato's *Republic* – they are rather to be understood as postponements or corrections of the existing institutional structures.

One way to clarify Levinas's position is to situate it in a key debate within the history of Zionism that recurred throughout the history of the State of Israel. Viewed from the viewpoint of universal history, the State of Israel is primarily a political event set within a particular political history; this view would be consistent with the Zionist position that saw the State of Israel as the realization of a civil freedom that could not be guaranteed to Jews in the diaspora. An opposed view would be to see the 'state' of Israel and its wars and politics as secondary to the messianic mission of Israel in Jewish sacred history. The political logic governing the actions of the real-existing State of Israel always seems to be in between the two positions – refusing the extremes of sacrificing the messianic mission of Israel in order to ensure the security and material well-being of the State of Israel, or sacrificing the State of Israel in order to fulfil the messianic mission of Israel in sacred history. This is a conflict that in the history of the State of Israel has been played out in terms of territory: how far must attempts to realize the religious claims to the Holy Land be qualified by considerations of protecting the existence of the State of Israel within current borders? That is to say, how far should territorial expansion be limited or even reversed in order to protect the existence of the state?

Levinas tries to sustain the inconsistency between sacred and universal history by holding that 'sacred history' involves a 'truth and destiny' 'not contained within political and national categories',³² while referring to a 'destiny confusedly felt' with respect to the events of May–June 1967 that concerned the very survival of the state, and thus fell under the political categories of universal history. He describes this inconsistency in terms of 'an awkward position within being';³³ this position cannot be understood solely in terms of universal history, but challenges the very dimensionality of its concept of the political, pointing to a need for extra dimensions of political experience that would include the ethical and the religious. The 'awkward position in being' also characterizes the State of Israel that leads 'a dangerous and pure life' as a hybrid product of sacred and universal history – 'a Holy Land resuscitated by the State, in spite of the profane forms it assumes' always in danger of one of its aspects – sacred or secular – destroying the other.

In this context Levinas properly insists on increasing the number of dimensions according to which political judgements, especially those concerning Israel, are made. Yet the conclusion of the *Esprit* essay seems on balance to prefer to judge the actions of the State of Israel according to the criteria of universal history. After a reference to 'my Muslim friend, my unhated enemy of the Six-Day War', Levinas concludes with the reflection, echoing Kant on the French Revolution, that 'it is from adventures such as these run by its citizens that a great Modern state – that is to say, one that serves humanity – derives its greatness, the attention it pays to the present and its presence in the world'.³⁴ With the exception of the reference to serving humanity, all of these epithets concern the secular universal historical significance of the State of Israel rather than the sacred historical significance of the prophetic mission of Israel.

The question of sacred and universal history pre-occupied Levinas for the rest of his life, for reasons that are by now evident. It is particularly apparent in his comments on Sartre and in particular Sartre's words 'If there is a Jewish history Hegel is wrong. Now there is a Jewish history.' Levinas's critique of Hegel is largely indebted to Rosenzweig, a writer central to *Totality and Infinity* on whom Levinas wrote a series of fascinating articles, including one reprinted in *Esprit* in 1982. With this essay Levinas effectively closed the series of articles for the journal, referring to the writer who was their political and religious inspiration. The final work to appear under his signature was the translation of an interview published in Spanish that linked its themes, 'Philosophy, Justice and Love', by means of the concept of prophesy and its orientation towards the future.

Levinas's articles for *Esprit* span the historical interval between the advent of National Socialism and the consolidation of the State of Israel. They show the link between his exercise of political judgement and the broader development of his philosophy, beginning with the racist character of the National Socialist political, moving to the Cold War political, and finally to the prophetic political of Israel and its awkward relation to the State of Israel. In almost all of his analyses Levinas opts for a complexity of political judgement that far exceeds the formalism of many of his discussions of justice and politics in terms of 'the third'. This complexity of judgement also precedes and underlies the formulation of his ethics, providing the political setting in which he developed his critique of ontological principles and the ethics

of alterity. Perhaps before trying to find a passage between Levinas's ethics and politics it is necessary first to recover the specific political conditions to which his ethics was a response?

Notes

1. 'Ethics and Politics', in Seán Hand, ed., *The Levinas Reader*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989.
2. Translated by Seán Hand in *Critical Inquiry* 17, Autumn 1990, pp. 64–71.
3. Translated in *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Seán Hand, Athlone Press, London 1990, pp. 259–64.
4. The difference in orientation is most evident in a comparison between Wojtyła's *Person and Act* and Mounier's *Treatise on Character* (1947), which in spite of their shared project of philosophical anthropology arrive at quite opposed conclusions.
5. For two examinations of the secular limits of the canon of continental philosophy, see P. Blond, *Post-Secular Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 1998, and Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1999.
6. As was evident in Ricoeur's position in 1941: 'until 1941 I was attracted, along with many others – the propaganda was intense – to certain aspects of Pétainism. It was probably that I held against the Republic the feeling of having participated in its weakness, the feeling that a new, stronger, France had to be formed.' *Critique and Conviction*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. 16.
7. While there are evident links between some of Levinas's positions and those of personalism, such as the stress on alterity and the critique of the money form, the substantial links between them are less evident than in the case of Ricoeur, who might with justice be described as a personalist philosopher.
8. *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1998.
9. At the end of the essay Levinas debatedly links this expansive characteristic of Nazism with Nietzsche's thought, in the first manifestation of his by no means unequivocal critique of Nietzsche.
10. 'Signature', in *Difficult Freedom*, p. 291.
11. 'Judaism and the Present', in *ibid.*, p. 214.
12. 'Sur l'esprit de Geneve', in *Les Imprevus de l'histoire*, Fata Morgana, 1994, 161.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 164.
17. 'Principes et Visages', in *ibid.*, p. 166.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
21. 'Le Debat Russo-Chinois et la dialectique', in *ibid.*, p. 171.
22. *ibid.*, p. 172.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
26. For a historical defence of the thesis of this discourse, see Howard Sacher's *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1996; for a critique, Albert Houriani's *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Faber, London, 1991.
27. 'Space is Not One-Dimensional', in *Difficult Freedom*, p. 259.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 260–61. The exploration of the inseparable political, ethical and philosophical significance of the trinity 'liberty, equality and fraternity' informs all of Levinas's work.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 263.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*