

WO ES WAR

A series from Verso edited by Slavoj Žižek

Wo es war, soll ich werden – Where it was, I shall come into being – is Freud's version of the Enlightenment goal of knowledge that is in itself an act of liberation. Is it still possible to pursue this goal today, in the conditions of late capitalism? If 'it' today is the twin role of pragmatic-relativist New Sophists and New Age obscurantists, what 'shall come into being' in its place? The premiss of the series is that the explosive combination of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxist tradition detonates a dynamic freedom that enables us to question the very presuppositions of the circuit of Capital.

In the same series:

Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*. Edited and introduced by Miran Božovič

Alain Grosrichard, *The Sultan's Court: European Fantasies of the East*. Translated by Liz Heron and introduced by Mladen Dolar

Renata Salecl, *(Per)Versions of Love and Hate*

Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality*

Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*

Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*

Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*

Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism? Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a Notion*

Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan*

Pulled from stacks.

Ethics

An Essay on the Understanding of Evil

ALAIN BADIOU

Translated and introduced by
Peter Hallward



VERSO

London • New York

Contents

This book is supported by the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs as part of the Burgess Programme, headed for the French Embassy in London by the Institut Français du Royaume Uni
if institut français

This edition first published by Verso 2001

© Verso 2001

Translation © Peter Hallward 2001

First published as *L'éthique: Essai sur la conscience du Mal*

© Editions Haüier 1998

All rights reserved

The moral rights of the author and translator have been asserted

Verso

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1V 3HR

USA: 180 Varick Street, New York, NY 10014-4606

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN 1-85984-297-6

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset in 10/12½pt ITC New Baskerville by

SetSystems Ltd, Saffron Walden, Essex

Printed by Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

Translator's Introduction	vii
Notes on the Translation	xxxvi
Preface to the English Edition	liii
Introduction	1
1 Does Man Exist?	4
2 Does the Other Exist?	18
3 Ethics as a Figure of Nihilism	30
4 The Ethic of Truths	40
5 The Problem of Evil	58
Conclusion	90
Appendix: Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Alain Badiou	95
Bibliography	145
Index	163

this point I had considered only their being (i.e. the fact that truths are generic multiplicities).

So you can see that the theoretical basis of the present book has evolved somewhat. But to my mind it remains solid enough on the essential points, and still offers an introduction that is both lively and coherent to a far-reaching enterprise which, I hope, will redefine what is at stake in contemporary philosophy.

I do not want to end without thanking both Verso, for their intellectual and political commitment, and Peter Hallward, who is a genuine friend – and all the more so since he often disagrees with my theories.

Alain Badiou, April 2000

Introduction

Certain scholarly words, after long confinement in dictionaries and in academic prose, have the good fortune, or the misfortune – a little like an old maid who, long since resigned to her fate, suddenly becomes, without understanding why, the toast of the town – of sudden exposure to the bright light of day, of being plebi- and publi-cited, press-released, televised, even mentioned in government speeches. The word *ethics*, which smacks so strongly of philosophy courses and its Greek root, which evokes Aristotle (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, one of the great bestsellers!), has today taken centre stage.

Ethics concerns, in Greek, the search for a good 'way of being', for a wise course of action. On this account, ethics is a part of philosophy, that part which organizes practical existence around representation of the Good.

The Stoics were no doubt the most dedicated of those who made of ethics not only a part of philosophical wisdom but its *very core*. The wise man is he who, able to distinguish those things which are his responsibility from those which are not, restricts his will to the former while impassively enduring the latter. We attribute to the Stoics, moreover, the custom of comparing philosophy to an egg whose shell is Logic, whose white is Physics, and whose yolk is Ethics.

Index of Theological, Philosophical, and Literary References

I

Does Man Exist?

According to the way it is generally used today, the term 'ethics' relates above all to the domain of human rights, 'the rights of man' – or, by derivation, the rights of living beings.

We are supposed to assume the existence of a universally recognizable human subject possessing 'rights' that are in some sense natural: the right to live, to avoid abusive treatment, to enjoy 'fundamental' liberties (of opinion, of expression, of democratic choice in the election of governments, etc.). These rights are held to be self-evident, and the result of a wide consensus. 'Ethics' is a matter of busying ourselves with these rights, of making sure that they are respected.

This return to the old doctrine of the natural rights of man is obviously linked to the collapse of revolutionary Marxism, and of all the forms of progressive engagement that it inspired. In the political domain, deprived of any collective political landmark, stripped of any notion of the 'meaning of History' and no longer able to hope for or expect a social revolution, many intellectuals, along with much of public opinion, have been won over to the logic of a capitalist economy and a parliamentary democracy. In the domain of 'philosophy', they have rediscovered the virtues

of that ideology constantly defended by their former opponents: humanitarian individualism and the liberal defence of rights against the constraints imposed by organized political engagement. Rather than seek out the terms of a new politics of collective liberation, they have, in sum, adopted as their own the principles of the established 'Western' order.

In so doing, they have inspired a violently reactionary movement against all that was thought and proposed in the 1960s.

I The death of Man?

In those years, Michel Foucault outraged his readers with the declaration that Man, in the sense of constituent subject, was a constructed historical concept peculiar to a certain order of discourse, and not a timelessly self-evident principle capable of founding human rights or a universal ethics. He announced the end of this concept's relevance, once the kind of discourse which alone had made it meaningful became historically obsolete.

Likewise, Louis Althusser declared that history was not, as Hegel had thought, the absolute development [*devenir*] of Spirit, nor the advent of a subject-substance, but a rational, regulated process which he called a 'process without a subject', and which could be grasped only through a particular science, the science of historical materialism. It followed that the humanism of human rights and ethics in the abstract sense were merely imaginary constructions – ideologies – and that we should develop, rather, what he called a 'theoretical antihumanism'.

corruption, indifference or cruelty was a fact already noted by the Greek theorists of tyranny. That it is easier to establish consensus regarding what is evil rather than regarding what is good is a fact already established by the experience of the Church: it was always easier for church leaders to indicate what was forbidden – indeed, to content themselves with such abstinences – than to try to figure out what should be done. It is certainly true, moreover, that every politics worthy of the name finds its point of departure in the way people represent their lives and rights.

It might seem, then, that we have here a body of self-evident principles capable of cementing a global consensus, and of imposing themselves strongly.

Yet we must insist that it is not so; that this 'ethics' is inconsistent, and that the – perfectly obvious – reality of the situation is characterized in fact by the unrestrained pursuit of self-interest, the disappearance or extreme fragility of emancipatory politics, the multiplication of 'ethnic' conflicts, and the universality of unbridled competition.

III Man: Living animal or immortal singularity?

The heart of the question concerns the presumption of a universal human Subject, capable of reducing ethical issues to matters of human rights and humanitarian actions.

We have seen that ethics subordinates the identification of this subject to the universal recognition of the evil that is done to him. Ethics thus defines man *as a victim*. It will be objected: 'No! You are forgetting the active subject, the one that intervenes against barbarism!' So let us be precise: man is *the being who is capable of recognizing himself as a victim*.

It is this definition that we must proclaim unacceptable – for three reasons in particular:

1. In the first place, because the status of victim, of suffering beast, of emaciated, dying body, equates man with his animal substructure, it reduces him to the level of a living organism pure and simple (life being, as Bichat says, nothing other than 'the set of functions that resist death').³ To be sure, humanity is an animal species. It is mortal and predatory. But neither of these attributes can distinguish humanity within the world of the living. In his role as executioner, man is an animal abjection, but we must have the courage to add that in his role as victim, he is generally worth little more. The stories told by survivors of torture⁴ forcefully underline the point: if the torturers and bureaucrats of the dungeons and the camps are able to treat their victims like animals destined for the slaughterhouse, with whom they themselves, the well-nourished criminals, have nothing in common, it is because the victims have indeed become such animals. What had to be done for this to happen has indeed been done. That some nevertheless remain human beings, and testify to that effect, is a confirmed fact. But this is always achieved precisely through enormous effort, an effort acknowledged by witnesses (in whom it excites a radiant recognition) as an almost incomprehensible resistance on the part of that which, in them, *does not coincide with the identity of victim*. This is where we are to find Man, if we are determined to *think him [le penser]*: in what ensures, as Varlam Shalamov puts in his *Stories of Life in the Camps*,⁵ that we are dealing with an animal whose resistance, unlike that of a horse, lies not in his fragile body but in his stubborn determination to remain what he is

– that is to say, precisely something other than a victim, other than a being-for-death, and thus: *something other than a mortal being*.

An immortal: this is what the worst situations that can be inflicted upon Man show him to be, in so far as he distinguishes himself within the varied and rapacious flux of life. In order to think any aspect of Man, we must begin from this principle. So if 'rights of man' exist, they are surely not rights of life against death, or rights of survival against misery. They are the rights of the Immortal, affirmed in their own right, or the rights of the Infinite, exercised over the contingency of suffering and death. The fact that in the end we all die, that only dust remains, in no way alters Man's identity as immortal at the instant in which he affirms himself as someone who runs counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-an-animal to which circumstances may expose him. And we know that every human being is *capable* of being this immortal – unpredictably, be it in circumstances great or small, for truths important or secondary. In each case, subjectivation is immortal, and makes Man. Beyond this there is only a biological species, a 'biped without feathers', whose charms are not obvious.

If we do not set out from this point (which can be summarized, very simply, as the assertion that Man *thinks*, that Man is a tissue of truths), if we equate Man with the simple reality of his living being, we are inevitably pushed to a conclusion quite opposite to the one that the principle of life seems to imply. For this 'living being' is in reality contemptible, and *he will indeed be held in contempt*. Who can fail to see that in our humanitarian expeditions, interventions, embarkations of charitable *légionnaires*, the Subject presumed to be universal is split? On the side of the victims,

the haggard animal exposed on television screens. On the side of the benefactors, conscience and the imperative to intervene. And why does this splitting always assign the same roles to the same sides? Who cannot see that this ethics which rests on the misery of the world hides, behind its victim-Man, the good-Man, the white-Man? Since the barbarity of the situation is considered only in terms of 'human rights' – whereas in fact we are always dealing with a political situation, one that calls for a political thought-practice, one that is peopled by its own authentic actors – it is perceived, from the heights of our apparent civil peace, as the uncivilized that demands of the civilized a civilizing intervention. Every intervention in the name of a civilization *requires* an initial contempt for the situation as a whole, including its victims. And this is why the reign of 'ethics' coincides, after decades of courageous critiques of colonialism and imperialism, with today's sordid self-satisfaction in the 'West', with the insistent argument according to which the misery of the Third World is the result of its own incompetence, its own inanity – in short, of its *subhumanity*.

2. In the second place, because if the ethical 'consensus' is founded on the recognition of Evil, it follows that every effort to unite people around a positive idea of the Good, let alone to identify Man with projects of this kind, becomes in fact the real source of evil itself. Such is the accusation so often repeated over the last fifteen years: every revolutionary project stigmatized as 'utopian' turns, we are told, into totalitarian nightmare. Every will to inscribe an idea of justice or equality turns bad. Every collective will to the Good creates Evil.⁶

This is sophistry at its most devastating. For if our only agenda is an ethical engagement against an Evil we

recognize a priori, how are we to envisage any transformation of the way things are? From what source will man draw the strength to be the immortal that he is? What shall be the destiny of thought, since we know very well that it must be affirmative invention or nothing at all? In reality, the price paid by ethics is a stodgy conservatism. The ethical conception of man, besides the fact that its foundation is either biological (images of victims) or 'Western' (the self-satisfaction of the armed benefactor), prohibits every broad, positive vision of possibilities. What is vaunted here, what ethics legitimates, is in fact the conservation by the so-called 'West' of what it possesses. It is squarely astride these possessions (material possessions, but also possession of its own being) that ethics determines Evil to be, in a certain sense, simply that which it does not own and enjoy [*ce qui n'est pas ce dont elle jouit*]. But Man, as immortal, is sustained by the incalculable and the unpossessed. He is sustained by non-being [*non-étant*]. To forbid him to imagine the Good, to devote his collective powers to it, to work towards the realization of unknown possibilities, to think what might be in terms that break radically with what is, is quite simply to forbid him humanity as such.

3. Finally, thanks to its negative and a priori determination of Evil, ethics prevents itself from thinking the singularity of situations as such, which is the obligatory starting point of all properly human action. Thus, for instance, the doctor won over to 'ethical' ideology will ponder, in meetings and commissions, all sorts of considerations regarding 'the sick', conceived of in exactly the same way as the partisan of human rights conceives of the indistinct crowd of victims - the 'human' totality of subhuman entities [*réels*]. But the same doctor will have no difficulty in accepting the

fact that *this* particular person is not treated at the hospital, and accorded all necessary measures, because he or she is without legal residency papers, or not a contributor to Social Security. Once again, 'collective' responsibility demands it! What is erased in the process is the fact that there is only one medical situation, the clinical situation,⁷ and there is no need for an 'ethics' (but only for a clear vision of *this* situation) to understand that in these circumstances a doctor is a doctor only if he deals with the situation according to the rule of maximum possibility - to treat this person who demands treatment of him (no intervention here!) as thoroughly as he can, using everything he knows and with all the means at his disposal, without taking anything else into consideration. And if he is to be prevented from giving treatment because of the State budget, because of death rates or laws governing immigration, then let them send for the police! Even so, his strict Hippocratic duty would oblige him to resist them, with force if necessary. 'Ethical commissions' and other ruminations on 'health-care expenses' or 'managerial responsibility', since they are radically exterior to the one situation that is genuinely medical, can in reality only prevent us from being *faithful* to it. For to be faithful to this situation means: to treat it *right to the limit* of the possible. Or, if you prefer: to draw from this situation, to the greatest possible extent, the affirmative humanity that it contains. Or again: to try to be the immortal of this situation.

As a matter of fact, bureaucratic medicine that complies with ethical ideology depends on 'the sick' conceived as vague victims or statistics, but is quickly overwhelmed by any urgent, singular situation of need. Hence the reduction of 'managed', 'responsible' and 'ethical' health-care to the

The University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

object task of deciding which sick people the 'French medical system' can treat and which others – because the Budget and public opinion demand it – it must send away to die in the shantytowns of Kinshasa.

IV Some principles

We must reject the ideological framework of 'ethics', and concede nothing to the negative and victimary definition of man. This framework equates man with a simple mortal animal, it is the symptom of a disturbing conservatism, and – because of its abstract, statistical generality – it prevents us from thinking the singularity of situations.

I will advance three opposing theses:

- Thesis 1: Man is to be identified by his affirmative thought, by the singular truths of which he is capable, by the Immortal which makes of him the most resilient [*résistant*] and most paradoxical of animals.
- Thesis 2: It is from our positive capability for Good, and thus from our boundary-breaking treatment of possibilities and our refusal of conservatism, including the conservation of being, that we are to identify Evil – not vice versa.
- Thesis 3: All humanity has its root in the identification in thought [*en pensée*] of singular situations. There is no ethics in general. There are only – eventually – ethics of processes by which we treat the possibilities of a situation.

At this point the refined man of ethics will object, murmuring: 'Wrong! Wrong from the beginning. Ethics is in no

sense founded on the identity of the Subject, not even on his identity as recognized victim. From the beginning, ethics is the ethics of the other, it is the principal opening to the other, it subordinates identity to difference.'

Let us examine this line of argument. Does it contribute something new?

Notes

1. [In English in the original. *Translator's note.*]
2. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.
3. Bichat was an eighteenth-century French doctor, anatomist and physiologist.
4. Henri Alleg, *La Question*, 1958. It is well worth referring to some of our own episodes of torture, systematically practised by the *French* army between 1954 and 1962.
5. Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales: Stories of Life in the Camps*, 1980 [1980]. This genuinely admirable book lends the form of art to a true ethics.
6. André Glucksmann, *The Master Thinkers*, 1977 [1980]. It is Glucksmann who has been most insistent on the absolute priority of the awareness of Evil, and on the idea that the catastrophic primacy [*primat*] of the Good was a creation of philosophy. 'Ethical' ideology is thus rooted, in part, in the work of the 'new philosophers' of the late 1970s.
7. See Cécile Winter, *Qu'en est-il de l'historicité actuelle de la clinique?* (inspired by an idea of Foucault's). This text demonstrates a most rigorous will to rethink medicine, in contemporary conditions, in such a way that it recognizes clinical requirements as its sole concern.

Does the Other Exist?

The conception of ethics as the 'ethics of the other' or the 'ethics of difference' has its origin in the theses of Emmanuel Lévinas rather than in those of Kant.

Lévinas has devoted his work, after a brush with phenomenology (an exemplary confrontation between Husserl and Heidegger), to the deposing [*destitution*] of philosophy in favour of ethics. It is to him that we owe, long before the current fashion, a kind of ethical radicalism.¹

I Ethics according to Lévinas

Roughly speaking: Lévinas maintains that metaphysics, imprisoned by its Greek origins, has subordinated thought to the logic of the Same, to the primacy of substance and identity. But, according to Lévinas, it is impossible to arrive at an authentic thought of the Other (and thus an ethics of the relation to the Other) from the despotism of the Same, which is incapable of recognizing this Other. The dialectic of the Same and the Other, conceived 'ontologically' under the dominance of self-identity [*identité-à-soi*], ensures the absence of the Other in effective thought, sup-

presses all genuine experience of the Other, and bars the way to an ethical opening to alterity. So we must push thought over to a different origin, a non-Greek origin, one that proposes a radical, primary opening to the Other conceived as ontologically anterior to the construction of identity. It is in the Jewish tradition that Lévinas finds the basis for this pushing over. What the Law (understood according to Jewish tradition as both immemorial and currently in effect) names is precisely the anteriority, founded in being-before-the-Same, and with respect to theoretical thought, of the ethics of the relation to the Other, itself conceived merely as the 'objective' identification of regularities and identities. The Law, indeed, does not tell me what is, but what is imposed by the existence of others. This Law (of the Other) might be opposed to the laws (of the real).

According to Greek thought, adequate action presumes an initial theoretical mastery of experience, which ensures that the action is in conformity with the rationality of being. From this point of departure are deduced laws (in the plural) of the City and of action. According to Jewish ethics, in Lévinas's sense, everything is grounded in the immediacy of an opening to the Other which disarms the reflexive subject. The 'thou [*tu*]' prevails over the 'I'. Such is the whole meaning of *the Law*.

Lévinas proposes a whole series of phenomenological themes for testing and exploring the originality of the Other, at the centre of which lies the theme of the face, of the singular giving [*donation*] of the Other 'in person', through his fleshly epiphany, which does not test mimetic recognition (the Other as 'similar', *identical* to me), but, on the contrary, is that from which I experience myself

ethically as 'pledged' to the appearing of the Other, and subordinated in my being to this pledge.

For Lévinas, ethics is *the new name of thought*, thought which has thrown off its 'logical' chains (the principle of identity) in favour of its prophetic submission to the Law of founding alterity.

II The 'ethics of difference'

Whether they know it or not, it is in the name of this configuration that the proponents of ethics explain to us today that it amounts to 'recognition of the other' (against racism, which would deny this other), or to 'the ethics of differences' (against substantialist nationalism, which would exclude immigrants, or sexism, which would deny feminine-being), or to 'multiculturalism' (against the imposition of a unified model of behaviour and intellectual approach). Or, quite simply, to good old-fashioned 'tolerance', which consists of not being offended by the fact that others think and act differently from you.

This commonsensical discourse has neither force nor truth. It is defeated in advance in the competition it declares between 'tolerance' and 'fanaticism', between 'the ethics of difference' and 'racism', between 'recognition of the other' and 'identitarian' fixity.

For the honour of philosophy, it is first of all necessary to admit that this ideology of a 'right to difference', the contemporary catechism of goodwill with regard to 'other cultures', are strikingly distant from Lévinas's actual conception of things.

III From the Other to the Altogether-Other

The principal – but also fairly superficial – objection that we might make to ethics in Lévinas's sense is: what is it that testifies to the originality of my de-votion [*dé-vouement*] to the Other? The phenomenological analyses of the face, of the caress, of love, cannot by themselves ground the anti-ontological (or anti-identitarian) thesis of the author of *Totality and Infinity*. A 'mimetic' conception that locates original access to the other in my own redoubled image also sheds light on that element of self-forgetting that characterizes the grasping of this other: what I cherish is that me-myself-at-a-distance which, precisely because it is 'objectified' for my consciousness, founds me as a stable construction, as an interiority accessible *in its exteriority*. Psychoanalysis explains brilliantly how this construction of the Ego in the identification with the other – this mirror-effect² – combines narcissism (I delight in the exteriority of the other in so far as he figures as myself made visible to myself) and aggressivity (I invest in the other my death drive, my own archaic desire for self-destruction).

Here, however, we are a very long way from what Lévinas wants to tell us. As always, the pure analysis of phenomenal appearing cannot decide between divergent orientations of thought.

We need, in addition, to make explicit the axioms of thought that *decide* an orientation.

The difficulty, which also defines the point of application for these axioms, can be explained as follows: the ethical primacy of the Other over the Same requires that the

Unit of Discourse, Columbia University

experience of alterity be ontologically 'guaranteed' as the experience of a distance, or of an essential non-identity, the *traversal* of which is the ethical experience itself. But nothing in the simple phenomenon of the other contains such a guarantee. And this simply because the finitude of the other's appearing certainly *can* be conceived as resemblance, or as imitation, and thus lead back to the logic of the Same. The other always resembles me too much for the hypothesis of an originary exposure to his alterity to be *necessarily* true.

The phenomenon of the other (his face) must then attest to a radical alterity which he nevertheless does not contain by himself. The Other, as he appears to me in the order of the finite, must be the epiphany of a properly infinite distance to the other, the traversal of which is the originary ethical experience.

This means that in order to be intelligible, ethics requires that the Other be in some sense *carried by a principle of alterity* which transcends mere finite experience. Lévinas calls this principle the 'Altogether-Other', and it is quite obviously the ethical name for God. There can be no Other if he is not the immediate phenomenon of the Altogether-Other. There can be no finite devotion to the non-identical if it is not sustained by the infinite devotion of the principle to that which subsists outside it. There can be no ethics without God the ineffable.

In Lévinas's enterprise, the ethical dominance of the Other over the theoretical ontology of the same is entirely bound up with a religious axiom; to believe that we can separate what Lévinas's thought unites is to betray the intimate movement of this thought, its subjective rigour. In truth, Lévinas has no philosophy – not even philosophy as

the 'servant' of theology. Rather, this is philosophy (in the Greek sense of the word) *annulled* by theology, itself no longer a theology (the terminology is still too Greek, and presumes proximity to the divine via the identity and predicates of God) but, precisely, an ethics.

To make of ethics the ultimate name of the religious as such (i.e. of that which relates [*re-lie*] to the Other under the ineffable authority of the Altogether-Other) is to distance it still more completely from all that can be gathered under the name of 'philosophy'.

To put it crudely: Lévinas's enterprise serves to remind us, with extraordinary insistence, that every effort to turn ethics into the principle of thought and action is essentially religious. We might say that Lévinas is the coherent and inventive thinker of an assumption that no academic exercise of veiling or abstraction can obscure: distanced from its Greek usage (according to which it is clearly subordinated to the theoretical), and taken in general, ethics is a category of pious discourse.

IV Ethics as decomposed [*décomposée*] religion

What then becomes of this category if we claim to suppress, or mask, its religious character, all the while preserving the abstract arrangement of its apparent constitution ('recognition of the other', etc.)? The answer is obvious: a dog's dinner [*de la bouillie pour les chats*]. We are left with a pious discourse without piety, a spiritual supplement for incompetent governments, and a cultural sociology preached, in line with the new-style sermons, in lieu of the late class struggle.

Our suspicions are first aroused when we see that the self-declared apostles of ethics and of the 'right to difference' are clearly *horrified by any vigorously sustained difference*. For them, African customs are barbaric, Muslims are dreadful, the Chinese are totalitarian, and so on. As a matter of fact, this celebrated 'other' is acceptable only if he is a *good* other – which is to say what, exactly, if not *the same as us*? Respect for differences, of course! But on condition that the different be parliamentary-democratic, pro free-market economics, in favour of freedom of opinion, feminism, the environment. . . . That is to say: I respect differences, but only, of course, in so far as that which differs also respects, just as I do, the said differences. Just as there can be 'no freedom for the enemies of freedom', so there can be no respect for those whose difference consists precisely in not respecting differences. To prove the point, just consider the obsessive resentment expressed by the partisans of ethics regarding anything that resembles an Islamic 'fundamentalist'.

The problem is that the 'respect for differences' and the ethics of human rights do seem to define an *identity*! And that as a result, the respect for differences applies only to those differences that are reasonably consistent with this identity (which, after all, is nothing other than the identity of a wealthy – albeit visibly declining – 'West'). Even immigrants in this country [France], as seen by the partisans of ethics, are acceptably different only when they are 'integrated', only if they seek integration (which seems to mean, if you think about it: only if they want to *suppress* their difference). It might well be that ethical ideology, detached from the religious teachings which at least conferred upon it the fullness of a 'revealed' identity, is simply the final

imperative of a conquering civilization: 'Become like me and I will respect your difference.'

V Return to the Same

The truth is that, in the context of a system of thought that is both a-religious and genuinely contemporary with the truths of our time, the whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other should be purely and simply abandoned. For the real question – and it is an extraordinarily difficult one – is much more that of *recognizing the Same*.

Let us posit *our* axioms. There is no God. Which also means: the One is not. The multiple 'without-one' – every multiple being in its turn nothing other than a multiple of multiples – is the law of being. The only stopping point is the void. The infinite, as Pascal had already realized, is the banal reality of every situation, not the predicate of a transcendence. For the infinite, as Cantor demonstrated with the creation of set theory, is actually only the most general form of multiple-being [*être-multiple*]. In fact, every situation, inasmuch as it is, is a multiple composed of an infinity of elements, each one of which is itself a multiple. Considered in their simple belonging to a situation (to an infinite multiple), the animals of the species *Homo sapiens* are ordinary multiplicities.

What, then, are we to make of the other, of differences, and of their ethical recognition?

Infinite alterity is quite simply *what there is*. Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences. Even the apparently reflexive experience of myself is by no

means the intuition of a unity but a labyrinth of differentiations, and Rimbaud was certainly not wrong when he said: 'I am another.' There are as many differences, say, between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself.

As many, but also, then, *neither more nor less*.

VI 'Cultural' differences and culturalism

Contemporary ethics kicks up a big fuss about 'cultural' differences. Its conception of the 'other' is informed mainly by this kind of differences. Its great ideal is the peaceful coexistence of cultural, religious, and national 'communities', the refusal of 'exclusion'.

But what we must recognize is that these differences hold no interest for thought, that they amount to nothing more than the infinite and self-evident multiplicity of humankind, as obvious in the difference between me and my cousin from Lyon as it is between the Shi'ite 'community' of Iraq and the fat cowboys of Texas.

The objective (or historical) foundation of contemporary ethics is culturalism, in truth a tourist's fascination for the diversity of morals, customs and beliefs. And in particular, for the irreducible medley of imaginary formations (religions, sexual representations, incarnations of authority . . .). Yes, the essential 'objective' basis of ethics rests on a vulgar sociology, directly inherited from the astonishment of the colonial encounter with savages. And we must not forget that there are also savages among us (the drug addicts of the *banlieues*, religious sects – the whole journalistic paraphernalia of menacing internal alterity), confronted by an

ethics that offers, without changing its means of investigation, *its* 'recognition' and *its* social workers.

Against these trifling descriptions (of a reality that is both obvious and inconsistent in itself), genuine thought should affirm the following principle: since differences are what there is, and since every truth is the coming-to-be of that which is not yet, so differences are then precisely what truths depose, or render insignificant. No light is shed on any concrete situation by the notion of the 'recognition of the other'. Every modern collective configuration involves people from everywhere, who have their different ways of eating and speaking, who wear different sorts of headgear, follow different religions, have complex and varied relations to sexuality, prefer authority or disorder, and such is the way of the world.

VII From the Same to truths

Philosophically, if the other doesn't matter it is indeed because the difficulty lies on the side of the Same. The Same, in effect, is not what is (i.e. the infinite multiplicity of differences) but what *comes to be*. I have already named that in regard to which only the advent of the Same occurs: it is a *truth*. Only a truth is, as such, *indifferent to differences*. This is something we have always known, even if sophists of every age have always attempted to obscure its certainty: a truth is *the same for all*.

What is to be postulated for one and all, what I have called our 'being immortal', certainly is not covered by the logic of 'cultural' differences as insignificant as they are massive. It is our capacity for truth – our capacity to be that

'same' that a truth convokes to its own 'sameness'. Or in other words, depending on the circumstances, our capacity for science, love, politics or art, since all truths, in my view, fall under one or another of these universal names.

It is only through a genuine perversion, for which we will pay a terrible historical price, that we have sought to elaborate an 'ethics' on the basis of cultural relativism. For this is to pretend that a merely contingent state of things can found a Law.

The only genuine ethics is of truths in the plural – or, more precisely, the only ethics is of processes of truth, of the labour that brings some truths into the world. Ethics must be taken in the sense presumed by Lacan when, against Kant and the notion of a general morality, he discusses the ethics of psychoanalysis. Ethics does not exist. There is only the *ethic-of* (of politics, of love, of science, of art).

There is not, in fact, one single Subject, but as many subjects as there are truths, and as many subjective types as there are procedures of truths.

As for me, I identify four fundamental subjective 'types': political, scientific, artistic, and amorous [*amoureux*].

Every human animal, by participating in a given singular truth, is inscribed in one of these four types.

A philosophy sets out to construct a *space of thought* in which the different subjective types, expressed by the singular truths of its time, coexist. But this coexistence is not a unification – that is why it is impossible to speak of *one* Ethics.

Notes

1. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 1961 [1969]. This is his major work.
2. Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Phase', in *Ecrits: A Selection*, 1966 [1977].

