

Lévinas and passivity

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Conference at Seattle University, College of Arts and Science, October 2003

Introduction

I think it is necessary, first, to tell you something about my *curriculum* in philosophy, essentially to explain why and how I have come to appreciate the great importance of Lévinas in the field of psychology.

Since my first personal work in philosophy – a master’s dissertation – I have tried to link philosophy and psychology, in fact, psychoanalysis. Even then, I was interested in the intricate question of genesis and genealogy. So I worked on “the ontogenesis of instinct in Freudian and ethologic works.” I don’t remember my conclusions at all... Later, I taught at Vincennes University, at a moment, the early seventies, when we tried to reconcile political philosophy (i.e. Marxism) and psychoanalysis (after Reich, Marcuse...). I was, for several years, very close to Deleuze, at the time when, with Guattari, he tried to invent a new psychoanalysis, the “schizoanalyse”, explaining that everything in the psyche was politically embedded. They gently dismissed the family, saying that there is no attachment to parenthood and so on... Guattari was my psychoanalyst. As a great result, I had to begin a new analysis ten years later... Nevertheless, my proximity to Deleuze and Guattari was useful in one sense: I agreed with them that Freud (or Lacan, the new guru of the time) did not hold a monopoly on the Truth and that we had to search for new ways in psychology and psychotherapy. At that time Lévinas was for me only a name in a list of books to read. The triumph of the so called “structuralism” pushed aside great French philosophers like Lévinas or Ricoeur. Freudian Marxism was not a success: too much speculation, too far from the practices of politics and of psychotherapy.

I tried more seriously to establish links between philosophy and psychoanalysis for my doctorate, at the end of the seventies. Among other comparisons, I linked Marx, Nietzsche and Freud as thinkers of “the edge of reason” – not knowing at the time that Ricoeur had

called them “the philosophers of suspicion”. There was a radical Unconscious, which the one called “the objective laws of History” – which are human but work whether we are conscious of it or not, the second described as “the great consciousness”, of which our usual consciousness is only and definitely a small part, because the great consciousness is the whole of our emotions that can never be captured by our thoughts, and the third postulated that the “Unbewußt” was a cauldron of chaotic impulses – partly resulting from repressed emotions, partly inherited from the Ice Age. Each of them agreed a kind of “historical logic”; each of them, being German in culture and language was, to a greater or lesser degree, an heir of Hegel. The logic of the metamorphosis of “productive relations”; the one of the circular ascent and decline of Dionysian culture, and its converse, Platonic Christianity; the one of successive states of sexuality-morality from the primitives to us and their repetition in every human child - were, and still are, among the great - if untrue - theories of human genealogy and history. This was precisely what “structuralism” tried to avoid - which explains in great part why it ended in such a mess. However, the idea of “historical logic”, whether founded in the field of work or religion or in the psychogenetic one, is too beautiful to be true, because it admits only *one* determination of human progress. If I consider, for example, the modern Aristotelian approach of Hannah Arendt¹, I must admit three ways of active life: Work, *Oeuvre* and Action - and, consequently, three kinds of logic of activity, three kinds of time, of organization of space, and so on.

This tripartite division of human activity has been permanently present in my mind for fifteen years or more. But in the past six or seven years, I have given it a new orientation, beyond the point of view of Hannah Arendt. I will discuss this point at greater length at the end of the present paper.

If we admit the intrinsic plurality of the determination of human activities we must be aware of the pluralistic shape of the theories we want to construct, including psychological ones.

During the last ten years my principal concern in research was and still is, “how to elaborate a theory of human activity - and especially human emotions if we admit that activity is based on emotions or, better, *is* emotion – admitting a plurality of determinisms, valuable at all levels and usable in our present world”. After very long deliberation, I decided, recently, to use, as stones for this construction, principally the works of Spinoza (my constant reference

¹ *The Human Condition*, 1961.

in philosophy for 35 years), Nietzsche, Freud and Lévinas. Spinoza for (but not only) his unique and perfect monist theory (of Nature, of Mind and Body, of Intellect and Affect). Nietzsche for his perspectivism, his profound theory of chaos as continuous creation and his approach of the multiplicity of the Self. Freud for his elucidation of the mechanics of the psyche – and especially of transference – and for the basic techniques of psychotherapy. Lévinas for his ethics, based on the responsibility to the Other, for his very strong approach to Time and - and this brings me to my subject - the inescapable command to look at the Face of everybody else, an obligation that underlies ontology, psychology and anthropology - in other words the pre-original passivity of the human being that extracts him from the anonymous being and from loneliness (which is the other face of the being-in-itself, the absolute being “described” from Parmenides to Heidegger).

What is passivity?

Philosophical tradition, in occidental countries, treats passivity as a fault, a weakness of the soul, the incapacity to drive oneself, excessive submission to any authority. With one strong exception: passivity before God, passive obedience to His commands. But it is not certain that to obey to God is exactly passivity, because it admits an initial or renewed choice, the choice to follow God. One may behave far from or against God, like Lucifer, one of the first angels, and Eve. In Jewish, Christian and Islamic tradition, Man always has the choice between good and evil. However, to obey without discussion seems to be, in Hebraic and Christian texts, a high realization of humanity (Abraham, Moses) or of divinity (Jesus). Could it be called “passivity”? Let the question remain suspended for a time.

Back to the philosophers, who were also, till the end of the eighteenth century, the psychologists, since the doctors were experts on the body and the philosophers on the soul and/or the spirit. For the philosophers, in contrast to the mystics, one of the most important goals of human life was to eliminate or convert or remedy the *passions*. Most of them thought that the disorders of the soul were the causes of the passions. In spite of very strong differences in their conception of body and soul, nature and divinity and so on, Hobbes, Descartes, Pascal, Spinoza, Locke (and, in France, the less well-known Cureau de la Chambre, Senault, Coeffeteau...) agreed on one point: we have to fight passions if we want to behave

as human beings and not as animals. The means of fighting may be very different, but the expected result is the same: to act according to natural (i.e. divine) or political reason.

Among such theories one deserves special attention: Spinoza's, because it is the most consistent and powerful of all them. For Spinoza, we are active when we are the adequate cause of something, inside or outside us. "Adequate" means that: we see clearly and distinctly the effects of our action on something, whatever this "something" could be. "On the contrary, I say that we are passive when something occurs in us or result from our nature of which we are only a partial cause." (*Ethics*, III, definition II) This is not the place to quote the whole theory of knowledge of Spinoza, but I simply want to say that for him *ignorance* weakens us, makes us sad, diminishes our power and maintains us far from God (Nature). We are passive when the other forces of Nature prevail on ours (every force is natural, nothing could be outside Nature). In no case can we become powerful, completely active, because we are only part of Nature. But we can become more and more active. A wise man is not less passive than other people, but is more active. Passivity, thus, is the part of our behavior that we can't master. A little child is almost entirely passive, so are fools, women, poorly instructed people, etc. To become active is not an intellectual or mystical or psychological or moral exercise. It requires only... activity. When our body does something, in any field, and we obtain the expected result, this is activity. The more our body acts in various fields the more we are active, knowing us and Nature (we are only a part of Nature). Not only do our power, joy and knowledge increase, but our spirit (*esprit*, *Geist*) becomes more eternal, i.e. united with God (Nature), i.e. out of Time and Space². It is clear now that for Spinoza passivity must be fought and that ethics is a remedy for passions. There is nothing good in passivity, even if passivity is inescapable, because our powers are and will ever be surpassed by those of the rest of Nature. Spinoza's theory of activity is the most well-founded I know. It does not have the faults of Descartes (who is not clear about body/spirit relations, passions, etc.), of Kant (who cannot reconcile his theories of knowledge and ethics), or of Hegel (who chooses an arbitrary sense of development of the spirit that leads to Germanness). He makes no suppositions on History, on Psychology and so on. Except two: God *is* Nature, God is entirely *active*.

² "Whose body is able to most varied actions, his spirit is mostly eternal". (*Ethics* V, P. 39)

I could show that Nietzsche, though very different to Spinoza in his mode of expression, is very close in his theory of action, and wants to go further than Spinoza. He agrees with him that there is one World (and not nature and divinity, or a perceptible and a moral world...) and no "background world", that ignorance is the source of passivity, that everything occurs in the bodies. But I think he is a better observer of humanity when he says that the spirit is only part of the body, as thoughts are only part of feelings; the Self is multiple and remains multiple; reality is not stable, has no essence but could be described and activated from various perspectives. All these ideas rest on only one: the world is a continuous creation, a permanent outpouring of energies, emotions, thinking... Nietzsche wrote: "Chaos sive Natura", explicitly answering to the "Deus sive Natura" of Spinoza. People, nowadays, often think that Nietzsche is the defender of Nihilism, Destruction and so on. This is completely wrong. Nietzsche was first a philologist; to him, like his fellows, "Chaos" meant the same as to the ancient Greeks (Hesiod, for example): "an open mouth, telling permanently new words". Chaos is continuous creation, physical-and-verbal. So activity, for Nietzsche, is the permanent fight against that which impedes or prohibits creation: Christianity, intellectualism, nihilism, etc. Passivity is decline, perversion of creation, submission, fixation of movement. For example Nietzsche rejects all philosophical system: it would be a limitation of Chaos. So the way to become active seems different for Nietzsche and for Spinoza. We shall discuss this again after our examination of Lévinas' theory of passivity.

Freud hardly knew Spinoza or Nietzsche (although Lou Andreas-Salome spoke of the latter to him) and it is erroneous to think he used them to build any part of his theories. For two good reasons: Freud was really atheistic (Spinoza and Nietzsche were not) and dualistic (impulses and representative of impulses, organic and psychic...); he took his inspiration from the tradition of German philosophy which he had learned at secondary school, from his teachers of neurophysiology and from Darwin. Passivity, for him, is a product of psychological disease. During the early years of his investigations, he thought passivity was produced only by sexual abuses committed against children by adults or other children. In December 6, 1896, he wrote to Fliess³ that at the first generation of abused children we find perversion; at the second generation, hysteria, by reversal of activity into passivity. The "activity" of the pervert, consisting of inflicting on someone else the damage he suffered, is a result of previous passivity towards the aggressor. It is clear that - and other examples would only

³ The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904, Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 212.

confirm this opinion - for Freud, passivity contains no advantage, no potential for psychological or social empowerment. Passivity is not the result of aggression but of not having any possible defence against aggression; that includes repression of emotion that occurred at the time of aggression - a repression which protects the self against complete collapse. Later, Freud invented the theory of "Oedipus complex" and of the "primitive bunch" to explain that not everybody was a victim of sexual abuse. He never accepted that there could be a very large variety of psychological abuses. Ferenczi completed and extended Freudian theory in stating that adults, in general, abuse their authority over children, particularly by venting their strong or violent passions on the tender feelings of children, who can, if the suffering is too intense, identify with the abusive adult. Both, therefore, agree on the negative value of passivity.

Almost everybody in Western culture considers passivity as a lack, a fault, which has no value, no dignity. Till recently, femininity or infancy were associated with passivity in this negative sense. It is probably Freud and his successors who, despite their indecision and ambiguity, opened up the field of the "activity" of women and children with the profound ideas of bisexuality and of infantile sexuality (in a very wide sense). Nevertheless, passivity remained something of a negative value, even if some authors regarded it as a minor value, as a charming posture, etc. The position of philosophers, psychologists and other writers on social sciences was no different.

Passivity and existence according to Lévinas

Emmanuel Lévinas is the first thinker, to my knowledge, who emphasises passivity and not only emphasises it, but places it at the centre of his philosophy. Spinoza put passivity at the beginning of life: a young child is a body with very few capacities, depends strongly on external causes, and is quite unconscious of himself, of God and of other things (*Ethics V*, P. 39, Scolia). Spinoza agrees with the idea of continuous progress from ignorance-and-passivity to knowledge-and-activity, though he is more consistent in his thinking than anybody else. Lévinas says something very different: in the beginning there is no ignorance (or knowledge) but unlimited being, being *per se*, being without any determination or

differentiation. This being is not a supreme existence, the Being of Hegel (result-and-origin of the metamorphosis of various beings) or of Heidegger (something we cannot reach, but which we can approach by the *Dasein*, existence, and precisely our existence as human beings). "Pure Being", for Lévinas, is not desirable at all. It is the shapeless, the endless, the indefinable, the "anonymous", the "there is" ("*il y a*"), without any properties. This Being is frightening, unbearable, unthinkable. It is "chaos", not in the sense of Nietzsche, but in the classical sense of disorder, of the Biblical "*Tohu-Bohu*" (emptiness and the horror engendered by it). The first manifestation of existence is to emerge from this being, to transform pure being into an existence, subject to change. Lévinas tells that he does not know how this first step is induced: he notes that it occurs; if it did not, no specific existence could be encountered, which is not the case. For Spinoza genesis is not a problem, but evidence. For Lévinas, it is a major issue. Existence begins with the discovery of dependency, attachment. "To be" depends on "to have": we feel, before any other experience, that we have (we are) a body and that this body needs care coming from outside. The spirit is not locked up in the body like a prisoner in a jail, but contained like a river in its banks. The attachment of the spirit to the body is the reality of the spirit, its escape from the horror of the anonymous, the "there is". This description by Lévinas is not only, and not primarily, speculative. He refers to the experience of the "there is" in the extermination camps of the Nazis. There, the bodies were treated as "anonymous beings"; it was the only way to destroy them en masse with no regrets. So, if we cannot clearly experiment the appearance of existence, we can experiment its disappearance. Lévinas distinguishes carefully between "existence" and "being": one can "be" without "existence"; protection of "existence" could lead to the sacrifice of "being". We could "be" without dependency, we cannot "exist" alone. This is the first, and constant, meaning of "passivity". We have to take care of ourselves, to feed our body with various things, without any possible escape. We have to preserve ourselves, as though we were two persons: one who protects the other. For Lévinas, the self exists precisely because of this concern of someone for someone; one's self and the other self appear at the same time, in the same movement. But this original passivity is not the ultimate passivity; the care for one's self (and the other self) is at the same time passivity and activity, each one inducing the other. This first relationship between one's self and an other self is not a relationship with the Other, considered as completely external to us. Some

psychoanalysts emphasise the fact that between a mother and a child there is a dual person, a dual unity.

The ultimate, the strong passivity appears when - in Lévinasian terms - I am obliged to answer to anybody, whoever he (or she) is, who acts, stands in front of me, whether he is loving or hating, admiring or contemptuous, only because he presents his *Face* to me, appears to me as a human being, exists as a human. This obligation is described by Lévinas in very hard terms: to be chained, to be a slave, to be liable, to suffer a trauma. Lévinas knowingly uses the terminology of psychoanalysis to demonstrate its opposite: dependence on the Other is not blameworthy; it is the condition to be existent as a human. This is where he uses the term “pre-original passivity”, which I must explain at some length. The original passivity comes from our original dependence on others, from our innate weakness, in which state we must trust in the care of our kin. This passivity is a beginning, a first step in our existence. There is no obligation, no chain, no trauma, except in case of carelessness. The pre-original passivity demands an answer even if there is no request. The most simple example, often quoted by Lévinas, is: “Après vous, je vous prie” (“After you please”). I have no choice when I pronounce that set phrase; I am entirely passive, in the pre-original sense. But that does not mean that it is a natural or inherited reflex, that “pre-original” means a distant origin, something pre-dating every known origin, which fades into a measureless past. The “pre-original” is present absolutely; it is the real substance of the present, it is the presence itself, the presence of somebody else which constitutes the present. “Pre-original” signifies “out of time”, because it gives rise to time. The being does not spontaneously arise in time, it appears in time with existence, with the presence of the Other, in front of the Face of him whom I must answer, with total passivity. So passivity, in this strong sense, is correlated with time, i.e. to existence. And since passivity is an obligation towards the Other, the “Psychology of the Other” must deal essentially with passivity. In this respect, Lévinas’ view is the opposite of Spinoza’s: to the Spinoza, passivity (in any sense) is an obstacle in the way of freedom (power, knowledge and beatitude); to Lévinas, passivity *is* the way of freedom.

But to say that pre-original passivity is generative of time, by the inevitable presence of the Other, does not completely take into account the modalities of the presence of the Other, i.e. of Time. The Other is not only somebody else, but a stranger, or even a familiar. The

Other presents himself in three ways, three kinds of passivity. The first of them is suffering and death, the second femininity and the third fecundity. Let us see them closely, because I think this is the basis of the Psychology of the Other, according to Lévinas⁴.

The experience of taking care of oneself requires work, effort, difficulties of all kinds. To ask for nourishment or to work to obtain it implies suffering. When we suffer, we cannot escape, we are one with suffering and we cannot put it in the light, treat it as an object of knowledge. "There is in suffering a lack of any refuge". After suffering comes death, a complete mystery, before which we are completely passive. "Something absolutely unknowable appears [...] stranger to all light [...] where we are ourselves seized." Death puts us in contact with the "absolutely other". This is the first kind of passivity. Here I am absolutely without power and completely open to the other. The experience of suffering and death is also that of the future, because the future cannot be seized, it takes hold of us. "Speaking of time for one subject, speaking of purely personal duration, seems to me impossible."

Once open to the future, we are also open to somebody else, whom I cannot seize. This completely other is not far from me: it is the other sex (Lévinas, as a man, speaks only of *feminine*). Between man and woman a relentless otherness remains, which is not abolished in sexual intercourse, where there is never fusion, but an increase of mystery. "If we could possess, seize and know the other, he (she) would not be other." "Love is without reason, it invades us and wounds us, however the Ego survives it." In relation to the other sex we experience constantly that "something" remains beyond our understanding (Lévinas used to illustrate this by making the movement of grasping something while saying "comprendre", "con-prendre", "prendre avec" – "take with", "understand"); we are very far from the usual meanings of activity and passivity in sexual relations; in meeting the other sex, *everybody* is passive, because he (she) cannot grasp the situation.

The third type of passivity is the most complex and the most obscure, because it unites oneness and otherness, life and death, masculine and feminine. *Fecundity* is the most strange experience that can occur to us. Fecundity is giving birth to a child, to a work, to a new world, without knowing its becoming. This is the only one way to stay oneself and to become other. "How could the *Ego* become other than him?" Through paternity (or maternity). The mystics would answer: in fusion with God. Lévinas does not accept this

⁴ This development is entirely inspired by *Time and the Other (Le Temps et l'Autre, Vrin, 1947)*

solution: it is an illusion, because God always remains transcendent to us (Spinoza said the same: we are only part of Nature, so we cannot identify with Nature). How could I become me and another, without madness, mystical (or chemical!) ecstasy or hallucination?⁵ Through a link of flesh and blood, of affects and ideas, of sensations and words, through paternity. "Paternity is a relationship with a stranger who, being other, is me. [...] The son is not only my work, like a poem or a manufactured thing; he is also not my property. Neither categories of power nor of holding can point out the relationship with a child. [...] I do not *have* my child; I *am*, in some way, my child." My child is me and not me. With paternity I enter "pluralist existence". Paternity is not only a biological condition or link; it is my future, in any person I decide to prepare for this future, which is mine and not mine, because unknown. With paternity we understand that Time is not a deterioration of Eternity (and Existence of Being - contrary to Heidegger) but the opening to Infinity and to the Other.

Lévinas' theory of passivity thus seems to me the most powerful one I have heard of. However, I must object to one point, not for the pleasure of discussion, but because it would be important for the foundation of a Psychology of the Other. Lévinas insists very often not only on the fact that the Other (including our closest relatives) is a stranger, but also that he gets inside me by breaking in, without my agreement. But if the Other is a complete stranger, a real Alien, with no relationship to me, how could I accept his intrusion inside me? How could I agree, with entire passivity, to this breaking in? The experience of early abuse in childhood shows that the child can identify with the abuser, not consider him as an Other; precisely, the abuse implies the quite complete impossibility of perceiving someone (and oneself) as an Other. I think, from my psychoanalytic experience, that Lévinas' Other has been inside me, as an Other, since the beginning of my existence. When I take care of myself (even asking help from a relative or anybody else) I am me and another: one helps the other; the other helps me. If only death could introduce us to the Other, it would be the opposite: a refusal to face death, considering it not as otherness but as annihilation. If the otherness appears at death, it is because it first shows when I take care of myself as another self. So concern for myself is of the same nature as concern for my children. Here, to use another point of departure, I join Paul Ricoeur when he says autonomy of the self and concern for

⁵ Human otherness is "neither ecstasy where the Same is absorbing in the Other nor knowledge where the Other belongs to the Same."

the other are intimately joined. If I am unable to welcome somebody else, I cannot accede to his demands. Thus, says Ricoeur, one's self is yet another self⁶. Passivity is the acceptance, with no conditions, of the Other in Me; and I experience this acceptance when I take care of myself, as an Other. Genetically, the process begins with paternity/maternity: No young human could survive without care from relatives; so taking care of oneself begins with concern of parents for children. If a little child is not cared for by somebody, he dies. The other is not an absolute unknown: he is inside me at the very beginning of my existence.

And yet, I have to discover death, femininity (masculinity) and paternity (maternity), three basic situations and relationships where I cannot exert any power, where I test the otherness inescapably. "Existing itself becomes dual". In these situations I cannot identify with the other; I meet the others as others, without power to reduce them to the same.

Finally, passivity is not the opposite of activity, it is acting without power, with no possibility of "taking situations in hand". Passivity is *pathos* beyond light, beyond knowledge. I suggest that we call this passivity "receptivity". However, we have to define this "receptivity" as it is known in western and eastern traditions. For example, in the old Chinese book, the *I Ching*, its hexagrams begin with K'ien the creator (light, power, activity, movement, perseverance) and continue with K'ouen the receptive (dark, malleable, receptive); the second is supplementary to the first, as the maternal feminine completes the paternal masculine, and as the sensitive completes the spiritual and submits to it. Immanuel Kant would have agreed: nothing occurs without sensitivity but nothing can expand without spirituality. Lévinas, like Spinoza and Nietzsche, does not accept the hierarchy of the masculine and feminine, intellect and affect, spirit and body. Lévinas thinks that hierarchy is the beginning of debasement.

The world of Lévinas - and of Spinoza, Nietzsche and Freud - is limited (the Greek sense of *hubris*, the horror of "il y a") but infinite (the Jewish sense of non-fulfilment, the refusal to accept closed totalities). With the concept of "passivity", Lévinas opens a way to reconsider the nature of the Subject, its beginning, growth and deterioration. First, we have to think of the *Ego* as an unsurpassable plurality, at least an initial duality. Secondly, understanding the *Ego* is not seizing an identity but various attributes, each increasing the *Ego*. Third, the

⁶ *Soi-même comme un autre*, Seuil, 1990.

purpose of psychotherapy is not only to resolve conflicts (like the theory of Freud) but also, and better, to restore community between oneself and the others. "Passivity" - which I suggest renaming "receptivity" - is the capacity of living in the duration (or to constitute duration) within the scope of death, sexuality and parenthood.

From passivity/receptivity to an extended theory of otherness

If Lévinas is so important for the *Psychology of the Other*, it is because he distinguishes three kinds of otherness. In my own way I expressed the idea, ten years ago, that there were two major determining factors of human life: the succession of the generations and the differentiation of the sexes (and not differentiation of generations and sexes as some anthropologists used to say). Along the generations, the challenge is filiation, descent from one to another, including the fact that absolute repetition is impossible; in other words, it is a question of life and death, of continuity of lives, including deaths. Between the sexes - and people in general - the problem is sufficient separation between two persons, with no confusion. I could also call these concepts *continuity* (between generations and human-kind in general) and *differentiation* (not only between sexes but for everything) and by adding *innovation* or creation. I describe them as general conditions of human life, but they could first be applied to psychology and psychopathology. It happens that I believe that these categories match those of Lévinas: suffering and death, femininity/masculinity, fecundity, except that I have expanded them. So I can express them as three major problems: continuity between the living and the dead; differentiation between the sexes (and other dualisms); novelty from a generation to another.

I shall now attempt to develop the implications of this trilogy for psychopathology. But I must first say again that this psychopathology is entirely based on the *plurality* of the human psyche: nobody could exist without a bundle of relations between him and a lot of other persons. Each one, each person, is made of these relations⁷. In others words, each of us must have: 1) a place in manhood; 2) his (her) place as a precise somebody with some kind of

⁷ In a paper entitled *Les psychanalystes saisis par le politique* ("The psychoanalysts seized by politics"), I develop the idea of the plurality of the soul. The argument is: we are constituted, as persons, by the feelings which link us with the others, past and present, dead or alive, and also with future others (laws of inheritance, of filiation...). The web of our feelings for others and the feelings of others for us is our soul (not our spirit or our body).

relations; 3) a capacity for changing place with others. The lack of place could be described as: 1) dereliction or being abandoned; 2) confusion and resulting conflicts; 3) sterility and perversion.

1. Dereliction and abandonment (Job, Hamlet)

If, as Lévinas says, suffering and death are inescapable experiences and the horizon of all life, we do not live in constant suffering and facing death. Even in case of great loss (parents, country, house, employment, way of life, ideology...), something remains constant, some kind of attachment (cf. Bowlby) continues. Essentially, everybody tries to continue to exist, to preserve himself. But - in the way I define the soul - if a person feels that nobody else cares about him, he may die (for example, little children, even if they are fed) or become attached to an artefact (Françoise Dolto gave the example of a little boy, whose father was dead and whose mother survived by dressmaking, who thought he had to be like a sewing machine to be accepted by his mother). I suppose that a good part of autism is of this kind: strong links with non-human and "strange" behavior - to preserve one's existence, despite the rejection (conscious or unconscious) of relatives. The feelings of prisoners in extermination camps, of "boat people", of survivors of genocides or other tragedies provoked by other humans could be of complete dereliction, feelings of not belonging to anything, to no community. To a minor degree somebody could feel little, powerless, unable. The prototype of this situation is Job: God withdraws from him. He lives with loss of existence. So the formula "to be or not to be" means "to exist or not..." and not "to live or not...". Hamlet is a kind of Job, and not an Oedipus, contrary to the interpretations of Freud and Jones. Hamlet wants to die because the world makes no sense for him after the discovery of his father's murder. So psychotherapy for Jobs and Hamlets consists in giving them the reassurance of being human among humans, of helping them to choose "to be", for example by considering Elephant Man as a man, and not as a monster.

2. Confusion and conflict (Oedipus)

The differentiation between male and female, masculine and feminine, is the archetype of other differentiations, because it is the most important of our whole existence (day and

night, right and left, hot and cold... important as they are to ensure a normal life do not have such profound implications in relationships). Other social differentiations are also important: parents/children, older people/younger people, relatives/foreigners, etc. The ability to differentiate between the sexes is first the capacity of accepting the separation between two persons: if there was no duality of sex, each of us could easily be exchanged with anybody else (in the same species). The otherness of the other sex is also, and in my opinion above all, the otherness of difference, separation, particularity. The tragedy of Oedipus is primarily that he does not know where his place is. He is assured that he exists (son of kings, victorious over the Sphinx, king of Thebes), but does not know from which place and, when he finds out, it becomes a horrible confusion: spouse-and-mother, children-and-brothers-and-sisters, murderer-and-avenger... And yet, the confusion, the lack of staying in one's place had a long history in the family of Oedipus, from the moment when Cadmos killed almost all the natives of Thebes, then gave his daughters in marriage to some of the survivors, probably with the goal to obtain a durable peace, beginning this way endless conflicts and horrors between them and their descendants. So the meaning of the oracle's prophecy to Laius was: don't have a child together (Jocasta was a direct heiress of the first survivors) or else conflicts and confusions will be revived and the city will die. The lesson of the Oedipus legend is not that every child has incestuous feelings but that not taking one's correct place could generate the worst confusions and result in very hard conflicts. To help somebody to find his place - especially but not only sexually - among his relatives seems to be the right thing to do. This is fairly well-known and treated by psychoanalysts, above all when they take several generations into account.

3. Sterility (Don Juan, Superman)

Here I stay close to Lévinas, because sterility is the opposite of fecundity. It is not a question of a biological incapacity to have children, but of inability to accept novelty, to contribute to creation, to make place for an unknown future, to breed children who continue our existence in other ways. My hypothesis about sterility is: if someone cannot complete a period of mourning (for someone else, an ideal, etc.), his universe becomes frozen and allows no place for novelty. If, for example, somebody lost a child, cannot accept the loss and has other children, he (she) considers the others like ghosts of the first and wants them

take his place, thus sterilizing their future. Every loss not elaborated and accepted leads to more or less strong depression (melancholia), as described by Binswanger⁸: the inaptitude to conceive a future, feeling worthless, lack of energy, the feeling of a frozen world. Ideally, everybody wishes the best at least for his children and relatives. In reality, we are seldom able to accept our children as they are (I am not talking of the clothes they wear or musical preferences): similar to us and also completely unknown. Sterility is not a state but an action, the action to deny somebody else his singularity, his uniqueness. In this case we try – with more or less success – to make the others our puppets, our instruments, with the intention to preserve a world at our resemblance. Idolatry has the same origin and function: we elect some figure (god, sacred wood, movie star, warrior, politician, scientist, totem, etc.) to an eminent and immutable place, to carry the illusory insurance that our world will stay unchangeable. The unique way, I think, to combat this very widespread behavior is to learn how to manage with losses.

I know I have extrapolated rather freely from Lévinas, but I hope it is in the same sense and for good reasons: the better to understand human beings as an intricate collection of others.

⁸ *Mélancolie et manie*, P.U.F., 1987.