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Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism

Emmanuel Levinas

Translated by Seán Hand

Prefatory Note

The following article appeared in *Esprit*, a journal representing a progressive, avant-garde Catholicism, in 1934 shortly after Hitler came to power.

The article stems from the conviction that the source of the bloody barbarism of National Socialism lies not in some contingent anomaly within human reasoning, nor in some accidental ideological misunderstanding. This article expresses the conviction that this source stems from the essential possibility of *elemental Evil* into which we can be led by logic and against which Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself. This possibility is inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being [*de l'être soucieux d'être*]*—*a being, to use the Heideggerian expression, “dem es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht.” Such a possibility still threatens the subject correlative with being as gathering together and as dominating [*l'être-à-reassembler et à-dominer*], that famous subject of transcendental idealism that before all else wishes to be free and thinks itself free. We must ask ourselves if liberalism is all we need to achieve an authentic dignity for the human subject. Does the subject arrive at the human condition prior to assuming responsibility for the other man in the act of election that raises him up to this height? This election comes from a god—or God—who beholds him in the *face* of the other man, his neighbor, the original “site” of the Revelation.

—Emmanuel Levinas
28 March 1990

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CRITICAL INQUIRY
Professor Davidson

Cet article a paru dans "Esprit", revue du catholicisme progressiste d'avant-garde, en 1934 presqu'au lendemain de l'arrivée de Hitler au pouvoir.

L'article procède d'une conviction que la source de la barbarie sanglante du national-socialisme n'est pas dans une quelconque anomalie contingente du raisonnement humain, ni dans quelque malentendu idéologique accidentel. Il y a dans ~~cette~~ article la conviction que cette source tient à une possibilité essentielle du Mal Élémental où bonne logique peut mener et causer laquelle la philosophie occidentale ne s'était pas assez assurée. Possibilité qui s'inscrit dans l'ontologie de l'être soucieux d'être — de l'être „dans es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht“ selon l'expression heideggerienne. Possibilité qui menace encore le sujet corrélatif de l'être-à-~~rassembler~~ et à-donner, ce fameux sujet de l'idéalisme transcendantal qui avant tout, se veut ^{et se croit} libre. On doit se demander si le libéralisme suffit à la dignité authentique du sujet humain. Le sujet atteint-il la condition humaine avant d'assumer la responsabilité pour l'autre homme dans l'élection qui l'élève à ce degré? Election venant d'un dieu — ou de Dieu — qui le regarde dans le visage de l'autre homme, son prochain, „l'œil“ original de la Révélation

Emmanuel Lévinas

The philosophy of Hitler is simplistic [*primaire*]. But the primitive powers that burn within it burst open its wretched phraseology under the pressure of an elementary force. They awaken the secret nostalgia within the German soul. Hitlerism is more than a contagion or a madness; it is an awakening of elementary feelings.

But from this point on, this frighteningly dangerous phenomenon becomes philosophically interesting. For these elementary feelings harbor a philosophy. They express a soul's principal attitude towards the whole of reality and its own destiny. They predetermine or prefigure the meaning of the adventure that the soul will face in the world.

The philosophy of Hitlerism therefore goes beyond the philosophy of Hitlerians. It questions the very principles of a civilization. The conflict is played out not only between liberalism and Hitlerism. Christianity itself is threatened in spite of the careful attentions or Concordats that the Christian churches took advantage of when Hitler's regime came to power.

But it is not enough to follow certain journalists in distinguishing between Christian universalism and racist particularism: a logical contradiction cannot judge a concrete event. The meaning of a logical contradiction that opposes two forms of ideas only shows up fully if we go back to their source, to intuition, to the original decision that makes them possible. It is in this spirit that we are going to set forth the following reflections.

1

Political freedoms do not exhaust the content of the spirit of freedom, a spirit that, in Western civilization, signifies a conception of human destiny. This conception is a feeling that man is absolutely free in his relations with the world and the possibilities that solicit action from him. Man is renewed eternally in the face of the Universe. Speaking absolutely, he has no history.

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For history is the most profound limitation, the fundamental limitation. Time, which is a condition of human existence, is above all a condition that is irreparable. The fait accompli, swept along by a fleeing present, forever evades man's control, but weighs heavily on his destiny. Beneath the melancholy of the eternal flow of things, Heraclitus's illusory present, there lies the tragedy of the irremovability of a past that cannot be erased, and that condemns any initiative to being just a continuation. True freedom, the true beginning would require a true present, which, always at the peak of a destiny, forever recommences that destiny.

Judaism bears this magnificent message. Remorse—the painful expression of a radical powerlessness to redeem the irreparable—heralds the repentance that generates the pardon that redeems. Man finds something in the present with which he can modify or efface the past. Time loses its very irreversibility. It collapses at the feet of man like a wounded beast. And he frees it.

The burning feeling of natural powerlessness that man experiences in the face of time is what creates the whole tragedy of the Greek *Möira*, the whole acuteness of the idea of sin and the whole greatness of Christianity's rebellion. In contrast to the Atrides, who struggle in the grip of a strange and brutal past that afflicts them like a curse, Christianity puts forward a mystical drama. The Cross sets one free; and through the Eucharist, which triumphs over time, this emancipation takes place every day. The salvation that Christianity wishes to bring us lies in the way it promises to reopen the finality brought about by the flow of moments of a past that is forever challenged, forever called into question, to go beyond the absolute contradiction of a past that is subordinate to the present.

Through this, Christianity proclaims freedom and makes such freedom fully possible. Not only is the choice of destiny a free one. Once the choice is made, it does not form a chain. Man retains the possibility—a supernatural possibility, certainly, but also a concrete and graspable one—of terminating the contract into which he freely entered. At any moment he can regain the nudity he had during the first days of creation. It is not easy to recover one's freedom. Such a plan can fail. It is not the effect of a capricious decree made by a will situated in an arbitrary world. But the depths of the effort required are a measure only of the seriousness of the obstacle and underline the originality of the new order that has been promised and achieved, an order that triumphs by tearing up the bedrock of natural existence.

This freedom, which is infinite with regard to any attachment and through which no attachment is ultimately definitive, lies at the base of the Christian notion of the soul. While it remains a supremely concrete reality that expresses the ultimate foundation of the individual, this freedom has an austere purity that comes from a transcendent inspira-

tion. Throughout the vicissitudes of the world's real history, the power of renewal gives the soul a noumenal nature that is protected from the attacks launched by a world in which concrete man nonetheless is placed. This is only apparently a paradox. The soul's detachment is not an abstract state; it is the concrete and positive power to become detached and abstract. The equal dignity of each and every soul, which is independent of the material or social conditions of people, does not flow from a theory that affirms, beneath individual differences, an analogy based on a "psychological constitution." It is due to the power given to the soul to free itself from *what has been*, from everything that linked it to something or engaged it with something [*engagée*], so it can regain its first virginity.

If the liberalism of these last few centuries evades the dramatic aspects of such a liberation, it does retain one of its essential elements in the form of the sovereign freedom of reason. The whole philosophical and political thought of modern times tends to place the human spirit on a plane that is superior to reality, and so creates a gulf between man and the world. It makes it impossible to apply the categories of the physical world to the spirituality of reason, and so locates the ultimate foundation of the spirit outside the brutal world and the implacable history of concrete existence. It replaces the blind world of common sense with the world rebuilt by idealist philosophy, one that is steeped in reason and subject to reason. In place of liberation through grace there is autonomy, but the Judeo-Christian leitmotif of freedom pervades this autonomy.

The French writers of the eighteenth century, who were the precursors of democratic ideology and the Declaration of the Rights of Man, in spite of their materialism, confessed to being aware of a reason that exorcises physical, psychological, and social matter. The light of reason was enough to chase away the shadows of irrationality. What remains of materialism when matter has been completely pervaded by reason?

In the world of liberalism, man is not weighed down by a History in choosing his destiny. He does not experience the possibilities open to him as a series of restless powers that seethe within him and already push him down a determined path. For him, they are only logical possibilities that present themselves to a dispassionate reason that makes choices while forever keeping its distance.

2

Marxism was the first doctrine in Western history to contest this view of man.

Marxism no longer sees the human spirit as pure freedom, or a soul floating above any attachment. The spirit is no longer a pure reason

that partakes in a realm of ends. It is prey to material needs. But as it is at the mercy of a matter and a society that no longer obey the magic wand of reason, its concrete and servile existence has more weight and importance than does impotent reason. The struggle that preexists intelligence imposes decisions on the latter which it had not taken. "Being determines consciousness." Science, morality, and aesthetics are not moral, scientific, or aesthetic in themselves, but at every moment translate the basic opposition between the bourgeois civilization and the proletarian one.

The traditional view of spirit loses the power to undo all the links of which it had been so proud. It collides with mountains that no faith in itself could shake. Absolute freedom, the type that works miracles, for the first time finds itself banished from the spirit's constitution. As a result Marxism is opposed not just to Christianity, but to the whole of idealist liberalism, wherein "being does not determine consciousness," but consciousness or reason determines being.

As a result of this, Marxism stands in opposition to European culture or, at least, breaks the harmonious curve of its development.

3

All the same, this break with liberalism is not a definitive one. In a certain sense, Marxism consciously continues the traditions of 1789, and Jacobinism seems in large measure to inspire Marxist revolutionaries. But above all, if the basic intuition of Marxism consists in perceiving the spirit to have an inevitable relation to a determined situation, this link is in no way a radical one. Individual consciousness determined by being is not sufficiently impotent not to retain, at least in principle, the power to shake off the social bewitchment that then appears foreign to its essence. To become conscious of one's social situation is, even for Marx, to free oneself of the fatalism entailed by that situation.

A view that was truly opposed to the European notion of man would be possible only if the situation to which he was bound was not added to him but formed the very foundation of his being. This paradoxical requirement is one that the experience of our bodies seems to fulfill.

What does it mean to traditional interpretations to have a body? It means tolerating it as an object of the external world. It weighs on Socrates like the chains that weigh him down in the prison at Athens; it encases him like the very tomb that awaits him. The body is an obstacle. It breaks the free flight of the spirit and drags it back down to earthly conditions, and yet, like an obstacle, it is to be overcome.

This is the feeling of the eternal strangeness of the body in relation to us that has nurtured Christianity as much as modern liberalism. It is this feeling that has persisted throughout every variation in ethics and

in spite of the decline suffered by the ascetic ideal since the Renaissance. If the materialists confused the self [*le moi*] with the body, it was at the price of a pure and simple negation of the spirit. They placed the body in nature, and accorded it no exceptional standing in the Universe.

But the body is not only something eternally foreign. Classical interpretations relegate to an inferior level, and regard as a stage to be overcome, a feeling of identity between our bodies and ourselves, which certain circumstances render particularly acute. Not only is it the case that the body is closer and more familiar to us than the rest of the world, and controls our psychological life, our temperament, and our activities. Beyond these banal observations, there is the feeling of identity. Do we not affirm ourselves in the unique warmth of our bodies long before any blossoming of the Self that claims to be separate from the body? Do these links that blood establishes, prior to the birth of intelligence, not withstand every test? In a dangerous sport or risky exercise in which gestures attain an almost abstract perfection in the face of death, all dualism between the self and the body must disappear. And in the impasse of physical pain, is it not the case that the sick man experiences the indivisible simplicity of his being when he turns over in his bed of suffering to find a position that gives him peace?

Can we not say that analysis reveals in pain the spirit's opposition to this pain, a rebellion or refusal to remain within it and consequently an attempt to go beyond it? But is it not the case that this attempt is characterized from the very beginning as desperate? Does not the rebelling spirit remain ineluctably locked within pain? And is it not this despair that constitutes the very foundation of pain?

Alongside the interpretation given of these facts by traditional Western thought, facts that it calls crude and unrefined and that it manages to diminish, the feeling can remain that they possess an irreducible originality and that one wishes to maintain their purity. Physical pain can reveal an absolute position.

The body is not only a happy or unhappy accident that relates us to the implacable world of matter. *Its adherence to the Self is of value in itself.* It is an adherence that *one does not escape* and that no metaphor can confuse with the presence of an external object; it is a union that does not in any way alter the tragic character of finality.

This feeling of identity between self and body, which, naturally, has nothing in common with popular materialism, will therefore never allow those who wish to begin with it to rediscover, in the depths of this unity, the duality of a free spirit that struggles against the body to which it is chained. On the contrary, for such people, the whole of the spirit's essence lies in the fact that it is chained to the body. To separate the spirit from the concrete forms with which it is already involved is to

betray the originality of the very feeling from which it is appropriate to begin.

The importance attributed to this feeling for the body, with which the Western spirit has never wished to content itself, is at the basis of a new conception of man. The biological, with the notion of inevitability it entails, becomes more than an *object* of spiritual life. It becomes its heart. The mysterious urgings of the blood, the appeals of heredity and the past for which the body serves as an enigmatic vehicle, lose the character of being problems that are subject to a solution put forward by a sovereignly free Self. Not only does the Self bring in the unknown elements of these problems in order to resolve them; the Self is also constituted by these elements. Man's essence no longer lies in freedom, but in a kind of bondage [*enchaînement*]. To be truly oneself does not mean taking flight once more above contingent events that always remain foreign to the Self's freedom; on the contrary, it means becoming aware of the ineluctable original chain that is unique to our bodies, and above all accepting this chaining.

From this point on, every social structure that announces an emancipation with respect to the body, without being committed to it [*qui ne l'engage pas*], is suspected of being a repudiation or a betrayal. The forms of a modern society founded on the harmony established between free wills will seem not only fragile and inconsistent but false and deceitful. The assimilation of spirits loses the grandeur of the spirit's triumph over the body. Instead, it becomes the work of forgers. A society based on consanguinity immediately ensues from this concretization of the spirit. And then, if race does not exist, one has to invent it!

This ideal of man and society is accompanied by a new ideal of thought and truth.

What characterizes the structure of thought and truth in the Western world, as we have already stressed, is the distance that initially separates man from the world of ideas in which he will choose his truth. He is free and alone in the face of this world. He is free to the point of being able not to cross this distance and not to make a choice. Skepticism is a basic possibility for the Western spirit. But once the distance has been crossed and the truth grasped, man nonetheless retains his freedom. Man can regain control and go back on his choice. Within the affirmation the future negation is already brewing. This freedom constitutes the whole of thought's dignity, but it also harbors its danger. In the gap that separates man from the world of ideas, deceit insinuates itself.

Thought becomes a game. Man revels in his freedom and does not definitively compromise himself with any truth. He transforms his power to doubt into a lack of conviction. Not to chain himself to a truth becomes for him not wishing to commit his own self to the creation of

spiritual values. Sincerity becomes impossible and puts an end to all heroism. Civilization is invaded by everything that is not authentic, by a substitute that is put at the service of fashion and of various interests.

Such a society loses living contact with its true ideal of freedom and accepts degenerate forms of the ideal. It does not see that the true ideal requires effort and instead enjoys those aspects of the ideal that make life easier. It is to a society in such a condition that the Germanic ideal of man seems to promise sincerity and authenticity. Man no longer finds himself confronted by a world of ideas in which he can choose his own truth on the basis of a sovereign decision made by his free reason. He is already linked to a certain number of these ideas, just as he is linked by birth to all those who are of his blood. He can no longer play with the idea [*jouer avec l'idée*], for coming from his concrete being, anchored in his flesh and blood, the idea remains serious.

Chained to his body, man sees himself refusing the power to escape from himself. Truth is no longer for him the contemplation of a foreign spectacle; instead it consists in a drama in which man is himself the actor. It is under the weight of his whole existence, which includes facts on which there is no going back, that man will say his yes or his no.

But to what does this sincerity bind man? Any rational assimilation or mystical communion between spirits that is not based on a community of blood is suspect. And yet the new type of truth cannot renounce the formal nature of truth and cease to be universal. In vain is truth *my* truth in the strongest sense of this possessive pronoun, for it must strive towards the creation of a new world. Zarathustra was not content with his transfiguration; instead he came down from his mountain, bringing a gospel with him. How is universality compatible with racism? The answer—to be found in the logic of what first inspires racism—involves a basic modification of the very idea of universality. *Universality must give way to the idea of expansion*, for the expansion of a force presents a structure that is completely different from the propagation of an idea.

The idea propagated detaches itself essentially from its point of departure. In spite of the unique accent communicated to it by its creator, it becomes a common heritage. It is fundamentally anonymous. The person who accepts it becomes its master, as does the person who proposes it. The propagation of an idea thus creates a community of “masters”; it is a process of equalization. To convert or persuade is to create peers. The universality of an order in Western society always reflects this universality of truth.

But force is characterized by another type of propagation. The person who exerts force does not abandon it. Force does not disappear among those who submit to it. It is attached to the personality or society exerting it, enlarging that person or society while subordinating the rest. Here the universal order is not established as a consequence of ideological expansion; it is that very expansion that constitutes the

unity of a world of masters and slaves. Nietzsche's will to power, which modern Germany is rediscovering and glorifying, is not only a new ideal; it is an ideal that simultaneously brings with it its own form of universalization: war and conquest.

But here we return to well-known truths. We have tried to link them to a fundamental principle. Perhaps we have succeeded in showing that racism is not just opposed to such and such a particular point in Christian and liberal culture. It is not a particular dogma concerning democracy, parliamentary government, dictatorial regime, or religious politics that is in question. It is the very humanity of man.