

## THE IDEA OF THE INFINITE IN LEVINAS AND KOYRÉ<sup>1</sup>

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It is well known that Levinas declared that ethics is the “first philosophy”. These words referring us at the same time to Husserl, Descartes and Aristotle, presuppose that we talk about a new beginning in philosophy, whereby all, or at least all the major foundations of other areas of philosophy must be revised starting from the ‘ethical’, and that, most importantly, it is only on the basis of the ‘ethical’ that we can talk about the ‘philosophical’ in general.

What is the essence of this rethinking of ethics (or the ethical), that should change the very way of doing philosophy? How to think the relation to the other human being, so that this relation could become a point of departure for the reconstruction (or destruction, or deconstruction) of the philosophy in general?

Ethics for Levinas is certainly a *praxis*, but a *praxis* of a special kind: what is at stake here is not just how we act towards the other, but also how we think of the other. The very way of thinking should become a *praxis*, as a ‘piety of thought’, not allowing me to consider my neighbour, another human being, *only* as a ‘psycho-somatic’ unity similar to myself. Levinas proclaims the Other as absolutely unaccessible; the otherness of the Other is his sanctity, and this is understood in accordance with Jewish tradition as radical separation. For Levinas, the access to the Other as such, can be achieved neither by empathy, nor in analogy with my own ego, and certainly not by objective cognition. Obviously, Levinas does not deny the value of psychology, politics or anthropology. In ethics he sees a kind of ‘spiritual optics’, a certain spiritual exercise which secures the ‘critical aspect of knowledge’, that is, the possibility of critical attitude to my self, and thereby of the truth. The aim of the

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reinterpretation of ethics as a first philosophy is to preserve and to safeguard the sanctity of the other human being; the non-philosophical presupposition of sanctity of the other person paves the way to the philosophical recognition of otherness as transcendence.

L'éthique... ne se borne pas à préparer l'exercice théorique de la pensée qui monopoliserait la transcendance. L'opposition traditionnelle entre théorique et pratique, s'effacera à partir de la transcendance métaphysique où s'établit une relation avec l'absolument autre ou la vérité, et dont l'éthique est la voie royale (*TI*, p.15).

Levinas presents ethics as a relation that preserves the transcendence of the Other.

The question is, therefore: how to think the transcendent and not reduce it by this very act of thinking to the immanence of our consciousness? This fundamental philosophical problem goes back to Plato, who explained that the *immediate* thinking of the Other as the Other, that is, not in its relation to the Same, is not possible.

Levinas insists that we cannot operate with the transcendent as with an object of our consciousness, moreover, he regards the distinction between the transcendent and the objective as a key point of his work:

Penser l'infini, le transcendant, l'Étranger, ce n'est donc pas penser un objet ... La différence entre objectivité et transcendance va servir d'indication générale à toutes les analyses de ce travail (*TI*, p. 41, italics by Levinas).

However, the opposition of the transcendent to the objective can be seen as a natural development of the phenomenological tradition. Indeed, the thrust of Husserl's famous slogan — *zu den Sachen selbst* — called for a rethinking of the relation of subject to object, and in the final run, for making manifest the genuine transcendence of the objective world. The intentionality that aims the consciousness towards the things, is remarkable in that it opens the consciousness of the subject, this immanence *par excellence*, to the irreducible transcendence of the world; and the key that opens this door is the meaning. The consciousness constitutes the meaning of a phenomenon in the phenomenon's original givenness, that is, in the absolute horizon of constitution. The horizon of constitution guarantees that the intended meaning is not the meaning which is made up or constructed, that is, immanent, since it is always 'co-constituted'<sup>2</sup> by the others, by my own corporality, and, finally, by the

<sup>2</sup> *Strasser S.* The idea of dialogal phenomenology. Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh; Editions E. Nauwelaerts, Louvain, 1969, p. 66.

world itself. Husserl himself called this paradox “the transcendence in the immanent”.

The same attentiveness to the problem of the transcendent, characteristic of Husserlian phenomenology, is also noticeable in Heidegger’s early work. Heidegger, however, experienced a certain frustration: his efforts to radicalize Husserl precisely at this point, revealed certain fundamental difficulties that *de facto* forced him out of phenomenology. Rudolf Bernet pointed out that Heidegger tried «d’arracher le phénomène au cadre étroit d’une théorie de la signification et surtout de la connaissance dans lequel Husserl l’avait confiné»<sup>3</sup>. In particular, Heidegger’s reinterpretation of the intentionality as a relation between the immanent *intentio* and the transcendent *intentum*, drove him to conclude that the very subjectivity of subject is the transcending (*Transzendenz*, cf. GA 24). This approach basically reduces the sense-bestowal to the way in which this sense-bestowal is achieved, that is, to the manner in which the existent as such makes itself manifest. The meaning in the ‘*Sein und Zeit*’ becomes the sense of being; but being cannot be an object. For the late Heidegger, the thinking in terms of object, or, more broadly, the relation of subject to object, is an instance of taking over, of domination or possession, etc. Refraining to describe the thinking in terms of the relation of subject to object, he therefore refrains from thinking in terms of immanent and transcendent (from his point of view the two pairs are closely related).

In this perspective, Heidegger’s interpretation of intentionality as ‘transcending’ can be read as a development of Husserl’s own intentions<sup>4</sup>. Levinas opposes Husserl as well as Heidegger in his treatment of the problem of the transcendent, which gradually becomes the main focus of his work. Here is the big scheme of Levinas’s argument. The transcendence (or the otherness) of another human being is fundamentally different from the otherness of things, of the world, of the works of art, even of the time. Unlike the otherness of the world that can be somehow reduced in cognition and possession, the otherness of the Other is essentially irreducible. The otherness of the Other is of ‘ethical’ kind, and so the relation to the Other as the Other cannot be described in terms of the correlation between the *noesis* and the *noeme*, and certainly not in terms of the ecstatic temporality. In other words, whereas for Husserl as well as for Heidegger, the transcendence of the other person is a particular

<sup>3</sup> Bernet R. *La vie du sujet. Recherches sur l’interprétation de Husserl dans la phénoménologie*. Paris, 1994, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60-65.

case of the transcendence of the world and of the time, Levinas, on the contrary, states that we perceive the transcendence of the world and the newness of time only on the basis of our relation to the absolutely Other, that is, the transcendent Other:

The Other is not a particular case, a species of alterity, but the original exception to the order. It is not because the Other is novelty that is “gives rise” to the relationship of transcendence — it is because responsibility for the Other is transcendence that there can be something new under the sun.<sup>5</sup>

But how indeed the transcendence of the Other, which, according to Levinas, is the responsibility for the Other, can found the transcendence of time and of the world? What is the specific character of this transcendence, or, more precisely, of the way we philosophize about it? Why the intentionality, which Levinas in 1930 calls “the veritable act of transcending and the prototype of all transcendence”, cannot, however, bestow upon the Other the meaning of the Other as such, that is, cannot give us the truth of the Other? We would like to point out that the truth of the Other, accessible only in responsibility, an ethical *praxis* of a particular kind, is a specific modus of truth which cannot be reduced to the truth of knowledge. Therefore, we are invited to leave the domain of knowledge and the philosophy of cognition, and approach the philosophy which is affected by the transcendent (*TrInt*, p. 22). This new kind of truth, which presupposes the rupture of cognition, and which goes beyond the correlation between the *noesis* and the *noeme*, is described by Levinas as “the idea of the infinite in us”. The Cartesian idea of the Infinite, traditionally taken for a foundation of “the ontological proof of the existence of God”, is reinterpreted by Levinas as a model of an essentially inadequate (and hence non-intentional) relation to the Other, the relation into which the I is always in a certain sense already involved.

The task of the present work is to clarify the connection of this reading of ‘the ontological proof’ with some of its other interpretations. It is customary for a research on the history of philosophy to aim at determining the differences between philosophical schools or movements. We believe, however, that in the case of an extremely original thinker such as Levinas, it would be more productive to determine the lineage in the history of thought which he continues and develops. Firstly, we would like to point out that the logic of Levinas resembles the original form of ‘the ontological proof’ presented in the *Proslogion* of St Anselm. Secondly,

<sup>5</sup> *Lévinas, E.* Of God who comes to mind. Stanford, 1998, p. 13.

we would like to show that Levinas's reading of the "Third Meditation" of Descartes is strikingly similar to the interpretations of Descartes and Anselm by Alexandre Koyré, a senior contemporary and a friend of Levinas. Finally, we hope that our analysis of the primacy of the infinite over the finite in Levinas and Koyré will allow us to elucidate the issue of the so called 'theological presuppositions' of Levinas's philosophy, more precisely, the problem of how exactly the transcendence of the Other is conditioned by the presence of God in the philosophical reflection.

To make a short digression we now briefly recall the principal philosophical encounters of Levinas and Koyré. Like Levinas, Alexandre Koyré was born in the Russian Empire in a Russian speaking Jewish family, though not in the Baltic provinces but in Taganrog in the Southern Russia. Early in his life he became interested in Husserl's philosophical teachings, and came to Göttingen specifically to become his student. It was rumoured that young as he was he was imprisoned in Russia for his political activities, and the only book he had in his cell was Husserl's '*Logische Untersuchungen*'. He spent two years in Göttingen and wrote a thesis which he never submitted because Husserl did not quite approve it. Koyré then moves to France which he chooses as his home. In 1922 and 1923 he publishes his books on Anselm and Descartes, the books recommended by Jean Hering to his student circle in Strasbourg, which included the young Levinas. Koyré was one of the prominent French philosophers of Russian descent who supported Lev Shestov's initiative to invite Husserl to Paris. It is not unlikely that Husserl's visit to Paris was the beginning of a long friendship between Levinas and Koyré, who was 13 years older than Levinas. It is well known that Levinas was one of two translators of the 'Cartesian Meditations' into French, but it is probably less well known that Koyré was the editor of this translation. Husserl told Koyré in one of his letters to him that he thought that Koyré was the 'true translator' (*der eigentliche Übersetzer*) and thanked him for the role he played in the translation. (This was an ambiguous compliment as Husserl did not really like the translation.) Koyré was also the author of the preface to the very first French translation of Heidegger, this was *Was ist Metaphysik?* translated by Henri Corbin. When Levinas moved to Paris in 1930, Koyré taught in *l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, where his lectures on Hegel were very popular. Levinas attended these lectures and was spotted discussing philosophy in Russian with Koyré and his successor in *l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*, Alexandre Kojève. There were indeed matters to be discussed: Levinas took an active part in the journal *Recherches philos-*

*ophiques* edited by Koyré and others, it is here that his work *De l'évasion* first appeared. The journal soon became one of the leading French periodicals in philosophy. Contributions of Levinas, most of them book reviews, appeared in almost every issue. Levinas and Koyré played a major role in spreading Heidegger's influence in France. The first issue had the French translation of Heidegger's '*Vom Wesen des Grundes*'. The same year Levinas published his 35-pages paper 'Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie', reprinted in 1949 with passionate eulogies omitted (let me quote one:

Par hasard, la Gloire ne s'est pas trompée et, malgré toutes ses habitudes, n'était pas en retard...

Soon both Levinas and Koyré changed their enthusiastic attitude to Heidegger, and it was Koyré who brought the unsettling news from Germany. In the late forties, Koyré and Levinas participated in the debates on Heidegger's philosophy in France organized by Jean Wahl; Koyré was strongly critical of Heidegger's philosophy in his article published at the time. Unlike Levinas, Koyré seems to have entirely lost his admiration for Heidegger's thought; both Koyré and Levinas refused to meet Heidegger when he visited France. The friendship of Levinas and Koyré lasted until Koyré's death in 1964.

Having set himself the task of philosophical access to the absolutely other, Levinas is guided by the "idea of the Infinite" from the "Third Meditation" by Descartes:

Cette relation du Même avec l'Autre, sans que la transcendance de la relation coupe les liens qu'implique une relation, mais sans que ces liens unissent en un Tout le Même et l'Autre, est fixée, en effet, dans la situation décrite par Descartes où le «je pense» entretient avec l'Infini qu'il ne peut aucunement contenir et dont il est séparé, une relation appelée «idée de l'infini» (TI, p. 40).

Levinas refers to the so-called "ontological proof" of Descartes based on the necessity of the existence of "the most perfect existing entity", the idea of which the thinking subject finds in himself. After the radical doubt Descartes convinces himself with certainty of the existence of *cogito*, and then turns to investigate other ideas. It then becomes clear that the idea of God, the idea of the Infinite is absolutely unique and very different from the other ideas. The analysis of this idea leads Descartes to an unexpected conclusion that, ultimately, the very existence of *cogito* is based on an infinite substance which precedes it. He writes:

And I must not imagine that I do not apprehend the infinite by a true idea, but only by the negation of the finite... since, on the contrary, I clearly perceive that there is more reality in the infinite substance than in the finite, and therefore that is in some way that I possess the perception of the infinite before the finite, that is, the perception of God *before that of myself*...<sup>6</sup>

Descartes believes that the idea of God is innate as well as objective, that is, not dependant on my subjectivism.

The similarity between the “argument” of Descartes and its early versions going back to St Augustine has been noticed very early. The thinker seeks God, finds Him in his soul, finds His idea in his mind, and, full of gratitude, exclaims: “I would not be able to seek Thee if I had not possess Thee already!” (cf. *Confess.* VII, I, 10). Even more strikingly Descartes’s proof resembles that of St Anselm in his ‘Proslogion’. Let us recall the core of Anselm’s argument. The “Proslogion” refutes the logic of the fool from the XIII Psalm, who denies the existence of God, in the form of a “proof by contradiction”. If God is “something-that-which-nothing-greater can-be-thought” (*aliquid quo maius nihil cogitari potest*)<sup>7</sup> or “that-than-which-is-a-greater-cannot be thought” (*quo majus cogitari nequit*) (*Proslogion* II), then the fool, who admits the purely theoretical existence of such an object but denies its actual existence, could think about it as actually existing, “which is greater” (*ibid.*). Thus our initial assumption that the fool considered the greatest thing that could be thought, was false. Koyré pointed out that Anselm, in contrast to Augustine, chooses not an ontological but a logical approach. Koyré notes in this connection that an ontologically based proof presupposes a prior knowledge of the essence of God, which for Anselm is impossible in principle (here Koyré traces the influence of Plotinus and a similarity to Pseudo-Dionysius<sup>8</sup>). In his proof Anselm carefully avoids any direct statements about the essence of God; he chooses an indirect reasoning, so that Anselm’s argument, in contrast to those of his successors, is not properly “ontological”<sup>9</sup>. However,

<sup>6</sup> *Descartes, A discourse on method*, tr. by J.Veitch, London, 1953, p. 104.

<sup>7</sup> Koyré indicates the Augustinian influence on this formula, cf. «Summun bonum omnino et quo esse aut cogitari melius nihil possit, aut intellegendus, ayt credendus est Deus, si blasphemii carere cogitamus» (*De moribus Minicheeorum*, 9, 24).

<sup>8</sup> For another approach to the parallelism between Anselm and Pseudo-Dionysius see *Evdokimov P. L’aspect apophatique de l’argument de Saint Anselme.* // *Spicilegium Beccense*, I, Paris, Vrin, 1959, pp.233-258.

<sup>9</sup> This idea of Koyré was repeated by E. Gilson in his dispute with K. Barth (cf. *Gilson, E. Sans et nature de l’Argument de Saint Anselme* // *Archives d’histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge*, IX, 1934, p. 29) and was later developed in Marion’s paper (*Marion J.-L. L’argument relève-t-il de l’ontologie?* // *Archivio di Filosofia*, N° 1-3 (58), Padova, 1990. S. 43-70).

Descartes goes much further: while for St Augustine it suffices to discover the idea of God in one's soul, and for St Anselm it is enough to show that one cannot logically conceive the non-existence of God, Descartes argues that the idea of the Infinite, which is fundamentally inadequate to the thinking subject, owes its manifestation to the Transcendence itself.

Levinas is certainly not a Cartesian, — primarily because he considers the idea of the Infinite as a *relation* between the Same and the Other, but not the idea of the Infinite as such. Besides, while traditionally the argument of the “Third Meditation” was interpreted as the “ontological argument” for the existence of God, in the interpretation of Levinas the Cartesian idea of the Infinite is not considered a proof of any theological statement. On the contrary, the genuine philosophical meaning of the idea of the Infinite as the ‘idea-of-the-infinite-in-me’, is revealed irrespectively of the question on the “existence” or “non-existence” of God (cf. *DQVI*, p. 7, also *EN*, pp. 227-229). The only premise for its consideration is the mere fact that the word “God” (or the Other) is present in the philosophical questioning.

One cannot but compare this reading of Descartes with the interpretation of the “Third Meditation” by Alexandre Koyré. The name of Koyré is usually mentioned in connection with his innovative works on the philosophy and history of science, but of major interest for us are his early writings on the phenomenological interpretation of the idea of God by Anselm and Descartes. The scope of his talent should not surprise us. Koyré wrote in the end of his philosophical career:

Dès le début de mes recherches j'ai été inspiré par la conviction de l'unité de la pensée humaine; d'où l'impossibilité de séparer, en compartiments étanches, l'histoire de la pensée philosophique et celle de la pensée religieuse dans laquelle baigne toujours la première, soit pour s'en inspirer, soit pour s'y opposer<sup>10</sup>.

No wonder, therefore, that Koyré sees in Descartes one of the predecessors of his own scientific infinitism. For Koyré, Descartes is first and foremost a theologian, even a “mystic apologist” ([Koyré1922], p. 1) or a “neo-Platonist” (*ibid.*, p. X); and in Koyré's opinion the most significant (scientific<sup>11</sup> as well as theological) achievement of Descartes

<sup>10</sup> Koyré A. *Études d'histoire de la pensée scientifique*. Gallimard, Paris, 1973, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> «[N]ous considérons que la plus grande gloire de Descartes mathématicien fut la reconnaissance la continuité du nombre; en assimilant le nombre discret aux lignes et aux grandeurs, il avait introduit la continuité et l'infini dans le domaine du nombre fini» (*ibid.*, p. 128). On the relation between continuity and infinity see also Koyré's interpretations of the paradoxes of Zeno (*Koyré A. Études d'histoire de la pensée philosophique*. Paris, 1963, pp. 29-31).



is the statement of the primordial character of the infinite in its relation to the finite ([Koyré1922], p. 139).

For Koyré, as well as for Levinas, the “Third Meditation” is important not because the arguments of Descartes prove or do not prove something. The logical structure of Descartes’s proof was borrowed from St Anselm; this structure has been made explicit already by St Bonaventura. The argument has two parts: the discovery of the possibility of the infinite being, and the transition from the possibility of this being to its existence. *Deus cogitatur — ergo Deus est*: this is Koyré’s summary of the logic of Descartes<sup>12</sup>. Like Levinas, Koyré pays almost no attention to the second part of the argument (the transition from a possible existence to the actual existence), he is entirely focused on the first part: the discovery of the idea of God as the most perfect, or the infinite, being. Where does Koyré see the fundamental difference of Descartes’s argument from the previous proofs built on the idea of the infinite? Koyré writes:

[P]ersonne avant lui n’avait su se former une idée vraiment claire de l’infini, personne n’avait su dégager cette idée de son sens théologique, personne, pour tout dire, n’avait avant Descartes affirmé avec autant de netteté la possibilité d’un infini actuel, la possibilité du nombre infini ([Koyré1922], p. 126).

Based on his profound intuition of “the unity of scientific, philosophical and religious thought”, Koyré managed to extract from this essentially mathematical idea philosophical consequences. We believe that their trace is visible in the work of Levinas.

So what is, for Koyré, the philosophical value of the mathematical achievements of Descartes? Why the introduction of the actual infinity, so crucial for the development of mathematics, had important implications outside the progress of sciences? This is what Koyré says about Descartes:

Supérieur à Cantor par la puissance et la profondeur de ses vues, il a pu établir non seulement la légitimité essentielle de l’infini actuel, et montrer l’impossibilité de le remplacer par la notion de l’indéfini, mais, en plus, il en a fait le fondement et le principe de la théorie du fini<sup>13</sup>.

In other words, it is the infinity that becomes a basic notion via which the finite is defined, and not vice versa. This idea resonates in the words of Levinas: «L’idée du parfait et de l’infini ne se réduit pas à la

<sup>12</sup> Cf. a formula of Malebranche: «Si on pense à Dieu, il faut qu’il soit» (*Entretiens métaphysiques* II 5).

<sup>13</sup> Koyré A. *Études d’histoire de la pensée philosophique*. Paris, 1963, p. 26.

négation de l'imparfait. La négativité est incapable de la transcendance» (TI, p. 31). However, the issue here is not just that a 'correct' point of view implies that it is impossible to think the infinite on the basis of the finite (or, for that matter, the transcendent on the basis of the immanent), and not the mere fact of logical dependence of the notion of the finite on the notion of the infinite (and here, by the way, lies the fundamental disagreement between the finitists and the infinitists in the foundations of mathematics). The main point is that we cannot think the *finite in itself*, since the thinking of the finite presupposes the thinking of the infinite (for example, the definition of a finite number already involves the definition of the entire infinite set of finite numbers). Such is the nature of the finite. Thus for Koyré the principal outcome of the 'ontological proof' are the consequences for the finite, and not for the infinite in itself; more precisely, the consequences that the thinking of the infinite being by a finite substance has for this finite substance. We may call this the anthropological aspect of the 'ontological proof'. Not in the 1920's, but in the 1950's, in one of his last works, Koyré wrote:

The idea of the infinite plays an important part in the philosophy of Descartes, so important that all Cartesianism philosophy may be considered as being wholly based upon this idea. Indeed, it is only as absolutely infinite being that God can be conceived; it is only as such that He can be proved to exist; it is only by the possessing this idea that man's true nature — *of a finite being endowed with the idea of God* — can be defined<sup>14</sup>.

The idea that man is a finite being endowed with the thinking of the infinite, a finite substance that can grasp itself only starting from the infinite, is often expressed by Koyré. In his summary of Cartesian philosophy, Koyré says that one of the main achievements of the "superhuman effort of the genius of Descartes" is the relation of the self-consciousness to the substance that infinitely exceeds it:

Il ne reste plus grande chose de la métaphysique de Descartes, et ses preuves de l'existence de Dieu sont allées rejoindre les preuves d'Aristote et de saint Thomas. Et pourtant, la grande découverte cartésienne, la découverte de la primauté intellectuelle de l'infini, reste vraie. Il reste vrai que la pensée enveloppe et implique l'infini, il reste vrai que la pensée finie — toute pensée finie — ne peut se saisir, ni se comprendre qu'à partir d'une idée infinie<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Koyré, A. *From the closed world to the Infinite universe*. The John Hopkins Press, London, 1957, p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> Koyré, A. *Introduction à la lecture de Platon. Entretien sur Descartes*. Gallimard, 1962, p. 227.

In Levinas we see a similar ‘anthropological’ reading of the idea of the Infinite, as «l’humanité de l’homme comprise comme théologie ou l’intelligibilité du transcendant» (*TrInt*, p. 29, 62). The idea of the Infinite is remarkable not because it gives us a knowledge of God — such a knowledge cannot belong to philosophy, since God cannot become a theme of our discourse; in thematizing God we reduce Him to a ‘conceptual idol’, as Jean-Luc Marion would put it. The idea of the Infinite is remarkable in the first place because it awakes the I to the responsibility for the Other, and it is only this responsibility that constitutes me as a subject (cf. *DQVI*, p. 109).

If we take into account the manner in which this transition from the ‘theological’ understanding of the ‘ontological proof’ to its ‘anthropological’ interpretation, is achieved, then the similarity between Koyré and Levinas becomes even more visible. According to Koyré, the radical novelty of “the proof of the existence of God through the idea of the infinite” is that its central element is not the idea of God as such, but

[...] l’idée de Dieu en tant que réalisée en moi, ou moi-même en tant que je possède cette idée ou, si l’on veut être plus précis encore, le fait que je possède une idée de Dieu ([Koyré1922], p. 149).

Koyré does not want to consider the intuition behind this idea, the intuition that aspires to attain the essence of God. Moreover, according to Koyré, the consideration of the idea of God is a step back from the indirect and purely logical proof of Anselm<sup>16</sup>. The only thing that matters is the way in which this idea is represented (or intended) in our consciousness, that is, in the case of this particular idea, the detachment of the representation from what is represented:

Personne n’avait aussi bien compris la différence, la distance infinie qui sépare tout fini de l’infini ([Koyré1922], p. 126)<sup>17</sup>.

Indeed, since “the distance between the finite and the infinite” is infinite, the two are separated by an abyss that cannot be bridged ([Koyré1922], p. 129); this highlights the true significance of Descartes’s argument that calls for coming over this abyss. For Levinas, too, the most important point in the “Third Meditation” is the inadequacy between the idea of the infinite and its *ideatum*; here Levinas is concerned not with

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Koyré A. *L’Idée de Dieu dans la philosophie de St. Anselme*, Paris, 1923, pp. 201-202.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. «la relation à être infiniment distant» in Lévinas (*TI*, p. 39).

the mathematical infinity, but with the infinitely transcendent, that is, the absolutely other:

La distance qui sépare l'*ideatum* et son idée, constitue ici le contenu de l'*ideatum* même (*TI*, p. 41).

The emphasis is relocated from the consideration of the idea itself to the I which considers this idea, from the infinity itself to the manner in which the infinity transcends the consciousness which considers it. To preserve the inadequacy of the transcendence to our acts of thinking becomes a prerequisite of thinking the transcendence; the problem of truth becomes, thereby, a question about thinking the inadequate.

For Levinas, as for Koyré, the philosophical cognition of the infinite precedes and substantiates the cognition of the finite (cf. *DQVI*, p. 106). However, while the philosophical research of Koyré concentrates on the genesis of the idea of infinity in the history of human thought, in theology as well as in mathematics and physics, Levinas is preoccupied with the search for an alternative to the famous opposition between the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and the god of the philosophers and the scientists (*DQVI*, p. 97). Developing Koyré's thought and going beyond it, Levinas considers the relation to the infinite otherness of God and of the other as "l'intrigue du sens" (*DQVI*, p. 110); he considers the subject as a "witness" of the infinity of the infinite, witnessing of this infinity as the source of sense.

Here indeed ends the similarity between Levinas and Koyré. For Koyré the infinity is mostly the mathematical infinity or the infinity of the infinite world; this infinity has no ethical connotation. Levinas wants something much more ambitious: not only to think the finite on the basis of the infinite, but to think the immanent on the basis of the transcendent. More precisely, not only to think about man on the basis of the world which is transcendent to him, that is, starting from the image of the world that man carries in himself, but to think about the I on the basis of the otherness of God or of another human being, the otherness which is not given (as opposed to the world, though transcendent to me, but still given to me in a certain way). It is here that becomes crucial the fact that the idea of the infinite is twofold: the idea of God or the "goodness beyond essence", and the face of the Other:

La manière dont se présente l'Autre, dépassant l'*idée de l'Autre en moi*, nous l'appelons, en effet, visage (*TI*, p. 43).

These are two different dimensions that cannot be reduced to one another. God, or the Goodness, establishes the structure of meaning, which obliges me to the Other.

This can only be if the Desirable commands me to what is the nondesirable, to the undesirable *par excellence*: to another<sup>18</sup>.

On the other hand, my relation to God is possible only through the Other. There is no immediate intuition of God. My relation to God are my actions which concern the Other. But if God is in the very foundation of my relation to the Other, why does Levinas talk about ethics in this context, and not, say some new kind of metaphysics? Indeed, ethics is precisely the way to relate to the totally Other, and it is a way of unfolding of the relation to God. In other words, in this perspective, ethics is a religious *praxis*, and philosophy becomes the true theology when it considers the relation to the Other. Our knowledge of God, our relation to Him comes into being as an ethical relation to the Other. There can be no philosophical discourse about God Himself, but all of ethics should be read as an irreducible trace of God's transcendence, or more precisely, of our whole being affected by it (cf. *DQVI*, p. 112-115). Thus we come to receive ethics not only as a relation to the Other, but as a way of thinking about God.

In this connection should we acknowledge the so called 'theological presuppositions' of the Levinassian philosophy, and if yes, in which sense? The Levinassian ethics entails a discourse about God, or, rather, a discourse to God. However, for Levinas, philosophy is incompatible with any thematization of the Divine based on religious beliefs:

Finally, in my commentary, the word "God" will occur rarely. It expresses the notion religiously of utmost clarity but philosophically most obscure. This notion could become clearer for philosophers on the basis of the human ethical situations the Talmudic texts describe. The reverse procedure would no doubt be more edifying and more pious but it would be no longer philosophical. Theosophy is the very negation of philosophy. We have no right to start from a pretentious familiarity with the 'psychology' of God and His 'behaviour' in order to understand these texts, in which we see traces of the difficult paths which lead to the comprehension of the Divine, coming to light only at crossroads of human journeys, if one express it thus. It is these human journeys which call to or announce the Divine (*QLT*, p. 70-71/ *Nine talmudic Readings*, p. 32).

<sup>18</sup> *Of God who comes to mind*, p.68.

At the same time his philosophy starts with the mere fact that the word ‘God’ is present in the language, would that be a trace, or even a negation of God. A tradition of thought going back to St Anselm shows that even the Biblical fool’s words “There is no God” can become a first step of a philosophically meaningful discourse about God. Once God comes into language, He comes into mind. Therefore, the so called ‘theological presuppositions’ are not properly speaking theological, since they do not involve any discussion of God in Himself. The point of departure for Levinas is the meaning of the word in the language; only silent omission or laughter can be opposed to it. One could start anywhere, even from such an obvious description of God as that than which a greater cannot be thought (*majus cogitari nequit*), and we shall come to think Him as that which is “greater than can be thought” (*majus quam cogitari possit*», *Proslogion XV*) in the words of Anselm, or, as Levinas puts it,

A thought, thinking more — or thinking *better* that is thought according to truth. A thought that also responded *with adoration* to the Infinite of which it was the thought<sup>19</sup>

Once we are here, the bounds of purely theoretical thinking, the thinking in terms of knowledge, are broken. We are beyond the alternative of theory and practice, in the realm of ethics, the first philosophy.

<sup>19</sup> Levinas, E., *Entre nous: on thinking-of-the-Other*. Transl. by M.B. Smith and B. Harshav. Columbia University Press, 1998, p. 200.