

## *Expanding our proximity to include more Others, an essay on Levinas*

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### **Introduction**

In this essay we will attempt to explore how Levinas' philosophy can be made a more inclusive way of thinking, in order to contribute – ultimately - to the alleviation, as Levinas would have it, useless suffering, and in particular of (post)colonial Others. In the first part we will explore Levinas' thinking to see what aspects can serve this purpose. We will in particular look at Levinas' critique to traditional Western philosophy, since its inherently violent, exclusive and usurps the Other and the world. In this part we will compare his thinking with that of Adorno and Horkheimer. In this part we will see there are profound similarities between Levinas' critique of traditional Western philosophy and Adorno and Horkheimer's description of the dialectic of Enlightenment. As we will see, all these three thinkers sought to expose the violent instrumental and calculating nature of Western thinking, which Adorno and Horkheimer trace back to the Enlightenment, and its invention of instrumental rationality, and Levinas to Descartes. Adorno and Horkheimer show how instrumental reason has become a tool of domination from the Enlightenment onwards and show how man with its use of reason has sought to dominate nature and mankind. With Levinas we will see how traditional Western philosophy has led to the exclusion, and at some points in history to the annihilation of the Other. We will also look at the differences, however. Adorno and Horkheimer not only critique Enlightenment thinking and its (self)destructive tendencies, but also critique the social economic order and the culture industry of their time. Levinas, on the other hand, does not seem to have such concrete a target, and looks more generally at Western philosophy as a violent way of thinking and seeks to develop a philosophy that has place for the Other, thereby contributing to an ethical relationship with the Other. What still unites them, though, is that all three believed to have exposed the barbaric nature of Western thinking, along with their wish to abolish suffering and social injustice.

In this paper I will first look at the criticism Levinas has of traditional Western philosophy in the first chapter, after which I will offer comparisons with Adorno and Horkheimer in the second. In the third and final chapter, I will try to use Levinas' thinking as an inspiration for thinking about the abolishment of suffering and social injustice. I will lean heavily on previous small papers I have written and will also make use of some thoughts formulated in my masterthesis that is a work in progress in the time of this writing. Of course, the passages I lean on will be extensively rewritten and utilized for the point I am attempting to make in this paper.

## I. Ungraspably violent, the self-centered usurping thinking of the West

### II.I The terrible neutrality of being

For Levinas, philosophy does not begin with wonder, as with the ancient Greeks or as according to other past or contemporary romantic views of philosophy, that often with this same romantic tone say that philosophy means wondering at things as if one were a child. For Levinas, philosophy begins with a shock. A philosophy that only starts out from wonder and sets out to understand things in their being, leading the philosopher to ask questions about this being - from which ever philosophical tradition this might be done - attributes a primacy to the ontological. And wrongly so, according to Levinas. What this namely leads to, he argues, is what he calls 'a terrible neutrality of being', meaning an indifferent, merely investigative attitude towards the world. Levinas exposes a violent tendency in this way of thinking. It thanks its existence to an absence of the *Good*. What characterizes the Western subject this thinking gave rise to, is that it constitutes itself as an *I* that violently goes around in the world, accumulating knowledge. The subject thereby does not only limit itself to a spectators' role, though. It also seeks to grasp, control and dominate the things around it, making them not only its mental, but also actual and material property. When reflecting on itself, this violent spectator of the world views itself as the proud spectator of the world and logical master of the universe. The Western ego or subject, as such always comes back to itself and views itself and its knowledge in terms of a totality. It is always preoccupied with sameness, as we will see, thereby reducing everything that is different to sameness, to a totality. Subsequently, the Western subject is unable to ethically deal with the Other. Instead, the Western subject – with its focus on ontology and its neglect of deontology and axiology - usurps every otherness and other, and consequently the whole world. It is this what giving primacy to ontology leads to.<sup>1</sup>

What Levinas wants to give primacy to in ontology's stead is *Ethics*. For him, philosophy begins not with wonder, but with a shock, with perturbation. The question then no longer is an ontological one about how being is in its being, but an ethical one: is it good, right or justified how being is?<sup>2</sup>

For Levinas, this is not only a philosophical, theoretical matter of prioritizing one way of thinking over the other for pure intellectual reasons. For him much more is at stake. Due to the violent tendency in traditional Western philosophy, we have failed to ethically deal with the Other in a humane and responsible way. With his critique, Levinas exposes an egotistical way of thinking, which he calls 'egology' that has no place for the Other, because it even excludes and even annihilates him. The *I*, can only constitute itself and exist by virtue of exclusion of the Other. Time and again, cruelty in history repeats itself because we are unable to deal with the Other in an ethical responsible way. The most extreme outcome of this thinking was the Holocaust. This is why Levinas asks himself what kind of philosophy has made this possible? Or more specifically: what kind of subjectivity gave rise to such horror? And how come 2000 years of revelation has not prevented such a terrible thing from happening? It are these questions Levinas takes with him in his deconstruction and Critique of Western philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Philosophy's aim, typically in the West, we will see, consists of mastering reality and others, by representing the reality and others in concepts, through and with thinking, which makes Western philosophy an intentional praxis.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. a text from a syllabus of Awee Prins about Levinas without a date, where I also borrowed the metaphors from.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Welten, 2011, pp. 150 & 154-5

## I.II Self-sufficient and appropriating thinking, Levinas' reading of Descartes

Levinas explores the Western modern philosophical history to find traces of the totalizing and egocentric ways of thinking, in order to expose its violent nature. Levinas argues to reveal this nature within a variety of thinkers, from Descartes, Kant and Hegel to Husserl and Heidegger. To the latter he is also partially indebted. He thus starts out with criticizing the egocentrically based thinking of Descartes. Descartes, by founding his thinking – in his famous methodological doubt - on his own ego and cogito, whereby he sought to constitute himself and his thinking on this very own thinking self that thinks itself, he gave rise to an exclusionary, self-centered thinking. What is egotistical about this, is that the thinking subject that has spurred from Descartes' philosophy falsely believes itself to be self-sufficient and is in no need of any Other or relationship towards him for his thinking. In placing itself within the center of being and seeing itself as a totality, the result is a falsely conceived "*unity of the I, in which all knowing is self-sufficient.*"<sup>4</sup> The form of ontology he created, is bound up with facticity and its intellectual move is intentional, in the sense that it constitutes the self. From Descartes onwards, this has resulted in us having become stuck on and with ourselves, so to say, completely bound up with the self, in other words, which makes it impossible to be engaged with any otherness.<sup>5</sup> Armed with its self-sufficiency, the Western subject has set out on his Odyssey to accumulate knowledge, and employing that knowledge for the fulfilment of its needs. This selfconstitutive tendency can be found in Kant as well, within his autonomous reason. What is typical of the philosophies of Descartes and Kant, is that they are concerned with representation. And within this representational attitude violence lies. All that is intelligible, is a consciousness of self. These forms of philosophy are typically contemplative, according to Levinas, which falsely subordinates the relations between beings to the structures of being, of thinking and representation in this case.<sup>6</sup> Because of their abstract and intellectual form, these forms of philosophy enclose and encapsulate us within our mind, resulting in a detached and disengaged form of thinking. Subsequently, this thinking is too preoccupied with itself and its contemplations that it impedes any relationship with the Other. The Other, in this mode of thinking, can only be understood as a concept to be comprehended through representation and consequently can only be treated as such.<sup>7</sup> In Levinas' own words: "*exteriority or otherness of the self is recaptured in immanence.*" Consequently, every otherness is reduced to the thought's self, which means that nothing new is ever learned, everything is made to fit into the mold of self's thought "*in the guise of recallable, re-presentable memory.*"<sup>8</sup> This thinking has thus come to be centered around the *I* that thinks. The *I*, subsequently, has come to view itself as a totality. Because it brings every particularity back to the *I* that thinks in an intentional, representational gesture, it comes to conflate particularity with totality. Again, Levinas emphasizes the violence that is inherent in this gesture, because *du moment* the thinking *I* conceives itself as a totality, it puts itself in the center of being and ignores or utilizes all exteriority and alterity, returning it to the *I* that thinks in the form of a represented concept. In other words: the thinking *I* wants to experience things on its own terms, which it can only do if all exteriority is reduced to its relatable and understandable interiority. Everything it henceforth experiences, is "*integrated into its needs and enjoyments.*" It takes ownership of all exteriority and strips everything outside of its center of its independence, alterity and freedom.<sup>9</sup> This consuming, objectifying way of thinking implies that "[t]hought qua learning [*apprende*], requires a taking [*prendre*], a seizure, a grip

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<sup>4</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 125

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2 & cf. Critchley, 2015, p. 15

<sup>6</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 5

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 13-4

on what is learned, a possession.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the Cartesian form of consciousness has an utilitarian attitude towards everything that is exterior to it and thus subsumes every exteriority under the interiority of the *I* that thinks, thereby taking possession of it. This utilitarian way of thinking serves the purpose of the falsely assumed unity of the *I*, which has to assume a harmony “*in the act of grasping, between the thinkable and the thinking, that the appearing of the world is also a giving of itself, and that the knowledge of it is a satisfaction, as if it fulfilled a need.*”<sup>11</sup> This is not thinking proper, according to Levinas, so it is better to say that this is a form of sensibility: the exterior is made sensible, thereby tracing everything Other back to the Same, that is, of the cogito or Kantian schemata’s.<sup>12</sup> Typical of Western philosophy, Levinas writes is that “[i]t is in the psyche qua knowledge (...) that traditional philosophy locates the origin or natural place of the meaningful and recognizes mind.”<sup>13</sup> Everything that is seen as meaningful, resides within the mind. Every meaning, thus comes from within. This is the *ego-logical* mistake that Western philosophy makes, according to Levinas.

What is characteristic of the modes of sensibility Levinas describes, is that it makes intelligibility understood in terms of vision. Seeing is then seen as the intentional structure, as providing us access to things. The knowing, in terms of vision and intentionality, is made a priority.<sup>14</sup> The forms of knowing here, is again understood as an *I* identical to itself and an *I* that thinks and thereby brings every alterity under its thematizing, intentional gaze. Because of the contemplative character of this seeing, it posits itself at a disinterested distance, resulting in a lack of existential and ethical engagement.<sup>15</sup> This has consequences for our treatment of the Other. Because like the world, the Other is also brought under the intentional gaze, it is being colonized by the *I* that thinks and utilized to fulfill the desires and drives of this *I* that thinks. The Other, as such, becomes graspable and an object to be apprehended and manipulated.<sup>16</sup> The *I think*, as a result, becomes an instrument of dominance by “*reducing one’s other to the same.*”<sup>17</sup> This makes every sociality impossible. Of course, subjects do interact with one another, but if they do so from this framework of thinking, when interacting “[f]or each of the interlocutors, speaking would consist in entering into the thought of the other, in fitting into it.”<sup>18</sup> A dialogue then consists of no more than in attempting to pour one’s thoughts into that of the other.<sup>19</sup> Every sociality, then, is “*reduced to the knowledge one can acquire about the other person as a known object, and would already support the immanence of an I having an experience of the world.*”<sup>20</sup>

### **I.III Thought and self-satisfied man, Levinas’ reading of Kant and Hegel**

Levinas also criticizes Kant and Hegel. Kant, like Descartes, is preoccupied by an *I* that thinks and its own consciousness. Kant, in developing a theory of consciousness, conceived of schemata and structures of the mind, into which everything has to be made to fit through a representational move, thereby reducing everything to an intellectual concept mediated by these schemata’s. Every otherness, or difference that does not fit into this mold, is either reduced in such a way as to make it fit anyway, or it is simply discarded as unknowable. And with Kant we have seen that everything

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 126

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.14

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 159

<sup>15</sup> Critchley, 2015, p. 59

<sup>16</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 160

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 161

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 162

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 7

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 164

unknowable is not worthy of our time and attention and can be ignored. This philosophical move is perpetuated by Hegel, who attempted to create a totalizing philosophy of the world spirit (Geist), that seeks to negate all otherness in order to make it whole. Hegel in this way violently reduces all multiplicity to a totality, thereby making any experience of otherness or a relationship towards the Other impossible.<sup>21</sup> Hegel's work, writes Levinas *"is a philosophy of both absolute knowledge and the satisfied man."* Here we see the totalizing and self-satisfying, utilitarian nature of Hegel's philosophy. Hegelian thinking, is always a triumph, because it *"triumphs over all otherness and it is therein, ultimately, that its very rationality resides"* and this refers to *"the unity of the I think [which] is the ultimate form of the mind as knowledge. And all things lead back to this unity of the I think in constituting a system."*<sup>22</sup> No less than Descartes philosophy Kant's and Hegel's philosophy are self-centered and self-serving.

#### **I.IV Intentional manipulation, Levinas' reading of Husserl and Heidegger**

Continuing his critique of Western philosophy, Levinas comes to criticize Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophy, of which he first shows the extent to which he is indebted to them. Of Husserl he writes he is indebted to him for *"the concept of intentionality animating consciousness, and especially the idea of the horizons of meaning which grow blurred when thought is absorbed in what it thinks, which always has the meaning of being."*<sup>23</sup> The phenomenology Husserl developed has taken us, so to speak, out of our head and engaged us more in the world, for with Husserl, consciousness is not consciousness anymore of itself (as with Descartes, Kant and Hegel), but consciousness is always consciousness *of something*, thereby constituting a horizon of meaning, whereby consciousness is dependent upon the outside world, or exteriority, to speak in Levinas' words. The most essential contribution to philosophy of Husserl and Heidegger, according to Levinas, is that in this way they have shown that thought is always engaged and determined by being, and not vice versa. The horizon of meaning this gives rise to, is determined by thought referring back to thought, whereby being indeed determines the phenomena.<sup>24</sup> This is a first move to make us unstuck with ourselves, because with phenomenology, thought is concretely engaged with whatever being it is conscious of, and therefore not disengaged and disinterested anymore. It also helps us move past naïve abstractions of everyday consciousness, which Levinas also argues is characteristic for scientific consciousness. But Husserl and Heidegger do not go far enough, for Levinas, because although they are engaged with concreteness, they nevertheless still adhere to naïve abstractions. In phenomenologically analyzing the concreteness of the mind, the theoretical and representational forms of knowing are still privilege, and as such ontology is still primary.<sup>25</sup> Because in these forms of philosophy thought always thinks in accordance to its own criteria, is always equal to itself, always refers back to itself, it can be seen as something that is always the Same. Because thinking functions along these lines, when thinking of the Other, the I can only rediscover itself in the Other. The Other, which the I perceives outside itself, is reduced back to the Same, by forcefully bringing it into harmony with that which already exists in its own mind, which is the thought thinking itself. Exteriority, thus becomes part of the interiority.<sup>26</sup>

When speaking of Heidegger in more detail, Levinas argues that it was Heidegger who has rightly shown that our presence in the world cannot be merely understood as contemplative. Our relationship with the world is not only mediated by our consciousness of it. Instead, we are *thrown* in

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<sup>21</sup> Critchley, 2015, p. 2 & 6

<sup>22</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 126

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 123

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

the world, which results in a form of factual *being-in-the-world* that cannot be reduced to thoughts. Here, we go from contemplation to existential engagement with the world, a practical existing in it. Comprehension of the world then arises from practically handling the things that are in it.<sup>27</sup> This does not end the egotistical predicament, though, says Levinas. Due to Heidegger's focus on individual *Stimmung*, we are still stuck to ourselves. We still grasp and take possession of things, now not merely mentally, but practically and still manipulate things in concordance to our needs.<sup>28</sup> Husserl, nor Heidegger help us move beyond conceptual knowledge. Levinas also criticizes the intentionality that is inherent in Husserl's thought. The form of consciousness of Husserl, due its intentionality is "*a modality of the voluntary.*" It is additionally characterized by representation. This also implies a presence, because the self is posited as a given, making it in the same move graspable, comprehensible, appropriable. This is why we can also conceive of intentional consciousness as playing out an active intervention upon intervention "*the stage where the being of beings is played out, gathers and shows itself*", which Levinas understands as "*an exercise of the conatus.*"<sup>29</sup> And from this exercise of the conatus and intervention on the stage we bring everything in the world into our presence and grasp everything in it to fulfill our needs.<sup>30</sup> Or, in other words, we usurp the whole earth.<sup>31</sup> The selfishness of claiming our place on the stage, or the world results in the usurpation of "*places that belong to the other man who has already been oppressed and starved by me.*"<sup>32</sup>

#### **I.V Western culture and its rationalization of suffering**

Levinas not only criticizes Western thinking, but also Western culture as a whole. Whereas the mind forcefully tries to make everything exterior fit into it, culture tries to "*remove the otherness of Nature.*" Everything within it must be brought "*at the disposal and within reach of the thinking thing(...).*"<sup>33</sup> This is also typical of our mathematical and scientific mindset, where "[e]ven the absence that makes science incomplete is henceforth present in the opening of the world to research."<sup>34</sup> In forming the world around it, western culture consists of a 'taking in hand' and "*brings forth a form in the material of things.*"<sup>35</sup> This is seen as a triumph of reason where "*thought completes itself by equaling and interiorizing the other – culture triumphs over things and men.*"<sup>36</sup> Characteristic of Western culture is that it seeks to know and control everything, thereby assimilating every alterity or otherness to its whole. Every difference, consequently, is effaced. Western culture, in that sense, is driven forth by immanence, a reducing of all otherness to the same, in which presence it is forced. "The place of the meaningful and intelligible, Levinas writes, "*will be maintained in knowledge and will be tantamount to the intrigue of the spiritual in all of Western culture.*"<sup>37</sup>

The most extreme example of removing otherness from culture, and triumphing over it is, as we have seen, is the holocaust. Conceptual knowledge, in no way helped is prevent it. On the contrary, it has made it possible. This and other suffering that the 20th century was full of, was seen as necessary to attain a certain conceived form of 'progress'. Suffering became an instrument for the attainment of this 'progress'. Typical of Western modern culture is that it sought and claimed to make progress, even though this progress was paid at high a price, namely with violence, exploitation

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<sup>27</sup> Critchley, 2015, pp. 17-9

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 25

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 125-7

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Levinas, 1998, p. 127

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 130

<sup>32</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 130

<sup>33</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 179

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 180

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 181

<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 179

and the colonial oppression and annihilation of the Other. Aware of this price, Western culture sought to rationalize the suffering it caused with modern progress, by conjuring up theodicies for this suffering. This is always done by the same representational consciousness Levinas seeks to deconstruct. Within these theodicies, strategies are developed to see suffering as conducive to some merit or reward. Often, it is conceptualized as a necessary evil for the attainment of some (socio-political) goal. Suffering, then, comes to be seen as a gateway for the achievement of reason, spiritual refinement or the health of the collective, societal body. As such, Western culture always tries to formulate a certain metaphysical order and ethics to ascribe meaning to suffering. This then serves the purpose to make suffering comprehensible, thereby making it part of some “*grand design*”. But however reasonable suffering is made to be seen, its meaningless and uselessness always shows itself “*beneath the reasonable forms espoused by social “uses” of suffering[.]*” For Levinas, this is a characteristic component of the self-consciousness of European culture.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 96

## II. Blinding Enlightenment, instrumental Reason and domination

In this chapter we will compare Levinas critique of Western philosophy with Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of enlightened reason. With these authors we will look at how instrumental reason became a tool of domination, thereby impeding freedom, nullifying individuality and creating and reproducing suffering and inequality. With Amy Allen we will look at how enlightened thinking contributed to colonial thinking and practices, and how that led to the exclusion and annihilation of colonial others.

### II.I Enlightenment and its calculating usurpation of Others and the Earth

In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer seek to explain why Enlightenment has not led us towards freedom and emancipation – which, ironically, was its main purpose – but how it instead has led to a new age of barbarism, and alas not to a truly humane state of affairs. Enlightenment is usually understood as the advance of thought. The aim enlightened thinking has endowed to this advancement, is the liberation of humankind from both fear and nature, and to consequently install them as masters. When mankind discovered what power they could accumulate with knowledge (as is seen in Francis Bacon's famous adage), it has since amassed knowledge to dominate nature and human beings wholly. Humankind thus discovered how to make an instrument of reason for the attainment of utilities.<sup>39</sup> The enslavement, or in Levinas words usurpation, of the world and everything in it that ensued, knows no limits. It is for this reason Adorno and Horkheimer argue to have found a (self)destructive and violent nature in Western subjectivity and Reason. Because of Enlightenment's mission to dominate external and internal nature, it has since become entangled with domination. Here we recognize the utilitarian form of thinking that Levinas also reveals in traditional Western philosophy.

Adorno and Horkheimer, as Levinas, expose the representational tendency in Enlightened thinking and the scientific mentality it spurred forth. Science, by representing everything in terms of matter, has attained an objectifying, reifying tendency. In its attempt to bring everything under unifying concepts, it reduces all difference, supplanting them *“by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object, between rational significance and its accidental bearer.”* Due to its preoccupation with abstractness, science subsequently created ever more distance to its objects, leading to an assumed autonomy of thought in relation to its objects.<sup>40</sup> The tendency Adorno and Horkheimer thus expose in enlightenment thinking is its attempt to bring every difference back to an unity, making the world calculable with an all-encompassing schema.<sup>41</sup> By subsuming the actual, (scientific) knowledge *“appropriates and perpetuates existence as a schema in the pictorial or mathematical symbol.”*<sup>42</sup> As Levinas, they thus show the totalizing, and unifying tendency in Western thinking that annuls all alterity and difference. Above all, we can read also the disinterested, disengaged mode of thinking within this scientific mentality, that Levinas also problematizes. According to Adorno and Horkheimer the striving for conceptual unity, expresses a dominating inclination. What a concept does, as we also saw with Levinas, is subsuming features under a unity. For Adorno and Horkheimer this ultimately has consequences for social reality as well, since the *“entire logical order, with its chains of inference and dependence, the subordination and coordination of concepts, is founded on the corresponding conditions in social reality, that is, on the division of labor.”*<sup>43</sup> Deductive science, in this way, mirrors social hierarchy and compulsion. The

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp. 1-2

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p. 7

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Han in Psycho-politics

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, pp. 10-6

domination of human beings that ensues from this dominating framework, leads them to be estranged from themselves and others around them. As a result, they are more easily forced to conform to the modes of operation that are expected of them. And what is expected of them is to function in terms of (economic) self-preservation. Typical of Enlightenment is that every thinking or act that is not instrumental, or does not fit in strategic rationality, is negated or coopted by enlightened rationality. As Levinas, Adorno and Horkheimer critique this emphasis on self-preservation, and Spinoza's view of *conatus*, which made "*the endeavor of preserving oneself is the first and only basis of virtue*".<sup>44</sup> Also according to them, this came to dominate the entire Western civilization. In short, the instrumental form of Reason of the Enlightenment thus led to a social-economic order that functions as a unifying totalizing enterprise that forces every Other and otherness to fit into its modes of production and utilities. In other words, individuals are thus made to fit into the all-encompassing economic apparatus.<sup>45</sup> The Enlightenment, and its formalized rationality and morality, has reduced individuals to a form to fit the modes of production, making them all the more the same to be able to manipulate the collective as a unity.<sup>46</sup> The individual, or individuality, argue Adorno and Horkheimer, is nullified, because other-ness is negated.<sup>47</sup> "*Reason*", Adorno and Horkheimer write, has become "*an aid to the all-encompassing economic apparatus*".<sup>48</sup> As Levinas, Adorno and Horkheimer argue Western Reason is triumphant in nature, because the factual mentality Enlightenment lies in, seeks to triumph over nature and human beings in using knowledge as a tool for power. Of this Levinas writes "*thought completes itself by equaling and interiorizing the other – culture triumphs over things and men*".<sup>49</sup>

## II.II Enlightenment and colonialization

According to Amy Allen in her book *The End of Progress*, the Enlightenment and Western Reason has a colonial tendency, negating and eliminating all otherness, that is to say, otherness as opposed to the Western conceptualization of the self and the Other. The Kantian conception of the autonomous rational subject and his conception of Enlightenment and progress, stems from a comparison with colonial others that are deemed inferior. The Western identity that ensued, but also its economic growth, was made possible with the extraction of natural resources, and exploitation of colonial others. The Enlightened mission of progress, she thus shows, is thus founded on colonialism.<sup>50</sup> Allen additionally argues that this way of thinking is still dominant today, as can be seen back in contemporary forms of imperialism and neo-colonialism, which is reflected in our current economic, juridical and political order.<sup>51</sup> In Levinas terms, in our strive for progress that is facilitated by this colonialism, we usurp the world and leave others to starve as a result of economic exploitation. This is why progress and oppression have always accompanied each other.<sup>52</sup> As Levinas, she shows the forms of suffering this causes is ideologically justified and rationalized under the header of progress. It is for this reason Allen believes Western reason must decolonialize itself if it is to abandon its complicity to the colonial logics of instrumental reason. This especially calls for a letting go of the Hegelian logics of imperialism, which Levinas also criticizes.

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<sup>44</sup> Spinoza, in Adorno and Horkheimer, 2007, p. 22

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, pp. 217-8

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Han, 2012, p. 12

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 23

<sup>49</sup> Ibid

<sup>50</sup> Allen, 2016, p. 4

<sup>51</sup> Ibid 16-9

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 3

### III. The abolishment of suffering and social injustice by answering to the appeal for justice of the Other

Up to this day, the (perhaps enlightened) Western goal of progress through the expansion of its social-economic order leads to the exclusion, exploitation and annihilation of others. All the suffering that ensues, is either neglected, justified or rationalized. In this chapter, we will look for forms of thinking and philosophy that might shed more light on contemporary suffering and social injustice. Thereby making use of the theories of Adorno and Horkheimer will not be enough, because although Adorno and Horkheimer formulated a theory with which they hoped to save the Enlightenment and contribute to abolishing suffering and social injustice. It is for this reason they developed a critical theory. If such a theory is to function properly, they argue, we must formulate a philosophy *“which aims to resist the negative course of the world [and therefore] must beware of secretly wishing to submit to scientific standards.”*<sup>53</sup> They thus sought a form of thinking that *“refuses to capitulate to the prevailing division of labor and does not accept prescribed tasks.”*<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, they wanted to save the Enlightenment by using philosophical thinking for progressive goals, and as such strive for *“the abolition of individual suffering and social injustice.”*<sup>55</sup> Adorno had the complementary wish to *“eliminate all material poverty”* for its existence in a technologically advanced world was indefensible.<sup>56</sup> They did not, however, formulate any philosophy of the Other. Second, their theory was also quite totalizing as it put them at an intellectual distance to those they sought emancipate through their theory. Exactly who they wished to free from suffering and social injustice, thus remained unclear in a concrete sense. They merely distinguished themselves as critical theorists from what they saw as the unthinking masses that were forcefully integrated in the oppressive economic apparatus. Additionally, their theory was mainly a theory about Western civilization, which made them neglect the colonial other that makes the economic apparatus they describe possible in the first place. By formulating a theory that is only about Western civilization, they perhaps also risked critically looking at poverty outside of the West, where it of course exists in much more severe forms. This is where Levinas’ philosophy of the Other might help. Often Levinas’ theory of ethics is seen as too demanding and going too far. I will argue in this final chapter, that it does not go far enough and should even include Others that were beyond Levinas scope. The Others I will speak of here, are (post)colonial subjects, of which Amy Allen writes in her theory on decolonializing Western critical theory.

#### III.I Thinking proper by including the Other

As Levinas has shown, our engagement with the world and the intentions that guide them, bring about consequences that go beyond them. How our intentions shape our engagement with the world, is something to take responsibility for. This means we should come to a proper form of thinking, one that is inclusive of the Other and does not exclude or annihilate him. The forms of thinking we saw Levinas criticize above, is not thinking proper, according to Levinas. Meaning does not stem from within, and from the *I* that thinks, but stems from the Other and our relationship to him. When thinking of the Other in an ethical responsible way, we must not subjugate him to our representations nor reduce him to a concept to be understood and comprehended by the

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 243

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 202

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 225

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 241

I that thinks. We must thus prevent that the Other is “reduced to the knowledge one can acquire about the other person as a known object, and would already support the immanence of an I having an experience of the world.”<sup>57</sup> Instead knowledge of the other should also be sympathetic, loving and not distanced and contemplative. The Other should instead be apprehended as a beginning, and approached responsibly as such.<sup>58</sup> Levinas writes that the “relationship with the other is not reducible to comprehension.” This makes the relation ethical.<sup>59</sup> An ethical relationship thus consists in not reducing the other to an object, or to a concept that only serves our own understanding. It consists in being called upon, and answering to the appeal the Other makes to us in the invocation that follows.<sup>60</sup> The meeting that takes place as a result of answering to this appeal, precedes any knowledge, meaning the relationship, and not ontology is fundamental. Answering to this call means being invoked and must be lacking of any exercise of power and any inclination to negate the Other, instead, it must be an equal relationship “to a being as a being.”<sup>61</sup> Meeting the Other, means coming face to face with him. The Other, reveals his vulnerability through its bear *face*, from which the ethical appeal stems. The face that invokes me, “signifies to me “thou shalt not kill,” and consequently also “you are responsible for the life of this absolutely other other – [which] is responsibility for the one and only. The “one and only” means the loved one, love being the condition of the very possibility of uniqueness.”<sup>62</sup> The relational depth that ensues, is one where we are humanized by the face of the Other.<sup>63</sup> Here we find the meaning of life, which is to live for the Other.<sup>64</sup> Only when we answer to the call of the Other can we become humane. We become responsible in recognizing this call of the Other.<sup>65</sup> Since meaning stems from the Other, also thinking and thought proper has its origin with the other, for it “begins with the possibility of conceiving freedom exterior to my own.” It is only then that we prevent stripping the Other of his independence and freedom. Subsequently, the recognition of the face of the Other is constitutive for thought.<sup>66</sup> It is for this reason moral consciousness precedes and is a requisite for thought. When facing the other, I find myself either in a state of guiltiness, or innocence.<sup>67</sup> For Levinas, having either one of these statuses, presupposes freedom, namely the freedom to either help or harm the Other.<sup>68</sup>

In our choice to either help or harm another, and when in such a way forming unique relationships, we must be careful not to create too intimate a relationship or society for that matter, because “such a society consists of two people, I and thou. We are among ourselves. Third parties are excluded.”<sup>69</sup> Taking responsibility for one person, or one community, might then risk resulting in the exclusion of a third party that calls for justice. A just society, therefore, must also answer to the appeal for justice of the third excluded party. Justice, for Levinas, consists in being there “for-the-other, which, in the alterity of the face, commands the I.”<sup>70</sup> Since Levinas was concerned with conceiving of a just society, we will look at possibilities to conceive a contemporary one in the next paragraph.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 164

<sup>58</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 5

<sup>59</sup> Critchley, 2015, pp. 14-5

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 6

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 8

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 168

<sup>63</sup> Welten, 2011, p. 150

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 149

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 155

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 17

<sup>67</sup> Ibid

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 18

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 19

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, pp. 166-7

### III.II The Global just society, to an Ethical relationship with the (post)colonial Other

When forming a just society we must prevent excluding third parties. The multiplicity of third parties are so tremendous, it cannot be entirely overseen. This also means that, inevitably, social wrongs can be committed without our knowing. Alas, we cannot face everyone.<sup>71</sup>

Levinas situated rightness and justice in terms of a proximity to our neighbor. And being within proximity, means being in the presence of a *face*.<sup>72</sup> But what then, should be done about people that are beyond our proximity? If justice indeed means “*to compare unique and incomparable others*”<sup>73</sup>, we must expand our scope of comparison as far as we can. The demand of justice, Levinas argues, is made within a plurality, where everything falls within the responsibility of the *I*.<sup>74</sup> Levinas goes as far to argue that knowledge starts with the demand for justice, he writes: “[a]n *objectivity born of justice and founded on justice, and thus required by the for-the-other, which, in the alterity of the face, commands the I.*”<sup>75</sup> So it is the alterity of the Other that makes us aware of a call for justice. And since thinking, according to Levinas, should include the Other, we should be as inclusive as we can. As we saw with Allen Enlightened thinking is quite Eurocentric. This means that every question about justice and suffering risks only amounting to Europe and its civilization and to a neglecting of everything outside of the West, in particular the Third World. Below we will assess if this same risk is inherent in Levinas’ thinking.

In his book *Can Non-Europeans Think?* Dabashi points out that Levinas once wrote that when writing, he was thinking about the gathering of humanity, of which he added that “[o]nly in the European sense can the world be gathered together[.]”<sup>76</sup> Does this not mean Levinas’ own thinking is constitutive of a totality? And does this not risk the exclusion of everyone that falls outside of Europe? Additionally, Levinas often said “*that humanity consists of the Bible and the Greeks. All the rest can be translated – all the exotic – is dance.*” Levinas, however, added that no racism was intended. Later, in a radio-interview, however, Levinas allegedly said that he “*refused even to acknowledge Palestinians as human enough to be his “other”.*” His definition of the other, was quite different. What is problematic in particular, according to Dabashi, is the reluctance of some philosophers to consider others as unable to think. The purpose is not here to disqualify Levinas or his thinking with these quotes. What we will instead show is that this calls for an expansion of thinking and consideration for the Other outside of Europe. To achieve this, Allen suggests that if we endeavor to make progress, we must prevent making progress over the dead bodies of Others. Instead, we should include the thinking of (post)colonial others and their demands for justice if we are to abolish the suffering we partially cause or have caused in the Third World. We should let the (post)colonial other speak and integrate them in our discourse of justice. Above all, we should realize that we must not only prevent usurpation of our common Europeans, but also of those that live outside of Europe and be aware that their suffering is as useless and unjustifiable as ours, and it is “*the suffering in the other, where it is unforgivable to me, solicits me and calls me [.]*” Indeed, our Eurocentric high-mindedness should be open to being “*called upon to feed human beings and to lighten their sufferings.*”<sup>77</sup> Also those in the Third World should not be left “*alone in the face of death.*” Also to them should we answer “*Here I am*” (...) [w]hich is, no doubt, the secret of sociality and, in its extremes of gratuitousness and futility, love of my neighbor, love without concupiscence.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 22

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, p. 165

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, p. 166

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, pp. 166-7

<sup>76</sup> Levinas quoted in Hamid, 2015, p. 256

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. 94

<sup>78</sup> Levinas, 1998, p. 131

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