

# THE ENCOUNTER

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“From the start, the encounter with the Other is my responsibility for him»

Levinas, Philosophie, justice et amour,  
*Entre nous*, le Penser-à-l'autre, English édition, p 102.

Today we shall speak about the most common event in mankind : the encounter, which men believe to be the purest event of daily life, when two human beings speak to each other, have dialogues and so on (and maybe more).

Chance encounters, organized encounters, encounters between two persons, meetings, gathering encounters or creation encounters, etc. The encounter seems at first to fulfil the existence of humanity in its most common way.

However, the encounter is enigmatic, if we are to consider it philosophically. If it has to take place, it is precisely because it is far from being evident. It is quite different to a mere meeting and implies a deep commitment of two consciousnesses. Encounter makes sense only if there is a common link in them consciences, that is to say if they understand, respect, love and favour each other. In the encounter, one also refers to the self, in the sense that the Self changes through the encounter and discovers, in the Other, part of its own truth.

Then, how is an encounter possible if it means precisely that two consciences may or perhaps have to encounter ? Are we not here in front of the absolute limit of subjectivity ? If the encounter is not a mere meeting, then a conscience does not only have to know the Other but soon to understand itself as “the other of the other”, and live the difference as pertaining to its identity. Therefore, encountering the Other implies losing oneself within its certainty, welcoming the other in its unlikeness and perhaps finding in the other the self one had been expecting. A purer, truer, more dignified self than the self locked-up in its own self-reflection.

However, as Levinas says, encounter can only take place with another being, that is to say with someone radically unlike to myself. By definition, no encounter between two similar beings can take place. How can I meet what is intimate to me through its dissimilarity. How can I grasp the true self which is mine in the course of this relationship with what I am not ? Am I to meet the absolute Other ? Can I or should I always be accessible to the encounter ?

We meet our fellow-beings and we are met by them. However, intuitively we feel that all encounters are not of the same nature : there are encounters which we would infinitely like to make, those that definitively upset our life. Other encounters are impossible, because they would destroy the very status of our identity.

Therefore, we have to consider that encounters cannot take place, even though we are with the other. The “being with the other” does not guarantee that encounter will take place and we may even consider that encounter is a rare and precious event, an exceptional moment in humanity in action. We would like to demonstrate, as Levinas says in “Time and the Other” (1) that encounter is the relation to others as it can be grasped in its purity. But if encounter is the purest relation to others we should not infer, for all that, that it is the simpler or the most common one.

Obviously, it is always the other that I am meeting, but what is the nature of this relationship ? When I say, in the first hours of love : “I have met someone” or later on in my solitude when I say that “I am trying to make encounters” it is clear that I refer neither to communication, to recognition nor to a meeting with acquaintances.

## **1. The mystery of Eros. The encounter of love. The mystery of sought alterity.**

In order to understand this mystery and keeping love - for the moment - as an example of encounter, we will draw our inspiration from Levinas’ remarks in *Time and the Other*, in a chapter entitled EROS

“It is only by showing in what way Eros differs from possession and power that I can acknowledge a communication in Eros. It is neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge. One must recognize its exceptional place among relationships. It is a relationship with alterity, with mystery-that is to say, with the future, with what (in a world where there is everything) is never there, with what cannot be there when everything is there. Not with a being that is not there, but with the very dimension of alterity. There where all possibles are impossible, where one can no longer be able, the subject is still a subject through Eros. Love is not a possibility, is not due to our initiative, is without reason. ; it invades and wounds us, and nevertheless the I survives in it.

Time and the Other, page 88/89

In this beautiful text, Levinas makes a wonderful observation. He says that love is neither possession nor fusion. Yet do we not have in mind the image and wish of a love where two separate beings become one single person, where the unity of human beings is restored after being lost ? Do not we have the image of a universe bereaved of humanity if the unity of love is not possible anymore ? “Only one being is wanting, and your whole world is bereaved of people” (Lamartine, Poetic Meditations, Isolation) ; as if love ought to be at last the break of the principle of individuation. Is love not the love of unity ?

Lévinas says in fact that love is the opposite of unity, that it is the very test of alterity - it is at the heart of the relationship - that escapes any kind of identification. The text says “it is neither a struggle, nor a fusion, nor a knowledge”. These three words - struggle - fusion - knowledge - offer a lot of information. Because in knowledge as well as in a struggle, in the very heart of the relationship with the Other, there is a search for the fusion of unity. To struggle with

the other, to struggle with one's other, it is in fact wishing to destroy one's difference to nothingness, it is struggling for the reconstitution of one's unity and identity, to the extent that it felt itself lost because of the other's presence.

But who is this Other I cannot encounter outside of love ? It is not the other as the negation of myself, the non-being of what I am, that is to say the one who is again determined by the identity of the self, as something I can know, identify and place in the closed world of my own significations. Thus, I never encounter the one I know, and I do not have to love him either because it is the one I identify, as the means and the moment of the strengthening of my identical self.

In love, in fact, it is not another that I encounter in the other, it is not even the negation of what I am, which means that there is nothing within himself that I can relate to - even negatively - the unity of my own subject. I live it and feel it in its alterity, in the sense that this alterity is not a division nor a diversion of *the same* but to the extent that his difference is anterior to all that can be identified, to all that can be known and possessed. The one I love is the one I cannot know, because it is precisely his alterity that I love and that it is the other I love in him : love is the love of alterity in itself.

Yet, as is further mentioned in the text, this alterity taking place in the very heart of the self as someone I love, is never a destruction of my subjectivity ; it is not a loss of oneself, and this pathology of love, this passion for oneself, is - at the same time - but in a way we do not understand yet - the upheaval of the subject, the birth to itself of the I who did not exist yet for himself before this relationship.

Everything occurs as if - in love - alterity was precisely what was making me coming to life to myself , as if the relationship was the fecunding of oneself, and that the encounter was - paradoxically - the event and the advent of my identity. Everything occurs as if I was precisely meeting myself for the first time and that this encounter was the trial of the Other, and was depending on the personal decision to exist.

Thus how can we understand the essentiality of the encounter - this intimate relation between the encounter of the other and the knowledge of oneself ? In other words : "How is love possible" ?

## **2. Obstacles to the encounter.**

### **a. Social Order**

We are perhaps going to begin with a paradox which may be accentuated in the course of the analysis : it is the "to be with the other" we mentioned earlier which appears as the evident obstacle to the encounter.

We live in society and - in this sense - we always already cohabit with the Other. However it is an assimilation rather than a cohabitation with the other. According to morals and more systematically to laws, the same rules apply to everyone, thus in the "being with the other" we are able to acknowledge ourselves as being "all alike".

Languages themselves give the impression that we can always be in a communication-

relationship with the other. However, to communicate does not yet mean to encounter. Laws, languages, social habits are a means of identification of the other to myself, of myself to the other, and in this sense I take part in a totality that overtakes my identity.

How then can I not see that it is precisely the other's singularity - as well as my own - that I expect not to perceive anymore. If the other is my fellow-citizen, is it not the reason why I know a priori what his reactions and deeds are going to be? If I am already acquainted with him, is the encounter a mere meeting on a common ground of interests?

Yet social relations, which are in fact the external framework of all encounters, constitute also the stronger obstacle, for there is no encounter with the similar, and even more so with the presumed similar. I never meet the fellow-citizen, I do not meet the city either: I live them as a community of destinies, the very identity of the other being nothing else than purely abstract.

We can even wonder if the encounter is not only what emerges *in spite* of social relations. When I meet the Other socially, I meet in him a general function which does not mean anything to me: he does not change my identity any more than the stranger walking on the street below my window. In return, when social relationships are not working anymore, when political or material mediations have collapsed, then suddenly the other's singularity appears as being what I have to encounter.

For example it is what happens in the experience of the other's suffering. Because the other who is suffering is not any more like me identified by the generality of mankind. By contrast he is in the process of suffering from an absolute singularity. As Levinas says, he is suffering for nothing. He is not suffering for me, not even because of me, not even because of any god. If he is suffering, nothing in the social order forces me to feel like his neighbour. It is, in fact, because he is becoming a stranger to me - because he exists in the singularity induced by his suffering - which is changing him into a stranger to himself - that he appears as the one I suddenly have in my keeping. It is a singularity I suddenly have to welcome in my life, and laws do not tell me what I have to do or what I can do, since his suffering is precisely the limit of any identification, the experience for him - and in a sense for me - of the absolute alterity of his body. But it is wonderful to see, as far as the encounter is concerned, that I am suddenly looking at him as such - and that it is precisely his singularity which strikes me and which - interrupting all speeches or mediation - forces me to listen to him absolutely.

Thus, we have to say that there is no encounter in the mode of generality or sociability- although these conditions seem to be necessary to constitute the framework of the encounter. It is probably what Levinas means in a text on the phenomenology of suffering when he says:

To think suffering in an inter human perspective does not amount to seeing in it the coexistence of a multiplicity of consciousnesses, or in a social determinism, accompanied by a simple knowledge that people in society can have of their proximity or of their common destiny. The interhuman perspective can subsist, but can also be lost, in the political order of the City where the Law establishes mutual obligations between citizens. The interhuman, properly speaking, lies in a non-indifference of one to another, in a responsibility of one for another, but before the reciprocity of this responsibility, which will be inscribed in impersonal laws, comes to be superimposed on the pure altruism of this responsibility inscribed in the ethical position of the I qua I. It is prior to any contract that would specify precisely the moment of reciprocity-a point at which altruism and disinterestedness may, to be sure, continue, but at which they may also diminish or die out.

The order of politics (post-ethical or pre-ethical) that inaugurates the "social contract" is neither the sufficient condition nor the necessary outcome of ethics.

Levinas, *Entre-Nous*, On thinking-of -the Other, English edition, Columbia Press, New York, page 100

The other is unique and its is because he is singular that I can meet him. However, his singularity is also an obstacle to the sincerity of the encounter.

### **b. Reciprocity and complicity**

The second obstacle to the encounter is the face to face of reciprocity : second paradox.

When I am face-to-face, I am in a reciprocity process. I know the other because he knows me. I respect the other because he respects me. I speak to the other because he speaks to me, etc. In short, I am able to know the other because the relation seems to be reciprocal and symmetrical. He is like me. I am like him. He is what I am for him. I am what he is for me.

However, the imminent danger of a non-encounter lies within this reciprocity. Firstly, because reciprocity is a derived form of identification. I know in the other only what I know of myself. I recognize him in as much as he is acting like me, that he acts towards me as I act towards him. But this condition is an obstacle to the encounter because what I meet is again identity within reciprocity, it is the duplication of the same in a reciprocal activity. For example, we see that many relationships are limited to complicity, which destroy themselves as soon as identification is not possible anymore. Accomplices are doomed to tear themselves apart because they do not respect the alterity of the other. They are in fact in a reciprocal narcissistic relationship. They are looking only for mirrors and it is what they find.

But, in his work, Levinas insists on the asymmetry of the encounter and even more so when he speaks of responsibility. In other words, to make the encounter possible there must not be any face-to-face. We must not be on an equal footing, even on a moral one. The other, in fact, must take it all, the other must become the whole of the encounter.

For Levinas, this asymmetry is not only related to its own alterity [I have nothing in common with him and it is precisely the reason why he is completely different from me] but also to the infinite character of the other's emergence : there is always somebody else than this other I have at present in front of me. Soon there will be others who can disturb the encounter and threaten it from outside.

Encounter is always threatened by a third party, who is the other of the other, the other of the encounter, as if - at the moment of meeting the other - I should know that behind him - and to a certain extent in him - there were all the others, and even everything which is radically unlike. In this sense, encounter is neither a duplication nor a perpetuation of solitude. It is quite the contrary;

« And you see (and this is important to me) the relationship with the Other is not symmetrical, it is not a all as in Martin Buber. When I say Thou to an I, to a me, according to Buber I would always have that me before me as the one who says Thou to me. Consequently, there would be a reciprocal relationship. According to my analysis, on the other hand, in the relation ship to the Face, it is asymmetry that is affirmed : at the outset, I hardly care what the other is with respect to me, that is his own business. For me, he is above all the one I am responsible for.

Levinas, *Entre-Nous*, Thinking to the other, *ibid*, page 104-105

Finally, the face to face of the encounter is always a virtually ternary relation - where however the second term is by no means a commonplace where the two others meet. It is rather the external pole of their difference, to the extent that it transcends their co-presence.

This also means that the other I am meeting is not the pure negation of the self. If the other was my opposite, it would mean that we would both be the terms of the same genus, only affected by negation. My enemy is not my other, in the sense that my enemy highly participates in the determination of my identity. Love is at the heart of the encounter. It is a mysterious relation which is neither identity nor negation of identity. It does not belong to the categories of unity or to unification. In short, it cannot be explained entirely by a logical judgment. Thus in a mysterious and alighting formula, Levinas says, in *Time and the Other* :

“The Other, as other is not only an alter ego. He is what I, I am not. »

Time and the Other, Power and relationship with the Other, p.82

In other words, the other is not another me, that is to say a self that would define itself by differing from me by its attributes of being. The other does not differ from me by his attributes or qualities because this would imply that his attributes could be related to an ideal subject in whom we could mutually recognize each other. The other is a third party : he is at the same time beyond the dichotomy of being and of its negation, and above all beyond the difference which is attributive in the logical judgment : he is not an I who exists otherwise, he is otherwise than an I. He differs as a subject and no synthesis can solve our unlikeness which proves to be substantial, and infinite and indefinable. The other I meet is in excess - always - and encounter is - in this sense - always more than I can bear.

### **[Remarks : encounter and teaching]**

In this sense, we should not mistake encounter and the relation of teaching as it is - for example - explained in Saint Augustine's *De Magistro* which has precisely something to do with recognition.

At first, there are some similarities with the encounter : a simple face to face is also impossible. It is not enough for the teacher to speak to the pupil to be understood. To be able to learn from the teacher, the pupil has to know what he is talking about. This presupposes that the pupil has already something of a beginning of knowledge. Likewise, the teacher is not the holder of knowledge. Rather, he is the one who makes a sign towards it (to teach is to make a sign) and who asks the pupil to turn away from himself in order to turn towards knowledge. In short, pupil and teacher only meet because there is above each of them a third place - truth itself - which is the means through which it is possible to communicate and where, in particular, the words of the teacher meet and are consistent with the meanings the pupil sees in this truth. Truth is an earlier community of spirits which is like the necessary condition to make communication possible.

We clearly see here that teaching is an action where an encounter takes place within the unity of knowledge. It transcends the face to face and takes away the immanence of reciprocity but it brings the two learners to the unity of the logos and connects them to this unity. In fact, in this relation, they find unity with themselves since Saint Augustine finally identifies truth with the “inner master” - the words of Christ - who makes us know the truth inside ourselves,

escaping from the exteriority of the words ; escaping in fact from the relativity of earthly and carnal life.

There is nothing of the sort in pure encounters, where what comes as a third party is not at all a medium-term, or a commonplace, or even the place of recognition. Rather, the third party is what makes us always renounce the hope that the encounter will reach a satisfactory conclusion ; because, in the encounter, the pre-eminence of all the others towards the other who is in front of me makes me deviate from the symmetry of the face to face situation. What is involved in the third party is not unity but the difference and this difference is the difference of the subject itself, not only the difference of its attributes. Therefore we are still wondering if encounter is even possible.

### **c. Third obstacle : the present**

We do not take enough into account the fact that encounter can only take place in time and therefore is experienced in the immediate present. Just as the face to face of reciprocity was a false idea of encounter, so the present is a time of encounter which deludes ourselves about the nature of the presence.

I meet the other in the present - because he is present in front of me - and this presence gives me the propitious illusion that he is that one, that he coincides in himself with what he is, that he is the unity of himself just in the presence of myself. Our contemporaneity in space makes us believe in our contemporaneity in time and lastly in our contemporaneity with ourselves. It is not difficult to see that in most false encounters we do not really take the time to be with the other, because we would thus be in a situation where our subject would have to change itself and cease to be itself.

Indeed this presence of the Other is at the same time an absence since the other differs from himself because of the action of time, just as I differ from myself. This immanent difference is not a variation within the heart of unity. The other differs from himself without remaining himself because this process of differentiation is an irreversible movement ; it is not a mere diversification in the heart of a possible simultaneousness but it is the movement through which he is definitively dying from what he has been. Just as I am a path leading me to the negation of the self, a negation which is not the possibility of finding oneself in another identity, but which is the final loss of unity, the final loss of the subject as a substance.

Thus, Levinas draws our attention to the strange proximity between death and time, between the other's death and the other's presence, between time and alterity itself. Just as the other does not differ from myself on the basis of a previous unity - but is what I am not as a subject - just as he is always the third party compared to all my identifications, just as the time in which the encounter takes place is the time when the other is leaving himself during his proper presence. He is the absence of his presence and that - what I am meeting - is a flight, a transcendence, someone absolutely unlike who is irreducible to my possibilities, to my gratitude, to my sympathy, someone altogether different who is as far from me as life is radically far from death, an "otherwise-than-being", that is to say a difference which, paradoxically, comes prior to the unity which is thus impossible

Thus we do not meet another subject in the other, or another way of being a subject, we meet the limit of subjectivity itself, death being in fact its ultimate term. The time of the other is in this sense the very trial of time, that is to say the experience of our own absence. Paradoxically

and although we do not understand it yet, the mystery of encounter is that it is referring me beyond *the now* and that the other is this very future. Encounter never succeeds and never reaches its end.

“In knowledge all passivity is activity through the intermediary of light. The object that I encounter is understood and, on the whole, constructed by me, even though death announces an event over which the subject is not master, an event in relation to which the subject is no longer a subject.”  
Time and The over, English edition, p.70

“Death is ungraspable because it marks the end of the subject’s virility and heroism. The now is the fact that I am master, master of the possible, master of grasping the possible. Death is never now. When death is here, I am no longer here, not just because I am nothingness, but because I am unable to grasp.”

Time and the Other, English edition, p. 72

Thus death is the only moment when I become absolutely other, to the point where I become loss as a subject. Death is the moment when I have become an object. It is the trial of radical alterity. It is precisely what appears behind the sight of the other’s suffering which, as mentioned earlier, is the opportunity for a real encounter. To quote Sartre’s beautiful formula in *Being and Nothingness* “Dying is falling prey to the others”.

However, we do feel that there is no possible encounter in death and that death is only the outside limit of encounter. Because an object does not meet anything since it has no activity, not even that of welcoming anything. What is then the mystery of encounter which is positing me in front of an absence - which is however presence - and which upsets the very idea of subjectivity ?

#### **d. Transition ; recapitulation**

What have we learned up to now ?

We have discovered that encounter does not take place in identification, because I do not meet a fellow-being. I meet the Other. We have learned that all forms of existence which are limited to community, generality, sympathy, reciprocity, are as many illusions made up by the subject, in as much as it is trying to escape the seriousness of the encounter, as it is only looking for itself in the mirror of the encounter ; that it is in fact unable to meet. Solitude is, in this sense, the very mode of identification, the pathetic mode of unification, the lost dream of the subject’s heroism..

We have learned that encounter is not the encounter of another subject, who would be different from me by its attributes or qualities, or even by the negation of those qualities, but that it is different to the subject itself, that it is other as a subject, and that it is even the experience of the absolutely other being, the being which is otherwise than being a subject. It is the limit of any self control of the subject on himself. Encounter of the other is the trial of limit of all subjectivity.

In death the existing of the existent is alienated. To be sure, the Other [l’Autre] that is announced does not possess this existing as the subject possesses it ; its hold over my existing is mysterious. It is not unknown but unknowable, refractory to all light. But this precisely indicates that the Other is in no way another myself, participating with me in a common existence. The relationship with the other is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other’s place. We recognize the other as resembling us but exterior to us ; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a mystery. The other’s entire being is constituted by its exteriority, or rather its alterity.”

Time and the other, English edition, p; 75/76

We are thus facing a terrible paradox which Levinas prefers to call “mystery” : I cannot meet anything from myself in the other ; however only a subject can make encounters.

The radical alterity of the other is as big a threat for our subjectivity as is death since it promises no synthesis, no possible identification, and that if I keep the seriousness of the encounter I shall be no more *the I* I was before the encounter. I risk it all in the encounter and yet in the heart of this absolute risk, I am still a subject.

### 3. Love as an illustration of the mystery of encounter

It appears that encounter is possible and rare and very often turned aside precisely because the alterity of the other is - for me - an absolute trial that I must however realise entirely. But what is this “I must” which is urging me to the encounter as a subject, which is throwing me into a necessary and impossible trial ?

We return to this mystery of love - so near to death in some ways - and which is positing us in the heart of encounter. Let us remember what Levinas says in another part of the text :

“There where all possibles are impossible, where one can no longer be able, the subject is still a subject through Eros. Love is not a possibility, is not due to our initiative, is without reason ; it invades and wounds us, and nevertheless the I survive in it.”

Time and the Other, English edition, p. 88-89

#### a. Renouncing the categories of liberty

We are confronted with the paradox of subjectivity in encounter, because we imply that subjectivity is the condition which could render liberty possible. It implies that encounter can only take place in a relationship in which each subject should be already free.

But if the two subjects who are meeting are already free, encounter is impossible.

The nature of a free subject is precisely to get hold of what he is not and to turn it into an object, to objectivise it, know it, master it, change it, in order to manifest his power. Any type of activity of a subject is a negation of alterity. All conscience is constitutive synthesis, that is to say a return to oneself. Consequently, when we posit two subjects face-to-face, we can only make the experience of an impossible encounter because both subjects will look at the other in an objectivizing, mastering and finally identifying manner which is the very nature of their activity of consciousness. And if I discover that the other is determining me through his activity of subjective representation, that he is producing representations that go beyond me and objectivise me, I shall not stop - in order to be again this subject that I am as threatened by the other - to try to recover myself as a subject in the heart of the relation. The encounter will become a conflict, an obstacle and I shall myself be only *against* the other’s alterity which is like an inner threat for my liberty. And vice-versa. Thus encounter is only the fight of two objectivizing liberties, of two denying subjectivities. Encounter becomes the hell of representations.

Finally we interpret encounter as if it were an intentional relation of logical knowledge when the subject always puts the object as if it were facing it, as if it were the produce of its subjective intentionality. We are acting as if the other’s alterity could be reduced into an object to be recognized.

In doing so, however, we can only fail in the encounter since the other's alterity - as we said many times - is not an object of experiment but the very subject of the encounter, that this alterity reaches the subject as subject, that it is the subject in as much as it is "other", and consequently that it is what resists to all kind of objectivation.

I am not going towards him for an encounter. He obliges me to an encounter with him. I am not even meeting a liberty which is facing me since I can only place this liberty at the same level of my subjectivity ; so that in return - and reciprocally - the other, as a free subject, sees me only as an object.

“A fundamental comment : I do not initially posit the Other as freedom, a characteristic in which the failure of communication is inscribed in advance. For with a freedom, there can be no other relationship than that of submission or enslavement. In both cases, one of the two freedom is annihilated. (...) In positing the Other's alterity as mystery, itself defined by modesty, I do not posit it as a freedom identical to and at grips with mine. I do not posit another existent in front of me, I posit alterity.”

Time and the Other, English edition, p. 87

Then, in order to consider the possibility of encounter, we have to renounce the categories of subjectivity without renouncing the category of subject. We have to consider that the *I of the encounter* is not that of the intentional and constitutive consciousness. We have to think that the Other is not a challenge for consciousness, who would be trying to define what it is for me, as if the consciousness could anticipate all possible experiments and bring them back virtually to the unity of an I.

### **b. Renouncing the categories of knowledge.**

In order to consider the purity of encounter, that is to say the possibility of love, we have to renounce the categories of knowledge. I do not meet anything - nor anybody - in the sense that there is some object to be considered.

I do not meet anything in the sense where the I would be the subject of the encounter. In the encounter *the I* does not meet. He is met. He becomes in himself the very trial of the non-identity, the trial of being a subject by - and within - passivity.

In fact I do not meet anything in the encounter. **I must give answers.** I am always still in an asymmetrical obligation with the other, as if his difference was a basic principle and that my identity - my unity with myself - and therefore the constitution of my consciousness was only a second and derived principle. As if it were necessary - in the encounter - to go beyond the intentionality itself.

### **c. Dread for the other**

In the encounter of love there is no dread for oneself, but dread for the other. I have the Other in my keeping as much as he is more valuable than I am and that he is absolutely not my equal. He is a stranger on earth, a homeless person whose place I have always already taken. He is the one I have already banished from his house before knowing him. The other is "the always already exiled".

Encounter only takes place when I fear for him. But what should I be afraid of? Levinas says : "of his destitution". That is to say his inability of making one with himself,

and therefore of being recognized in his alterity. We never recognize alterity as such but only as a derivation or a negation of the identical. Whether it is within a conflict or within the reciprocity of a face-to-face, the other is always threatened to be killed in its alterity, that is to say is threatened to be submitted to the categories of the self. What I fear is the other's death, of which I can essentially be the possible cause. To kill the other is it not, first of all, having a representation of him, that is to say denying his absolute singularity ?

The other is beyond the dichotomy of the identical and of the non-identical. Therefore he is essentially in danger because he is absent within his own presence, he is the excluded third person, threatened by my consciousness and my judgement, by my position of consciousness in the world. He is in danger, not because I wish to usurp him but because every consciousness is usurpation, a threat to alterity, and because the self is always in a position of conquest.

I threaten him every time I want to understand and recognize him. In this sense, the self is always potentially the murderer of the other's alterity.

It is the reason why only love enables encounter to take place. In love the dread for the other has precedence over the fear for myself, and the activity of the consciousness in its auto-constitution ceases, to become the one which is welcoming, the one which fears for the other more than it fears for itself. It becomes the one who is responsible for the other and who does not know anything anymore about himself. It becomes the one who has the other in keeping and ceases to try to know or to understand him by using concept. It becomes the one which is responsible for the other before all liberty, that is to say before having to answer for oneself.

Thus encounter begins when the other's death is imminent, in the other's suffering, or simply in my threat. The other is absolutely nude, alone in front of his probable death, but this possibility is not his possibility but mine. His death is my risk, the risk of the self in as much as it ignores the alterity, and wants to be one I before being everyone else. His death is my risk since the dread for myself is stronger than the dread for the other. The Other is the excess of being that my consciousness may have to destroy, because of its tendency to *understand* the other and try to define him with its own categories.

“ Fear for the other person, that is fear for the death, I of my neighbour, but nowise fear for me.  
Entre-Nous, Ibidem, page 131

Conversely, Love is this strength which invades us and manages to make us unable to do anything else but to be for the Other the exceeding strength. It is amazing to see that the supremacy of the Other lies in the fact that he is always absolutely naked.

And because it exceeds all apprehension or representation of the consciousness, this strange strength obliges me to confront the excess of existence itself.

## Conclusion

In some ways, the subject of this encounter that I live is subject in a new meaning, being now myself subject to encounter. I am not anymore the subject who knows, recognizes, compares

or calculates the other that he is meeting, or even the one who is seeking some reciprocity through this encounter. I am not anymore the free subject who knows that he always holds the first place in the relationship with the Other as well as I am not anymore at war with each liberty that stands in front of me considered like a subject.

I am now a subject in a new meaning : I am under the submission of the alterity itself, which preserves me against the illusions of identity. I am the one who loves the Other especially for what he is not yet, that is to say for nothing. In him I encounter the strangeness itself, that is to say what I do not know, what I shall never know or recognize. I encounter in him the strength and the fragility of knowledge, which experiences its limits in front of the Other. I encounter in him the overstepping of myself. That is to say, in a sense, existence itself.

I encounter in him my responsibility towards every one else. Every love is love for the neighbour in the sense that the other, although he is always absolutely different from me, is absolutely in my keeping. Every love, then, is a sort of ethical encounter, and encounter is the very trial of morality itself.

We understand now why encounter is at once something very precious and rare. It is because it generates two conflicted possibilities at the same time, which are however very similar to each other. That is to say, in short, two manifestations of subjectivity. The first one is like a conquest, giving the shape of knowledge and objectivity to the other, and then being a sort of destruction of what makes him differ from me. This kind of subjectivity is like the dream and illusion of unification with the Other. The other kind of subjectivity is the one which is in charge of alterity itself, and not only of a given other. This subjectivity knows itself as being in a way always exceeded by the radicality of the other's differences, and thus renounces any self-consciousness, any knowledge, and then feels fear for the Other. A subjectivity which now knows that it has been created and given by the Other, so that the transcendence is its real identity : it knows that it is impossible to be only itself, but that it differs from itself, and then is thrown in the excess of existence.

Thus, we never encounter *the same*, but we encounter only *the Unlike*. And, in this sense, it is also an encounter with oneself, in as much as it is drawing me back to the intimacy of unlikeness, that is to say in a sense to the hazards of time. We have to encounter the Other in this manner, that is to say we have to love him. Otherwise we would give our preference to being rather than to existence, identity rather than to unlikeness, and, in a certain extent, to death rather than to life.

Encounter is, in this sense, necessary to life, because it is existence, and is always infinitely exceeding any knowledge and representation.

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