RAPHISA.
Revista de Antropología y Filosofía de lo Sagrado
Review of Anthropology and Philosophy of the Sacrum
ISSN: 2530-1233 Nº 6, Julio - Diciembre (2019) pp.: 51-63

RECEIVING THE OTHER AS A STRANGER: ON THE ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF HOSPITALITY

LA RECEPCIÓN DEL OTRO COMO UN EXTRAÑO: EL SIGNIFICADO ÉTICO Y RELIGIOSO DE HOSPITALIDAD

Jonas Holst[1]
Universidad San Jorge, Zaragoza

Abstract: The purpose of the first part of the paper is to explore the ethical and religious significance of guest friendship and hospitality in the ancient Greek tradition. In contradistinction to the Hebrew tradition of the Old Testament, in which God manifests himself in the guise of three strangers, the gods tend to withdraw and become more and more distant in the Greek tradition, where they are most often said to merely observe humans. In a critical reinterpretation of Emmanuel Levinas' understanding of hospitality in Totality and Infinity, the second part of the paper will study how Levinas attempts to reconcile Greek ethics and Hebrew religion through the figure of the stranger. Although he may not fully succeed in his reconciliation of the two traditions, his attempt points to an under-theorised aspect of human existence which the paper will shed some light on in a final discussion of Hannah Arendt's thoughts on being received when born.

Key words: HOSPITALITY; ETHICS; RELIGION; EMMANUEL LEVINAS; HANNAH ARENDT.

Resumen: La primera parte del artículo explora el significado ético y religioso de hospitalidad en la antigua tradición griega. A diferencia de la tradición hebrea del Antiguo Testamento, en la que Dios se manifiesta en forma de tres hombres, los dioses en la tradición griega tienden a retirarse y observar a los seres humanos a una distancia. A través de una reinterpretación crítica del concepto de hospitalidad que Emmanuel Levinas presenta en Totalidad e infinito, la segunda parte del artículo estudia cómo Levinas intenta reconciliar la ética griega y la religión hebrea con el extraño como mediador. A pesar de no lograr reconciliar las dos tradiciones, su intento apunta a un aspecto de la existencia humana poco estudiado, sobre el cual el artículo arroja luz en la parte final en una discusión con Hannah Arendt.

[1] (jholst@usj.es) es doctor en Filosofía e Historial del Pensamiento. Su línea de investigación está centrada en la ética del deporte, lo tectónico en la arquitectura, inteligencia artificial. Es autor de dos libros sobre el significado ético de la amistad y dos libros sobre el autor danés, Peter Seeberg. Ha publicado numerosos artículos sobre filosofía, historia intelectual, amistad, experiencia, melancolía, Platón, Aristóteles, Hannah Arendt en obras especializadas y en revistas científicas. Ha participado en congresos nacionales e internacionales sobre ética en el deporte, lo tectónico en la arquitectura, inteligencia artificial.

Palabras clave: HOSPITALIDAD; ÉTICA; RELIGIÓN; EMMANUEL LEVINAS; HANNAH ARENDT.

Introduction

Being a stranger in the world could be viewed as a primordial reality for humans living on earth, not only for the homeless, the refugees and the foreigners, who are without a home, but every single human being is marked for life by strangeness. First of all, in the sense, which Hannah Arendt highlights at the beginning of *The Human Condition*, that we are all "newcomers who are born into this world as strangers."[2] To every newborn the world is an unknown and hostile place to arrive in. If it were not for those, who are there to take care of the newly arrived, the world would remain a *tierra incognita* without any welcome greetings.

Throughout history the family in all its different cultural and institutional forms appears to be the most common and stable human response to this predicament, in which we find ourselves from the beginning of our lives. It is probably because the basic human condition of being strangers in the world has not changed much that the family has remained the enduring bond, which has kept its members together around the central place for their arrivals, gatherings and departures, the home. Seen in the light of the latest development of advanced technologies and artificial intelligences, the human condition, as we know it, may be about to undergo a profound transformation; an evolution which will manifest itself in the years to come.

Returning to our point of departure, we humans have to a large degree turned the world into our settlement, a familiar place with which we can, to a greater or lesser degree, identify ourselves. Yet, despite this extended establishment of identities and familiarities across borders and cultures worldwide, something still remains unknown to us human beings, namely ourselves. Building ourselves an identity around common places, which we can so to speak come home to, may curb the most hazardous effect of natality, but it does not completely erase the trace of our being born into this world as strangers nor can it remedy our ignorance of who we are. One could even argue that tying the knot of identity too hard to what is most common and familiar to us may make us forget that we remain strangers to ourselves and to others throughout life.

This forgetfulness of ourselves and others as strangers results in a dire estrangement effect, as it removes us even further away from our-

[2] Arendt, Hannah: *The Human Condition*, 9. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

selves and others. We become doubly alienated. This calls for the development of a heightened human awareness of ourselves as strangers, who are in need of being received in act of hospitality without becoming merely one more member of the family house. In the first part of the paper, this act of receiving the other as a stranger will be explored through an interpretation of the ethical and religious significance of guest friendship and hospitality. In the ancient Greek tradition the gods with Zeus at the top were said to protect the stranger and be vigilant of human goodness, whereas in the Hebrew tradition, the distance between God and humans was bridged, as Jahwe manifested Himself in the guise of three strangers and was were received by their host Abraham.

One of the few 20th century philosophers, who has attempted to reconcile these two traditions in an attempt to reformulate an ethics of hospitality, is Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*. The second part of the paper offers a critical reinterpretation of Levinas' understanding of hospitality with an aim to counteract the double alienation effect described above and thus confront ourselves with our own estranged nature. The final discussion returns to Hannah Arendt's reflections on natality and the reception offered to the newborn in order to open a new ethical horizon

Being a foreigner and a stranger in the ancient Greek tradition

In the Appendix to his best-selling book, Ética para Amador, Fernando Savater recalls an ancient Greek saying, which also resonates in Arendt's observation quoted at the beginning: "to be born is to arrive in a strange country."[3] Especially the epic and the tragic tradition of the ancient Greeks revolve around being a stranger in the world, but also Plato's and Aristotle's works contain reflections on this topic.

In the *Odyssey*, Homer famously describes how Odysseus, on his way home to Ittaca, arrives at the island of the gruesome Cyclopes, who were feared for their lack of human customs. Not only did they not observe the law of hospitality, upheld by the highest divine principle of justice, Zeus. They inverted this law in the most sinister way by trapping visitors and making a feast out of their dead bodies.[4] As we all know, Odysseus escapes from the island, and while he travels by land and sea to get home,

[3] Savater, Fernando: *Ética para Amador*, p. 186. Barcelona: Ariel, 40. ed., 2001. My translation.

[4] *The Odyssey of Homer*, IX 270-295. New York: Bantam, 1990.

Homer recounts how the suitors dishonors ”the table of guest friendship” in his house.[5]

In *Agamemnon*, the first tragic drama of the *Oresteian* trilogy, Aeschylus adopts this Homeric expression of dishonoring the ”guest-table” to refer to the origin of the strife between Hellas and Troy: The moment when Prince Paris stole Menelaus' wife from his house.[6] The table was considered to be the sacred place in the house, where the host and his guests could share a meal together with other tokens of trust in order to bridge the gap between them and mediate their otherness. As an explanation of the decisive events of evil doing in their own past, the earliest testimonies of the ancient Greeks attribute these events to lack of hospitality and the pulling apart of the guest-table, the symbol of friendship.

Appointing Zeus to be the guardian of strangers and foreigners stresses the significance of hospitality and guest friendship in ancient Hellas, which consisted of many kingdoms. Receiving strangers was considered to be one of the basic human gestures towards travelers, who were far away from home. Without signs of hospitality they would be lost and not survive for long. In the Classical period, hospitality and ritualised forms of guest friendship still remained important for the whole social order among Hellenic city-states, which were ”criss-crossed with an extensive network of personal alliances linking all sorts of apolitical bodies (households, tribes, bands, etc.).”[7]

Despite the ethical and religious significance accorded to hospitality by ancient Greek authors, the Hellenic civilization was, like most civilizations in the ancient world, quite hostile to people coming from outside their own borders. This dichotomy between literary testimonies, which point to the ethical and religious significance of hospitality, and a political discourse, which turns its back on its own tradition when faced with the hard ”reality” of people in real need, is also markedly present in today's world. As Savater remarks, it is easy to talk about loving humanity in the abstract, but it is much more demanding to enter into contact with human beings, who are strange and different from ourselves, and receive them face to face without turning them into something familiar and well-known.[8]

---

[5] *Ibidem*, XIV 158-159, XVII 155-156, XX 230-231. See Omeroy, *Odysseia*. Athens: Bibliotheke Papyroy, 1957, for the original text, in which *xenia* is employed for guest friendship.

[6] Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, *Agamemnon* 399-402. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

[7] Herman, Gabriel: *Ritualised Friendship & The Greek City*, p. 6. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

[8] Savater, *Ética para Amador*, p. 186.

What Savater insinuates, although without exploring further, is that it is one thing to recognize and respect the stranger from the outside, but it is quite another thing to recognize oneself in the stranger. Apparently, this should not be so difficult to do for beings like us, who arrive into this world as strangers, but it seems that it is this ontological feature of ourselves that we tend to be forgetful of, or we only apply it outwardly, not inwardly. One of the first in the ancient Greek tradition to view himself as a foreigner among his own fellowmen and a stranger to himself was Plato's Socrates. We do not know, if Socrates really saw himself as a stranger and talked about it publicly in Athens, but in Plato's dialogues he is described as an insider, who behaves like an outsider[9], or as he himself puts it in court, defending himself against the charges of his fellow Athenians: "I am simply foreign to the manner of speech here. So just as, if I really did happen to be a foreigner, you would surely sympathize with me if I spoke in the dialect and way in which I was raised, so also I do beg this of you now."[10]

Of course, Socrates is a not a foreigner, but he behaves like one among his own by questioning the beliefs and traditions which have been handed down to them through generations. Socrates' relentless philosophical search for the truth, which implies confronting his interlocutors with their own ignorance, resulted in his own death penalty. Plato envisaged Socrates to be a true friend of Athens, but a majority of its citizens saw him as an enemy. Jacques Derrida has drawn attention to the figure of *l'étranger*, being both a foreigner and a stranger, who appears at the limits of the home and the established society, before he or she becomes a friend or an enemy.[11] Socrates plays this role of the "for-anger", who is not recognizable right away, as he appears in the guise of an other and exposes his fellowmen to the unknown, their own unacknowledged nature. Socrates detects that they think they know a lot of things, but they do not even know who they really are themselves. Much less do they not want to face the image of their own estranged nature which Socrates holds up in front of them, and so they end up excluding him from their midst.

Not only does Plato portray Socrates as a stranger to his surroundings. In one dialogue, *Greater Hippias*, he lets Socrates tell a story of how he becomes a stranger to himself when he goes home. There he is met by

---

[9] For such an interpretation, see Nightingale, A.W.: *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construction of Philosophy*, p. 26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

[10] Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 17 d. New York: Cornell University Press, 1979. Accessible at: https://www.sjsu.edu/people/james.lindahl/courses/Phil70A/s3/apology.pdf.

[11] In relation to Socrates being both a foreigner and a stranger, see Derrida, Jacques: *De l'hospitalité*, 11-15. Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2002.

a guy, who challenges and refutes him, leaving him in an aporetic state of mind, not knowing where to find any reference points or a place for his thoughts to settle down. The house appears to be a metaphor of his own soul, and the guy at home is, as Plato lets his readers know, Socrates himself.[12] Socrates pretends to be somebody else, but what he actually describes at the end of the *Greater Hippias* is the way, in which he himself is perceived by somebody, who believes he knows what he claims to know, yet, his beliefs prove to be unjustified.

If Socrates is the philosopher, who almost every thinker since Plato's days has seen as a paradigm for philosophical thinking and practice, then philosophy, understood as love for wisdom, is all about keeping the mind open to the unknown; put in interpersonal terms, this means keeping a door open to the stranger, who unsettles me and questions what I thought that I knew about the world and myself.

Hospitality between ethics and religion in Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*

It may not be a coincidence that it is a stranger, who is the protagonist in several of the dialogues which are considered to belong to Plato's late work: The *Sophist* and the *Statesman* are linked together chronologically, and it has often been said that a third dialogue, the *Philosopher*, was meant to be the last part in the trilogy. Would the stranger also have been the leading figure in this third dialogue?

We should not forget that, besides being linked to the philosopher in the guise of Socrates, the stranger stands in a relationship to the divine throughout the ancient Greek tradition.[13] At the beginning of the *Sophist*, after Theodorus has introduced the stranger to Socrates, Plato reminds us of this: With an explicit reference to Homer, Socrates asks Theodorus, if it is not some god, who accompanies him in order to "enter into companionship with men who have a share of due reverance [...] one of the higher powers, who comes to watch over and refute us because we are worthless in argument"? The Greek word for "refute" is the same that Socrates uses about his own dialectical method and about the guy, who awaited him at home in the *Greater Hippias*: *elenchos*. Theodorus denies

[12] Plato, *Greater Hippias* 298 b, 304 c-e. In *Plato's Complete Works*, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1997.

[13] For a brief summary of the Greek tradition of *theoxenie* and the existing literature on this topic, see Friese, Heidrun: "Der Gast. Zum Verhältnis con Ethnologie und Philosophie", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 51 (2), 2003, 316-317.

both: The stranger is neither looking for ”dispute” nor is he a God, but he does appear, Theodorus adds, to be ”divine”: ”for I give that epithet to all philosophers.”[14]

For Plato, philosophy relates to the divine through the stranger, who prefigures the coming of something out of the ordinary, a moment of truth, where human ignorance will be revealed, as Socrates insinuates. In the Hebrew tradition of the *Old Testament*, God does, in fact, manifest himself in the guise of three strangers, who seem to arrive to the tent of Abraham precisely for the reason, which Socrates gives in the *Sophist*, namely to observe the excesses and the righteousness of human beings. Abraham, the patriarch of the three monoteistic religions, receives his divine guests and shares with them some food from his household, establishing a bond to his God, built on hospitality and trust.[15]

The foremost philosopher in the 20th century, who has struggled to integrate these two traditions of ancient Greek philosophy and Hebrew religion via the figure of the stranger, is Emmanuel Levinas. At the beginning of his first *opus magnum*, *Totality and Infinity*, which Derrida has declared to be ”an immense treatise on hospitality”[16], Levinas states explicitly what the purpose of his work is: ”This book will present subjectivity as welcoming the Other, as hospitality.”[17] Instead of positing the I as a sovereign and self-reliant entity, a view commonly held by most philosophers in the Western tradition, Levinas unfolds his ethical thinking by showing how “[T]he subject is a host.”[18]

Perhaps we should be careful here and only conclude that Levinas attempts to disclose how human subjectivity becomes a host by receiving the other as a stranger. This “ethical event” is not already given as a *fait accompli*, but it is something that happens to and surpasses the subject, which starts out by establishing itself at home around a more or less self-sufficient economy, where it turns everything that is foreign into something familiar with which it can identify itself. Through an on-going process of appropriating things and thoughts it sustains itself and achieves enough power to become “a separate being fixed in its identity, the same, the I”.[19] Yet, this raises right after one of the key questions in

[14] Plato, *Sophist* 216 a-c. London: Heinemann, New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1921.

[15] *Genesis* 18. In *The Holy Bible*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982. The Greek terms for excesses and righteousness are *hybris* and *eunomia*, which have religious connotations of sacrilege and piety, respectively.

[16] Derrida, Jacques: *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, p. 70. Paris: Galilée, 1997.

[17] Levinas, Emmanuel: *Totality and Infinity*, p. 27. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991.

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 299.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 27.

Totality and Infinity: "But how can the same, produced as egoism, enter into a relationship with an other without immediately divesting it of its alterity?"[20]

Being fixed in its own identity and radically separated from the other, there is something which the I is not capable of: "The sway of the I will not cross the distance marked by the alterity of the other."[21] *Totality and Infinity* carries the subtitle, *An Essay on Exteriority*, which refers to an "outside" opposite the house of the I. If the I, at some point, is supposed to open itself up to the other and become a host in "the astonishing feat of containing more than it is possible to contain"[22], as Levinas states at the beginning of his book when he introduces subjectivity as hospitality, then this opening, this feat of receiving the other as other, only seems to begin and really first come about from somewhere beyond the I itself.

Put differently, since the ego finds itself stuck to its own interior world without being able to overcome the distance to the other, who is radically different and incomparable to anything the I knows, it is not from inside, from a sovereign master saying "I can", that a door is opened up towards the outside. It is the other way around, namely from the other side of what belongs to the I, i.e. the side of the other, that an opening appears which transcends its egoistic, self-contained economy: "For Levinas there is only one exit. And the I cannot reach it on its own. It is actually not an exit, but an entrance. Something enters from outside, offering to rescue the I: "God comes to mind […]"[23]

Rudi Visker's interpretation is not far removed from Levinas' own understanding of the infinite dimension which is opened up by the presence of the other, whose face calls for religious exegesis: "the word God comes to the tip of one's tongue"[24], Levinas proclaims in the foreword to the book which Visker indirectly refers to, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. Returning to *Totality and Infinity*, the ego is precisely appointed to be the entrance (*entrée*) of the relationship to the other, who is described as absolute other, infinite and transcendent, a stranger coming from afar and breaking open the totality of the I's enclosure by expressing words which offer assistance in order to be made intelligible.[25] Yet, how is this moment, where the other

[20] *Ibid*.

[21] *Ibidem*, 28.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 27.

[23] Visker, Rudi: *The Inhuman Condition: Looking for Difference after Levinas and Heidegger*, p. 117. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004.

[24] Levinas, Emmanuel: *Of God who Comes to Mind*, xv. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

[25] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 36, 38, 40, 64-69.

speaks to me in the spirit of a teacher, who constantly explains his or her own words by being present, reconcilable with the passages, where the other is envisaged by Levinas as coming from a height only comparable to God's might, provoking shame in me and commanding me to offer more than I can give?[26]

There is a tension in *Totality and Infinity* which explains this dichotomy in the other's manifestation: On the one hand, Levinas draws on the *Old Testament*, when he evokes the infinity and transcendence of the other, who commands me like "the stranger, the widow and the orphan" to open my house and share my belongings.[27] The felt presence of the other, whose face questions and judges me for my egoism, provokes shame in me, Levinas contends, but it also gives me a chance, not unlike Abraham at Mamre, to live up to the occasion and respond ethically to the other's command. On the other hand, Levinas invests the ethical relation between the I and the Other with a philosophical and discursive dimension by quoting and paraphrasing Plato. According to this understanding, the other appears in the guise of a teacher, who relentlessly comes to his or her own assistance by revealing the meaning of every word as a sign of the "the plenitude of discourse", which is the way Plato describes Socrates' and his own dialogical approach.[28]

These two sources, which Levinas relies on, are not easily reconcilable. In many passages of *Totality and Infinity*, in which the other is presented as suffering and in urgent need of being helped, ethics is almost reduced to covering basic needs. Levinas would probably insist that this is first and foremost what ethics is about. Yet, he also emphasizes that ethics is concerned with situations, such as dialogue and teaching, where survival is usually not an issue for those who engage in speaking with each other, although it could become one, but then the dialogue would also immediately end. Is it possible to resolve the described tension and make ethics and religion compatible, which appears to be Levinas' goal, when he proposes that the ethical relation, face-to-face with the other, should be called "religion".[29]

In whatever way Levinas' descriptions of the other, being both a destitute, poor stranger approaching me from below and an eloquent teacher addressing me from above, can be resolved, it seems clear that this ethical event can only happen from the outside. Levinas speaks of the door

[26] *Ibidem*, pp. 41, 100-101, 200.

[27] *Ibidem*, pp. 77-78, 244-245.

[28] *Ibidem*, pp. 70-73, 96.

[29] *Ibidem*., p. 40.

being unlocked to my egoism, as when the idea of infinity is offered in the form of "new powers (*pouvoirs*) to a soul, who is no longer paralytic – powers of welcome, of gift, of full hands, of hospitality" (TI, 205/224). Yet, this transmission of powers only seems possible from the religious point of view of the other being a trace of God, whose infinite presence overwhelms me and commands me to receive and do more than I am capable of. Would it be possible to open up another way, which leads from inside the I towards the other, who is offered hospitality, not through a command from above, but thanks to a reception which has already taken place within the house and left an enduring mark on the I?

The first reception

Keeping in mind the passages in *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas highlights the way in which the Other introduces the idea of infinity into the impotent soul of the I, he does not seem to help us sketch out another way which leads out into the open from inside the I. The problem is, as other commentators of Levinas' work has also pointed to, that if I am in no way free to open the door to the stranger but find myself forced to welcome the other into my house, how can this still be coherently presented as an ethical way of receiving the other?[30]

Yet, Levinas does also emphasize that the I can lock the door and exclude all language and hospitality from his house. Can the Other still break open such a sealed off and inhospitable home? Regardless of whether this is possible or not, Levinas contends that "[I]n the separated being the door to the outside must hence be at the same time open and closed."[31] If not, it would be practically impossible to receive anybody and thus for hospitality to take place, unless one recurs to violence, which would again distance us from an ethical encounter.

What seems to facilitate that the I opens the door or at least keeps it half open and not completely shut is the discrete presence of the feminine, which Levinas tells us is equal to the woman in the house, whose intimate and hospitable reception makes dwelling and separation possible in the first place.[32] Although Levinas is careful to state that this first re-

[30] For such a critique, see Kjerschow, P.: "Ansvarshavende som søvngænger", in Kolstad, H et al. (ed.): *Sporet af det uendelige*, Oslo: Aschehoug, 1995 and Critchley, Simon: *The Problem with Levinas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 80.

[31] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 148.

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 155.

ception does not depend on the factual presence of a woman in the house[33], he himself underlines that the I, in building itself an identity, needs "the light of the face", which shines through in the female grace, in order to separate itself.

Levinas' conflation of the feminine and the woman and his introduction of the female other into the house without conceding her the full status of other has provoked a lengthy debate on whether he reduces female existence to a mere and barely present condition of male egoism.[34] Without going into this debate here, which lies outside the scope of the present paper, he does not seem to resolve the impasse in which he leaves his readers. He omits explaining fully how the feminine contributes the I's openness toward the absolute other. Instead, he limits himself to insinuating that the discrete presence of the feminine "contains all possibilities for a transcendent relation to the other"[35], although in his own analysis it contributes more to the separation and enclosure of the I than to its connection with and openness toward the outside.

What if the presence of the feminine in the house of the I, ultimately, refers to the motherly reception which every human being meets when it is born and still clings onto in the first years of its life? It would open another or at least one more ethical horizon than the one which Levinas envisages in *Totality and Infinity* and send us back to our starting point, namely that we are born into this world as strangers. Does hospitality already begin at this early stage? In a certain sense, it does, although Levinas would insist that a newly born baby is not a complete stranger or a transcendent other to the family members. Still, Levinas concedes enough ethical power to the figure in the house named "Woman" so that she can receive and make it possible for the I to recollect itself and perhaps also to receive somebody coming from the outside.

Hannah Arendt spoke of birth as "a miracle of life" and as that which makes it possible for any human being to begin something new. Most often she takes the link between birth and beginning for granted without mentioning the reception which must take place, if any newborn is to survive and be able to lead a life on her own. Yet, in one entrance of

[33] *Ibidem*, p. 158.

[34] Katz, C.E.: *Levinas, Judaism and Feminism*. Indianapolis: Bloomington, 2003 and Palacio, M.: *La mujer y lo femenino en el pensamiento de Emmanuel Levinas*. Cordoba: Editorial de la UCC, 2008 offer comprehensive discussions of the more or less problematic role of the feminine in *Totality and Infinity*. In "Words of Welcome" in *Phenomenolgies of the Stranger. Between Hostility and Hospitality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), Jeffrey Bloechl suggests that the "Woman", who Levinas refers to, could be read as counterpart of "Man as agent of power, violence", p. 239.

[35] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 155.

her philosophical diary, *Denktagebuch*, she reveals that she is fully aware of the importance of the people being there for the newborn: "We are born into this world of plurality where father and mother stand ready for us, ready to receive us and welcome us and guide us and prove that we are not strangers."[36]

Now, the thought-provoking thing about this quotation is that Arendt ends up stating that our status of being born as strangers is cancelled out by the reception of our fathers, who "prove that we are not strangers." How do they do that, and if we are no longer strangers after we have been received, what or who are we then? Although Arendt does not establish any causal connection between the actions of our parents, it appears to be through their welcome and guidance that they prove to us that we are part of this world and not estranged from it.

Yet, despite becoming familiarized with the world thanks to our parents and our own interactions with our surroundings, we are still strangers in the other sense of the word, which we introduced at the beginning, namely strangers to ourselves. This is an aspect of human existence which Arendt rarely touches upon, but it surfaces, at least indirectly, in her characterization of human uniqueness as a result of being born into this world. She denies that this uniqueness has anything to do with "otherness", but in so far as every human being can only come to terms with her own strangeness through others and through an otherness in relation to herself, alterity must still play a key role for the ways in which each person struggles to realize her own uniqueness, which can never become completely familiar, not even to the person herself. If it should ever become so familar as to become generalizable through commonly shared concepts, then there would be nothing really unique about any human being anymore.

This raises the question whether the parental presence really erases our strangeness, as Arendt claims. Had she said that the welcoming reception of our parents proves that we are not complete strangers, she would have left some room for still receiving our closest relatives and loved ones as strangers, and she would have moved closer to an experience which many parents and friends may have had, namely that their children and friends remain unique and fundamentally different from themselves despite all the things and features which they also have in common. One literary testimony of this experience is given by the father in Norman Maclean's unforgettable story about his own family, *A River Runs through It*: After the storyteller's brother has died, he and his father talk about his

[36] *Denktagebuch I, February 1954, [*19], 39. München, Zürich: Pieper Verlag, 2002.

death and reach the conclusion that it is ”those we live with and love and should know who elude us.”[37]

What we are heading towards is the conclusion that we need to rethink ethics and the human condition by studying strangeness and otherness within the familiar and the unique. Many studies of psychology, sociology, medicine and family structures may help analyse and interpret this double constellation empirically, but what is most needed is to coin and clarify a conception of human life which makes room for receiving every other as a stranger. In our reinterpretation of Levinas' and Arendt's thoughts on these matters we have only taken a small step in this direction. It is surely no coincidence that Socrates for both thinkers is a paradigm of critical philosophy which reflects on the wonder of being alive without ever getting to know oneself and others fully. If there is still a religious significance to be found in such a philosophy, then it consists in awaiting and being open to the unknown and the stranger in order to receive.

[37] MacLean, Norman: *A River Runs through It*, p. 104. London: Picador and Pan Books, 1992.