Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) opposed the disengagement of the individual as described in Chapter 3. They argued for a self that is oriented towards the other. For all three the relation between self and other precedes and transcends the identity of the self. In that sense ethics is primary philosophy, if ethics is seen as oriented towards the relation between self and other. For Buber (2006) the relation with the other is a matter of dialogue in reciprocity and symmetry, in give and take and in a convergence of self and other. That suggests an idyllic end station in which difference and power no longer play a role. Levinas denies that. He is extremely radical. According to him the relation between self and other remains asymmetrical: the self remains more responsible for the other than vice versa, the self surrenders itself without calculation and without demanding or even expecting anything in return. Self and other can never merge, be subsumed in each other, become equal or even comparable. Especially on the last point I agree and therefore I prefer to proceed with Levinas rather than Buber.

For Levinas the feeling of responsibility for the other is not a rational choice but something that happens to you and that you experience as being chosen or ‘elected’ and that makes you unique, irreplaceable vis-à-vis the unique other. There is an ethical call to surrender to the other, and to suffer from his or her suffering, an imperative that precedes all other consideration. One does not invite it or rationally accept it or find it justified or understand it: it just happens to one. Levinas speaks of giving oneself as a ‘hostage’. With this term he means that the self becomes ‘victim without being guilty’ (Levinas 1995, p. 115). Responsibility and dedication to the other go so far that they apply also when the other obstructs or even persecutes me (Levinas 1991b, p. 116). I will return to this point.

From the traditional centrality of the self in Western philosophy it is difficult to find a foundation for benevolence or altruism. Levinas turns it around: benevolence is primary, precedes the self and all consideration of self-interest, and defence of one’s interests is a compromise on that. One can
and, in conditions of real life in society, inevitably does compromise on the ethical call, but the call remains valid to maintain an ideal of conduct that we should not forget.

Levinas, as a Jew, was strongly driven by his abhorrence of the Holocaust that had cruelly cut into his own family. He rises in arms against what he calls the ‘paganism’ of Nazism, i.e. the acceptance and glorification of the finite, bodily, worldly existence in a heroic exaltation of it in a spontaneous activity that intensifies life and lifts it above its finitude in a self-transcendence that is continually in search of itself (Guibal 2005, p. 124). Levinas says that the pagan strives for ‘the cult of power and of earthly grandeur, the legitimacy of power to confirm itself as power, to love and hate spontaneously’, and that in the appeal to the ‘gratuitous, i.e. heroic deed, there lies the permanent source of Hitlerism’ (Levinas 1991a, p. 152, 1976, p. 197).

Here it is as if we were reading about the thought of Nietzsche. In an anachronism, Nietzsche has been reproached for the inspiration that his work contributed to Nazism, though the idea does have its grounds. Nietzsche of course could not see this coming and any accusation of anti-Semitism is nonsense since he despised it. However, his sister, who guarded his heritage and was anti-Semitic, did try to steer the interpretation of his work in that direction (Janz 1994).

As a counterweight to the absolute evil of Nazism and of other ideologies that subjugated the individual human being, such as Stalinism or the regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia, we require something that is sufficiently strong, and for that it must be absolute. For Levinas the source of all evil lies in some justification or other of the suffering of people (‘they aren’t really people’, ‘in the pursuit of an ideology individual sacrifices need to be made’) (Levinas 1991b, p. 109). As a counterweight the self must feel personally and unconditionally responsible for the suffering of the other.

I should immediately add that Levinas repeatedly recognizes that in the transition from the ideal, isolated relationship between self and other to a society of third and more parties charity towards the single other must make a transition to justice in society, with rules that are universal and impersonal (e.g. Levinas 1991b, pp. 113–15). There I must also feel responsible for third parties and ask myself whether the single other does not damage the other others. There the asymmetry of the ideal relation disappears and reciprocity and equality under the law appear. How that compromise of the ideal relationship for the sake of justice can still reflect the ideal is problematic. In the relativization of the relationship of self to other, in the loss of its absolutism and unconditionality, how can we maintain the ethical force that Levinas considered necessary as a counterweight to absolute evil in the world? In his work the notion of justice is highly embryonic and not specified. I will return to this.

In this chapter I will give a survey of some of the main lines of the philosophy of Levinas. It is not easy to comprehend his thought, and next to the reading of his work (in the original French) I employ interpretations