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The Question of Alterity and the Crisis of Technology

سؤال الغيرية وأزمة التقنية

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Abstract

The contemporary philosophical discourse has witnessed a surge in the significance of the concept of alterity, especially following the shift from self-centeredness to an openness towards the other. This transition emerged from the crisis of technology, which highlighted the detrimental aspects of modernity's emphasis on progress and reason. This crisis revealed the destructive potential of individualism and its disregard for other human existences. The emergence of alterity, however, offers a path towards a more inclusive and ethical approach to human relationships, rooted in dialogue, mutual recognition, and coexistence. This essay aims to analyze the concept of alterity and its potential as a response to the crisis of technology, exploring its implications for understanding the human condition in the face of modern technological advancements

Keywords : otherness, the self, instrumental rationality, technological rationality, technological crisis, modernity.

ملخص

لقد شهد الخطاب الفلسفي المعاصر تصاعدًا ملحوظًا في أهمية مفهوم الغيرية *(Alterity)* ، ولا سيما في أعقاب التحوّل من التمركز حول الذات إلى الانفتاح على الآخر. وقد برز هذا التحوّل في سياق أزمة التقنية، التي كشفت عن الجوانب السلبية الكامنة في تشديد الحداثة على التقدّم والعقلانية، وأظهرت ما ينطوي عليه النزوع الفرداني من إمكانات تدميرية، وما يترتب عليه من تجاهل لوجود الآخرين بوصفهم ذواتًا إنسانية مغايرة. غير أنّ بروز مفهوم الغيرية يتيح أفقًا جديدًا لتأسيس مقاربة أكثر شمولًا وأخلاقية للعلاقات الإنسانية، قوامها الحوار، والاعتراف المتبادل، والتعايش. ومن هذا المنطلق، تسعى هذه المقالة إلى تحليل مفهوم الغيرية واستكشاف إمكاناته بوصفه استجابة فلسفية لأزمة التقنية، مع الوقوف على دلالاته وانعكاساته في فهم الوضع الإنساني في ظل التطورات التكنولوجية التي يشهدها العالم المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الغيرية، الذات، العقلانية الذاتية، العقلانية التكنولوجية، أزمة التقنية، الحداثة

1. INTRODUCTION

The question of alterity is considered one of the most vital contemporary issues to have emerged within postmodern discourse. It has garnered significant attention from contemporary philosophers, who have addressed it through diverse analytical approaches. Philosophy found itself compelled to contextualize this emerging discourse as an endeavor to escape the harrowing human condition—marked by reification, devastation, wars, and all forms of inhuman injustice.

Modernity, through its propagation of ideas centered around the rational subject championed by Descartes, fueled a relentless pursuit of technological mastery aimed at global dominance and the control of nature by unraveling its laws—completely disregarding the 'Other' and human values. This critical oversight plunged humanity into a state of barbarism and savagery, exposing a stark contradiction between the promises of the Enlightenment and the degraded moral reality that ultimately led to the dominance of instrumental rationality, wherein human beings were reduced to mere instruments and slaves to technology.

Consequently, an alternative path became essential to restore a fractured humanity and mend the rift between the Self and the Other. This yields the following question: *How can the question of alterity serve as an outlet from the crisis of technology forged by the modernist project?*.

2. From the Modernist Project to the Condemnation of the Enlightenment

Western Modernity constituted a pivotal phase, dividing philosophical production into pre-modern and post-modern eras. It represents a crucial turning point in Western philosophical history—positioned between establishing the centrality of human reason and its mastery over nature, and liberating thought from this anthropocentrism along with its devastating contemporary repercussions for humanity. Thus, our study begins by addressing the modernist project, which

embodies the early signs of the technological crisis as one of its negative outcomes; we shall examine how the question of alterity was introduced as an avenue to overcome this crisis.

The modernist project was grounded in scientific progress, humanization, and freedom—values enshrined by Enlightenment principles. Scientific progress initially stemmed from investigating the rules of scientific knowledge to uncover the laws of nature, aim to master it, and harness it for human utility. With the emergence of two dominant intellectual movements—Rationalism with Descartes and Empiricism with Bacon—a new consciousness crystallized, consolidating a novel instrumental rationality.

Whereas during the theological era the human subject was regarded merely as an ontologically and epistemologically subordinate entity to a Supreme Being embodying all absolute knowledge, the human subject now became aware of its capacity to decipher the laws of the external world and master them (Boumenir, 2010).

According to Horkheimer, Cartesian philosophy constructed a rationality that rendered man the "master and possessor of nature," shifting the paradigm from contemplative reflection to searching for its underlying laws (Boumenir, 2010). As Descartes famously stated in his *Discourse on the Method*:

"Knowing the force and the actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us, just as distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans, we might also apply them in the same way to all the uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves as masters and possessors of nature." (Descartes, 1991, p. 82)

This mastery could only be realized through an epistemological and scientific revival that positioned science and technology as the foundations for possessing nature and escaping prior stagnation, thereby exemplifying a model of anthropocentric domination (Boumenir, 2010).

However, despite Descartes' prominence, he was not alone in promoting this orientation; Bacon similarly emphasized man's endeavor to comprehend the laws of nature to secure dominion over it. For Bacon, mastery is achieved through knowledge; as he asserted in the *Novum Organum*:

"Nature to be commanded must be obeyed" [i.e., nature is conquered only by understanding its laws] (Boumenir, 2010, p. 27).

This renders knowledge a practical imperative rather than a mere intellectual addition, equating knowledge with power—since power cannot be attained without the mastery of nature. Yet, this domination was not confined to nature or the invention of machines; human dominance expanded to encompass the subjugation of human beings by other human beings through specific mechanisms inherent to instrumental rationality (Boumenir, 2010).

It is well known that Enlightenment philosophy enshrined rational principles, progress, and the liberation of humanity from all forms of servitude, aiming to achieve happiness attainable only through acquiring maximum scientific knowledge for domination (*la domination*), rather than remaining in the passive state imposed by mythological thinking during the theological era (Boumenir, 2010).

The Enlightenment program aimed to disenchant the world—a phenomenon Max Weber diagnosed as *le désenchantement du monde* (the disenchantment of the world)—meaning the dissolution of the magical worldview and the deconstruction of all mythical, religious, and metaphysical frameworks (Hanifi, 2016). In contrast to modernity, the mythical worldview was characterized by a decentralized, passive, and reflective human subject (Hanifi, 2016).

Mythological thought differs from rational thought in its interpretive multiplicity, presenting a holistic vision of the world where sacred elements, cultural practices, and human behavior intersect without delineating nature from myth. This reveals a conflation of culture and nature—or what Habermas describes as the confusion between the objective physical realm and the social-cultural realm. Modern understanding, by contrast, differentiates among three autonomous spheres: modern science and technology, autonomous art, and morality/law (Hanifi, 2016).

The Enlightenment sought not only to liberate humanity from mythical constructs, but also from all forms of guardianship, injustice, and servitude. However, this drive for liberation strayed from its constructive path and regressed into a relapse of reason—a retreat into a new form of myth. *"This terrifying myth is none other than the myth of instrumental reason in its reified, positivist nature"* (Hanifi, 2016, p. 5).

When Enlightenment philosophy confronted myth with the notion of domination—one of its foundational intellectual tenets—it generated conflict in man's relationship with nature, negatively affecting human relations. As Martin Jay noted:

"The idea of dominating nature that crystallized in Enlightenment philosophy had a profoundly negative impact on interpersonal human relations." (Boumenir, 2010, p. 22)

Hence, the question arises: How did the domination of nature through empirical and mathematical sciences shift toward the domination of human beings? In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer linked the control over nature directly to the subsequent control over humanity itself (Boumenir, 2010).

Furthermore, how did the pursuit of liberation from servitude transform into servitude to the very idea of control through science—ultimately culminating in enslavement to science and technology itself? Humanity found itself under a form of domination more severe than any in its history, *"for instrumental rationality within modern Western societies produced unprecedented forms and mechanisms of domination"* (Boumenir, 2010, p. 13).

This rationality operated under the guise of technological rationality—utilizing scientific structures and technology to subjugate nature for human utility, only to redirect this control toward humanity itself. Herbert Marcuse focused on the core mechanisms through which technological rationality asserts control over individuals in advanced industrial societies. In these societies, individuals cannot relinquish the advancements of science and technology, becoming perpetually bound to them to the point of conflating happiness with technological dependence—thereby

cementing their enslavement to technology (Boumenir, 2010).

As reason manifested in its most instrumental form, humanity sank into barbarism and despotism. Questions inevitably arose regarding the fate of Enlightenment promises—to deliver security, peace, tolerance, freedom, and progress—and how humanity devolved into war and devastation instead. Starting with the discovery and domination of nature, this trajectory culminated in the domination of man himself (Boumenir, 2010). This outcome sparked a wave of critique and condemnation aimed at Enlightenment values, Western rationalist anthropocentrism, and the modernist project alongside the technological crisis it generated—a crisis that reduced human beings to mere appendages of the machine.

3. The Crisis of Technology

Technical progress, through scientific and rational organization, assumed a coercive and totalizing character over human beings—a comprehensive domination that philosophers, and Marx specifically, describe using the term reification (*Verdinglichung*) (Boumenir, 2010). Within this dynamic, human relations within society transform into objective relations resembling rigid objects, reducing human beings to commodities to be bought and sold (Boumenir, 2010). Marcuse explained this phenomenon as a consequence of the capitalist system, which binds individuals through the commodities they exchange according to market value, thereby fostering selfishness, submission, and various forms of servitude (Boumenir, 2010).

Reification signifies the supremacy of the logic of things—instantiated by technology—over both objects and humanity itself. As Al-Messiri notes:

"This is the ultimate abstraction: the loss, neutralization, and surrender of the self before the world of things." (Al-Messiri, 2002, p. 142)

Conversely, Marcuse diverges from the Marxist diagnosis, which limits the crisis of contemporary man to material conditions. For Marcuse, this crisis is tied to what he terms technological rationality. Domination cannot be reduced to a single social class or to a purely material dimension; rather, it is a societal crisis that

emerged when technological rationality was co-opted to control human beings (Boumenir, 2010).

Marcuse articulates the deployment of technological rationality in advanced industrial societies in *One-Dimensional Man*:

"The society which project and undertake the technological transformation of nature alters the traditional basis of domination. … Personal dependence is replaced by dependence on the objective order of things… domination now rests on a higher degree of rationality." (Marcuse, 1988, p. 55)

Meanwhile, Max Weber established technology and scientific knowledge as the bedrock of Western modernity (*la modernité*), positing an intrinsic correlation between modernity and rationalization. By rationalization, Weber meant the reliance on scientific and technological knowledge to organize human life—applying its standards to society across all institutions. The term rationalization (*la rationalité*) emerged to describe the novel character acquired by modern industrial societies following the aforementioned disenchantment of the world, wherein no space remains for spiritual, sacred, or other metaphysical forces (Boumenir, 2010).

Furthermore, Marcuse viewed technology—as part of the project of domination—as the determinant force shaping society and all its institutions. Originating as man's domination over nature, this industrial logic gradually transitioned into political domination, penetrating all spheres of life (Boumenir, 2010).

On the other hand, technology is not merely a practical application of scientific knowledge; rather, it imposes a novel worldview and a fresh stance toward nature grounded in the logic of control, domination, and mastery over things. This is exemplified in Heidegger's perspective, who did not limit his critique of technology to its destructive outcomes, but delved into its very essence (*Wesem*) following his phenomenological method of moving from the phenomenon to the essence. While technological manifestations appear as machines, tools, and devices, its essence is metaphysics itself—dictating the relationship between man and Being (*l'être*),

where the question of Being can only be posed at the level of beings (*l'étant*) (Boumenir, 2010).

Herein lies the manifestation of humanism (*l'humanisme*): the rational subject becomes the center, reason becomes the source of all truth, and the knowing subject becomes capable of cognizing and dominating the entities of the external world (nature). Nature is thereby reduced to a mere object of control for the human subject, which subjects it to quantification and consumption. In this process, man forgets Being (*l'être*) and declares himself the master of nature:

"Therefore, man's relationship with technology, according to Heidegger, falls under what he terms 'the forgetfulness of Being' (l'oubli de l'être) in Western metaphysics." (Boumenir, 2010, pp. 58–59)

The outcomes of technology and the reification experienced by contemporary man exposed the tyranny of Western rationality, which devolved into instrumental rationality and undermined all principles of human tolerance that the Enlightenment project failed to realize. Instead, it engendered wars and the proliferation of diverse tyrannies—ranging from mass slaughter to systemic obfuscation—in a world where validity belongs exclusively to the machine, science, and utility, devoid of all Enlightenment-touted values.

The indictment was directed not at the founding principles of the Enlightenment or the modernist project, but at the degenerate outcomes resulting from the tyranny of technology. This prompted a group of philosophers to immerse themselves in critiquing the project to forge a solution and an exit, most notably the pioneers of the Frankfurt School and Habermas. Habermas framed modernity as a project of crisis that can be transcended, presenting a lecture entitled *Modernity: An Unfinished Project*:

"Instead of abandoning [modernity], we must rectify the aberrations into which it has fallen." (Hanifi, 2016, p. 8)

Many philosophers proposed alternative approaches to fill the void left by the crisis of instrumental rationality. While some turned to the aesthetic dimension and art to fill the spiritual void—tailoring their proposals to their specific diagnosis of the

crisis—others recognized that focusing exclusively on the subject had eclipsed the position of the "Other" in society, thereby opening horizons for what is known as the philosophy of alterity. But how can alterity serve as an exit from the technological crisis, and within what contexts did it emerge?.

4. The Question of Alterity

Examining the context in which the concept of alterity emerged reveals that it sprang from a historical pivot wherein intellectual discourse shifted toward a new paradigm founded on the "Other"—grounded in communication, recognition, and intersubjectivity (*intersubjectivité*). As analyzed previously following the crisis of modern thought rooted in subject-centrism and the philosophy of consciousness without regard for its consequences, philosophers formulated various approaches proposing solutions coalescing around alterity in its multiple dimensions: communication, recognition, and intersubjectivity with the Other.

Semantically, Jamil Saliba defines alterity (*Altérité*) in his lexicon as:

"Derived from the Other (Autre), denoting that two things are mutually distinct. It is also said of two things such that the existence of one can be conceived without the other. It is the counterpart of identity, distinct from ethnicity. In logic, the 'one' is contrasted with alterity from the perspective of what constitutes 'otherness'." (Saliba, 1982, p. 130)

As a philosophical term, alterity is understood as the relationship binding one subject to another. Alterity is synonymous with intersubjectivity, expressing social relations and reflecting the openness of subjects to one another (Bouzark, 2021). To delve deeper into the concept of alterity, we must examine various approaches and models that allow us to view the question through different entry points—beginning with Habermas and his theory of communicative action, moving through Axel Honneth and the philosophy of recognition, and culminating in Levinas in his sacred garb.

A. Jürgen Habermas and the Theory of Communicative Action

Contemporary philosophical discourse champions the principle of dialogue and positive communication—a stance prominently found in Habermas. Habermas set out to correct the course of modernity, maintaining that modernity is an "unfinished project" whose errors must be rectified by devising a new trajectory rather than relying on instrumental rationality, which constitutes the core of the crisis. This rationalization is what accompanied the disenchantment or desacralization of the world, as articulated by Max Weber.

Adopting this perspective, Habermas proposed communicative rationality as an alternative to instrumental rationality. The paradigm of communication can accompany daily practice and ought to be harnessed within the realms of ethics, law, and politics. Consequently, communicative rationality can correct the modernist trajectory through a novel practice rooted in and bound to language (Hanifi, 2016).

Habermas's objective is to construct a theory of society grounded in the communicative paradigm—namely, the intersubjective relationship between the ego and the alter (*ego-alter*)—surpassing the subject-object dichotomy derived from the philosophy of consciousness. Communicative rationality reconstructed practical reason through a communication based on discourse ethics (*Diskursethik*), which rests upon the principle of universalization and the principle of argumentation.

The universalization principle—contrary to approaches entrenched in dogmatism—is achieved through reaching consensus based on mutual understanding via an argumentative procedure wherein the best argument prevails, free from any pressure arising from external motives (Hanifi, 2016). Habermas clarifies this:

"A consensus achieved in a communicative form possesses a rational foundation; meaning it cannot be imposed by any party whatsoever—neither instrumentally through direct intervention in the action situation, nor strategically through calculated impact on a rival's decisions from the standpoint of success." (Habermas, 1981)

Furthermore, the universalization principle is only realized if it submits to the

principle of argumentation. Because discourse occurs within an interactive intersubjective context, participants can only attain agreement if they respect specific procedural conditions required for sound argumentation (Hanifi, 2016).

Although Habermas's indebtedness to Kant is evident in numerous points regarding ethics, his distinctive imprint was clearly marked by his raising of the question of alterity and the subsequent horizons it opened in the philosophies of communication and recognition—paths followed by many philosophers, such as Axel Honneth.

B. Axel Honneth and the Problem of Recognition

Axel Honneth, a representative of the third generation of the Frankfurt School, is among the most prominent philosophers who contributed to establishing the concept of recognition (*Anerkennung*). He built his theory by reviewing and addressing the perceived shortcomings of earlier Frankfurt School critical theory while building upon its foundations. Honneth was particularly influenced by the works of Jürgen Habermas, while deriving the foundational origins of his theory of recognition from Hegel.

According to Honneth, Hegel's significance lies in being the first philosopher to study social relations as relationships between subjects striving to realize mutual recognition through what is termed intersubjectivity (Boumenir, On the Question of Recognition in Axel Honneth).

The structural presence of Hegel in Honneth's theory is evident in familiar concepts such as recognition, alienation, and struggle. Honneth notes (as cited by Mounis Ahmed):

"Here I returned to Hegel, who inspired me in formulating my thesis... I returned to the young Hegel, where I found a brilliant idea: that societies maintain their stability through the struggles of their social groups for recognition. This was the starting point from which I developed my thesis on recognition; all societies revolve around spheres of recognition that enable their members to enter into mutual recognition." (Mounis)

Previous approaches to the concept of recognition were tied to conflict—specifically, the "struggle for recognition." Honneth's philosophical grounding, however, offers a novel framework and divergent path from Hegel's struggle for recognition as outlined in his early writings on the master-slave dialectic. Honneth frames his approach through an ethical dimension, because the struggle for recognition tends toward frustration or what is termed *reification*, whereas Honneth aspires toward the horizon of fostering positive relations between the self and others (Mounis).

Honneth argues that mutual recognition is sufficient to put an end to social conflicts rooted in injustice, enabling individuals to realize their selves and identities within intersubjective relations. This means self-realization is conditioned upon mutual recognition among individuals and groups, as an individual's self-image is formed through interaction with the Other. He distinguished three forms of recognition—love, rights, and solidarity—which correspond to three levels of self-realization:

1. Love occurs at the level of intimate and friendly relations (its primary manifestation being between mother and child) and achieves self-confidence.
2. Rights occur at the legal level and achieve self-respect.
3. Social solidarity occurs at the societal level among individuals and achieves self-esteem. (Boumenir, *The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School from Max Horkheimer to Axel Honneth*, 2010)

Consequently, social recognition is deemed an essential concept for transcending the crises of contemporary society—with its nodes of injustice, marginalization, and reification—to avert the wars and devastation born of conflict. This explains why the term recognition (*la reconnaissance*) prominently features in contemporary philosophy across numerous thinkers: alongside Axel Honneth in *The Struggle for Recognition*, Paul Ricœur in *The Course of Recognition*, Charles Taylor in *The Politics of Recognition*, and others (Boumenir, 2010). It truly stands as the concept of our present era.

C. Emmanuel Levinas

In diagnosing the perilous impasse into which Western thought has fallen, Emmanuel Levinas traces the root cause to modern philosophy, which erected itself upon ego-centrism and the sanctification of the rational, knowledge-seeking subject that dominates the world without regard for the Other. The "Ego" became the sole center of existence and the exclusive criterion for judgments and human relations.

Levinas critiqued the legacy of this rationality, attempting to transcend the ontological hermeneutics of the Ego-Other relationship to establish an ontology grounded in the paradigm of goodness toward the Other—meaning that to be is to be for the Other, to be good to them. Human rights, in his view, rest upon the paradigm of love and responsibility toward the Other (Mahmoudi, 2020).

The privileges of the Other over the Ego take precedence over the rights of the Ego over the Other; the Other comes before the Ego and holds primacy. Upon reflection, this idea contains no exaggeration: if each of us acted this way, we would find that what we offer returns to us, for the Other likewise prefers us over themselves—even though Levinas rejects any teleological calculation oriented toward personal gain.

Accordingly, Levinas opposes any notion of freedom that rejects the absolute alterity of the Other and seeks to shape the Other according to subjective self-representations (Tahir & Jebari, 2018).

Levinas regarded the modernist discourse of reducing and displacing the Other while glorifying the Ego—which induces self-alienation—as a species of ethical absurdity or moral crisis. Consequently, he sought to establish an ethical relationship with the Other; self-centeredness is the malady of modern Western European thought.

Levinas attempted to bridge religious experience and ethical empiricism in the service of humanity, treating the Other as the center of human experience because the human being is sacred to him. He viewed the function of the Torah as

laying the groundwork for ethical thinking—revealing his religious dimension—yet the function of religion is not transcendent; rather, it descends into human ethical practice (Ross, 2001).

Jacqueline Russ points out that despite Levinas's return to the Talmud, his outlook was not purely religious; rather, it was permeated by a philosophical dimension with a religious point of departure. She clarifies:

"The point is simply that philosophy takes precedence in Levinas, and theoretical ethics is grounded in the experience of the Other, not the experience of the sacred." (Ross, 2001, p. 35)

It must be noted that the face of the Other commands my respect and inviolability; it is the symbol denoting human dignity—an humanity transcending all self-interest. Alterity is responsibility toward the Other; it is an ethical necessity demanded by human existence to achieve coexistence in its fullest perfection. It is a responsibility devoid of egoistic teleology, preceding all thought (Mahmoudi, 2020).

Furthermore, alterity for Levinas is neither mere ethical theorizing nor legal codes; rather, it is an intersubjective practice—he brings it down into *praxis* (practical reality) rather than leaving it as a mere concept. It is enacted among subjects through daily practices, manifesting its dimensions firstly in democracy as a global system unifying subjects, secondly in citizenship as relations among individuals prior to constitutional laws, and thirdly in comprehensive alterity extending toward all living creatures regardless of species (Mahmoudi, 2020).

When every individual embraces alterity as an ethical necessity—as behavior and *praxis*—the optimal model of shared coexistence is achieved, offering a way out of the crisis of contemporary society where contempt for the Other has reached a degree that threatens humanity with destruction through violence and slaughter.

5. Conclusion

The conditions of contemporary society—characterized by conflict and the widespread manifestations of domination and violence among human beings—

served as a primary catalyst for re-examining the relationship between the Self (or Ego) and the Other. Consequently, philosophical projects shifted toward the question of alterity as a proposed solution to the technological crisis, which resulted in the reification of humanity and the fragmentation of values as man became enslaved to the paradigm of control and domination.

This subjective consciousness—viewing itself as the sole axis of existence (Western anthropocentrism)—completely disregarded the place of the "Other" and the sanctity of alterity marginalized by the modernist project. In response:

- Jürgen Habermas sought to rectify these shortcomings by replacing instrumental rationality with communicative rationality grounded in discourse ethics—anchored by the principle of universalization and procedural argumentation.
- Axel Honneth, influenced by Habermas, established a novel framework for the concept of recognition, articulating its three distinct spheres (love, rights, and solidarity) to achieve self-realization, which remains conditioned upon mutual recognition among individuals.
- Emmanuel Levinas posited alterity as an ethical practice (*praxis*) rooted in the ethics of goodness and the sanctity of the Other prior to the Ego.

The common denominator among these approaches is the overarching objective: establishing global peace and founding human relationships governed by love and tolerance to achieve the optimal form of shared coexistence—devoid of interindividual conflict—within contemporary society.

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